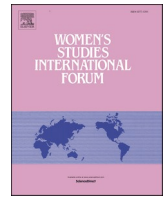


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# A bound-less love: Long-distance motherhood of Ukrainian women living in Southern Italy

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## ABSTRACT

Through a gender-sensitive lens, this study explores the psychic and subjective meanings that Ukrainian women living in Southern Italy for economic reasons attribute to their long-distance motherhood and migration experience. Ten Ukrainian women were interviewed in the pre-war period, before 2022, through a semi-structured interview following the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Our findings show that long-distance motherhood and the challenges of migration led to a redefinition of the respondents' identity as women and mothers. The complex affective configuration that developed from separation lacks adequate elaboration, leaving a gap that calls for supportive psychological interventions. Understanding these experiences has become urgent given that the war is affecting both Ukrainian women living in Italy and those who are arriving due to the war.

## Ukrainian female migration to Italy before the latest Russia-Ukraine conflict

The Ukrainian community in Italy began to grow in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's declaration of independence. The rising cost of living and the associated lack of job opportunities in Ukraine, together with the labor demands of Western European countries, fueled significant migration. This migratory flow immediately took on a gendered dimension, with Ukrainian women heading to Italy to meet the demand for domestic labor. Italy's need for labor in the service sector stemmed from various social phenomena, including an aging society, the Italian understanding of family where caregiving responsibilities are often delegated to women, and the increased participation of Italian women in the labor force, which made them less available to assume caregiving responsibilities. The role of caregiving therefore shifted to immigrant women (Di Bartolomeo & Marchetti, 2016). Scholars use the expression "feminization of migration" both in relation to its quantitative increase and the qualitative characteristics of such migration, which exhibits its own specificity.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict is contributing to a great

redefinition of migration. As shown by the latest data from UNHCR (2023), contemporary migration flows from Ukraine predominantly consist of women and children, or entire family units.

However, according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (2020), before the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out in February 2022, the Ukrainian population residing in Italy totaled 230,639. The Campania Region, in which the present study took place, had the second highest Ukrainian population in Italy, after Lombardy. Moreover, women represented 78.6 % of the total Ukrainian population in Italy, with their average age being 46. Data also indicated that Ukrainian women predominantly migrated to Italy alone, leaving their children in the care of grandparents or fathers, with the intention of eventually returning home to their families (Pasquinelli & Rusmini, 2013). Ukrainian women mainly sought employment as domestic helpers or caregivers to the elderly and often opted to cohabit with the employer to maximize earnings. Their wages were typically lower than those of Ukrainian men and their Italian female counterparts. This was partly due to their temporary status in the country, that usually lasted between two and four years, leaving them vulnerable to dual discrimination: as women and as migrants.

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An analysis of migration dynamics from a gender perspective (Fedyuk, 2016) revealed that female migration requires a reconsideration of intergenerational relationships and social roles within the traditional family system of the Ukrainian population, which is increasingly evolving into a transnational family (Tyldum, 2015; Volodko, 2011). In this structure, women often become the primary breadwinners, while husbands and relatives assume the responsibility of childcare.

### *Transnational motherhood*

Several migration studies have focused on the phenomenon of transmigration, which refers to the condition in which migrants establish roots in the host country while maintaining connections with their country of origin, fostering multiple interconnections between countries (Vertovec, 2009). This gives rise to a new family configuration whose members are in at least two nation-states and spend more time apart than together (Parreñas, 2001, 2005) leading to new definitions of parenthood (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012).

Transnational motherhood (Orellana, 2015; Parreñas, 2001), particularly that affecting Ukrainian women, allows for the simultaneous maintenance of ties between “here” and “there,” between what is considered “home” and “the outside,” requiring the reorganization of previous practices and experiences in relation to the parental other and the children. In addition to the cultural and traumatic challenges imposed by migration and the associated redefinition of identity (De Leo et al., 2022; De Leo et al., 2023; Tessitore, Parola, & Margherita, 2023), migrant mothers who leave their children at home must redefine their experience of motherhood to navigate their absence. These mothers often experience the double paradox of migrating to secure a better future for their children while being unable to accompany them during their formative years. Fineran and Kohli (2020) also highlighted that cultural conflicts in the host country may result in migrant mothers undergoing contradictory interpretations and negotiations of their *maternal* practices. Stock (2012) described the experience of mothers living in “transit-countries” as the interplay between structural and individual factors that shape women's mobility and immobility during transit. From a psychological point of view, the motherhood role of female migrants has also been interpreted as an area of agency allowing women to assume an active role that serves as a protective barrier against pre-migratory, migratory, and post-migratory trauma (Tessitore & Margherita, 2021, 2022).

Regarding the experiences of Ukrainian women, the literature highlights that they often face social stigma in their home country (Fedyuk, 2012), where they are recognized for their significant contributions to their families and to the local and national economy less than they are considered inadequate mothers (Parreñas, 2005). Their migration was presented by the Ukrainian media, the official policies, and the public institutions as a threat to the stability of the Ukrainian nation and family values (Vianello, 2016). This has portrayed migrant mothers as women who abandon their duties, leaving their children behind as social or euro-orphan, victims of parental euro-starvation (Lutz & Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2012). In line with Tolstokorova (2010) and Didula (2008), we believe that the use of these terms politicizes this sensitive issue and risks undermining the mother-child relationship by labeling these children, damaging their trust in parental care, and provoking guilt in the mother. Furthermore, this stigmatization has and still does occur within a cultural context where the roles of women and mothers have often overlapped.

During the Soviet regime, policy encouraged gender equality in the labor market, promoting women's emancipation from economic dependence on men (Ghodsee, 2018). Such emancipation was often termed “emancipation from above” (Zaharijević, 2017), as motherhood continued to be regarded as the highest form of service to one's people and the state (Issoupova, 2000). While the principle of “gender equality” destroyed some patriarchal traditions, it also preserved others, such as

the expectation that women take care of the household.

Once Ukraine declared its independence, demographic concerns and other factors restored the idea that women are dependent on men and must be relegated to domestic roles (Kis, 2005). The pronatalist discourse of the post-Soviet governments led to the re-emergence of the myth of Berehynia, a pagan goddess protector of women, families, and homes. Berehynia was quickly popularized by patriotic novels, praising her as the eternal guardian of traditional Ukrainian values of national culture and ethnic identity (Kis, 2005). This was based on the “Ukrainian matriarchal culture” mythology as the origin of the nation, in which men and women lived an “equality in difference,” with complementary roles. It is within this political climate that women chose to migrate, driven to fulfil their motherhood role, which motivated them to seek work abroad, often illegally, and to face the multiple demands of migratory life to provide a livelihood for their family.

The obligations of motherhood serve as a driving force for migration, giving women a reason to tolerate the cultural risks they may face in a foreign context (Kindler, 2008). The consequences of this choice on mothers have been termed the *Italy Syndrome*, highlighting symptoms of stress, burn out, depression, and panic attacks in many Ukrainian women who migrated to Italy and are far from their husbands and children (Giancristoforo, 2021). Ukrainian transnational mothers are subject to “multidimensional exploitation”: exploitation of their labor by employers, emotional exploitation by families left behind, exploitation by intermediaries who profit from their efforts to maintain connections, and exploitation by domestic economies and financial corporations that benefit from their money transfers (Tolstokorova, 2010).

While this migration phenomenon reflects established gender dynamics, in which women are expected, even from a distance, to take care of the family, migration also allows for greater gender fluidity, creating tensions in traditional gender relations, and allowing renegotiations of the concepts of masculinity and femininity as a result of the influences of the host country's culture. Migration can be an engine of change challenging gender-related roles, norms, expectations, and parenting practices that are prevalent in the country of origin. While the sociological and sociocultural dimensions of transnational motherhood among Ukrainian women have been extensively studied, the psychic meanings attributed to the experience of long-distance motherhood and migration of Ukrainian women in Italy remained understudied. The present study, carried out in the pre-war period, is aimed at deepening, through a gender-sensitive lens, the experiences of long-distance motherhood and migration of Ukrainian women already residing in Italian territory. Since thousands of Ukrainian mothers and children are arriving to Italy, we believe that the psychological investigation of these experiences, even when recognizing their qualitative diversity, could be useful in understanding the risks and resources of migration and motherhood experiences, helping to guide tailored psychological interventions and migration policies.

## **Materials and methods**

### *Ethical approval*

All the research steps were approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Naples Federico II and carried out in accordance with the last declaration of Helsinki. A specific consent form informing each participant of the aims, characteristics, and procedures of the study was provided prior to the start of the research. Anonymity was guaranteed to each participant by using pseudonyms.

### *Setting and procedures*

The participants were recruited through contact with Neapolitan associations that offer services to migrant citizens. Each potential participant was informed of the aims of the study and asked to express their interest in participating. Once they declared their availability to

take part in the research, each of them was provided with a consent form and asked to fill out a socio-demographic form. Subsequently, an in-depth interview was individually administered by the first and second authors, who are research fellows, clinical psychologists, and psychotherapists with a psychoanalytic orientation.

### Methodology

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1995, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008) was chosen for this study. The IPA is a qualitative research methodology aimed at exploring the subjective meanings attributed by people to their personal and social worlds. As evidenced in previous studies (Tessitore et al., 2024; Troisi et al., 2022), and in line with other scholars (Anagnostaki & Zaharia, 2020), we believe that this kind of research methodology offers suitable material for psychodynamic understanding and interpretation.

The IPA has an *ideographic* nature, so attention is focused on participants' subjectivities and personal meanings and representations. Therefore, it avoids providing generalization and individuates general norms within a nomothetic perspective. Coherently with this ideographic nature, the homogenous nature of participants is prioritized over their number. The interview construction, coding, and data interpretation require a hermeneutic activity by the researcher, which responds to the interpretative nature of the IPA. The hermeneutic activity is expressed through a double reflexivity: the reflective process belongs both to the participant and to the researcher, who is called upon to actively interpret the participant's words through their personal and symbolic processes. Additionally, the phenomenological nature of the IPA allows exploration of individuals' personal views, considering them as the "real expert" of the topic being investigated, so that the attention is constantly based on the narrative truth, rather than the historical one.

### Participants

Consistent with the ideographic nature of the IPA, participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 1990; Morse, 1991) based on the following selection criteria: Ukraine nationality; having resided in Italy for almost 10 years (this criterion was chosen in order to guarantee their understanding of the Italian language); and having experienced or still experiencing long-distance motherhood. Ten women meeting these criteria were identified. As shown in Table 1, participants were in the 40–52 age range (mean age: 45; SD: 49.42). Eight participants were divorced, while two were separated. All women had left their children, between 5 and 10 years old, in Ukraine. On average, they had arrived in Italy 12.2 years ago. Given this information, at the time of the interviews, all the women's children were already adults. The participants left Ukraine due to economic reasons and were working in Italy as domestic helpers, caregivers to the elderly, or both.

### Instrument

In line with the IPA principles, an ad hoc in-depth interview was

developed, based on two main thematic areas: 1) the experience of migration, to explore the relationship with the motherland, the feelings around the departure and the arrival, and criticisms as well as supportive factors once in Italy; and 2) the experience of long-distance motherhood, to explore the feelings and the meanings associated with this, the changes in caretaking, the main difficulties, and resources.

To allow the participants to narrate their personal experiences and maintain the in-depth structure of the interviews, the researchers developed some open questions to promote story telling. As the interviews were unstructured, the interviewers (the first and second authors) followed the interviewees' narrative, delving into what struck them most. The following questions opened the narrative on the relevant topic area: How would you describe your experience of migration? How were your early days in Italy? What were the main difficulties and resource once in Italy? How would you describe your experience of long-distance motherhood? What do you think has changed in your experience as a mother? What were your main feelings experienced as a mother? The interviews lasted an average of 50 min and were conducted in Italian.

### Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the procedure described in the IPA process (Smith, 2011). Therefore, all the interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and analyzed individually. The analysis stages were cross-checked at various intervals by three researchers (first, second, and third authors) who are clinicians and research experts in the field of migration and intervention in clinical social contexts with female migrants. The IPA process of data analysis requires an iterative analysis, providing a strong interaction between the reader/researcher and the text. After having transcribed the interviews, the researchers read the texts several times to familiarize themselves with the participants' narratives: the interviews were paraphrased and comments, notes, and connections were added to the text on the basis of the researcher's personal interpretation. From this first step of analysis, some subordinate themes typically emerge. Their number usually reflects the richness of a specific passage in the text. The connection between the subordinate themes, based on their content, determines the formation of superordinate themes which represent a sort of container of the subordinate themes' meanings.

To enhance the credibility of the data analysis, the interviews were analyzed individually by two researchers (the first and second authors) and their findings were cross-checked by two other researchers with experience in the migration research field (penultimate and last authors).

### Findings

Four superordinate themes emerged from the interview analysis. Table 2 shows the themes and their frequencies for each participant. Some of the subordinate themes were named through the participant's words to respect the ideographic nature of the IPA process (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Country of origin	Years in Italy	N. of children	Children age when left	Civil state	Work
Maria	41	Ukraine	11 years	2	7–10 yrs old	Divorced	Domestic helper
Lucy	40	Ukraine	10 years	1	8 yrs old	Divorced	Caregivers
Luda	45	Ukraine	13 years	2	7 yrs old	Divorced	Caregiver
Micaela	43	Ukraine	11 years	1	5 yrs old	Separated	Domestic helper
Irina	40	Ukraine	11 years	1	5 yrs old	Divorced	Domestic helper
Svitlana	51	Ukraine	15 years	2	6–9 yrs old	Divorced	Domestic helper
Oxana	49	Ukraine	11 years	1	8 yrs old	Separated	Domestic helper
Sandra	52	Ukraine	15 years	3	5–7–10 yrs old	Divorced	Domestic helper and caregiver
Gloria	46	Ukraine	10 years	4	5–6–9–10 yrs old	Divorced	Domestic helper and caregiver
Natasha	43	Ukraine	15 years	2	5–9 yrs old	Divorced	Caregiver

**Table 2**  
Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate and subordinate themes	Maria	Lucy	Luda	Micaela	Irina	Svitlana	Oxana	Sandra	Gloria	Natasha
<b>Rethinking gender roles</b>										
1a. <i>The men collapse</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
1b. <i>Solitary heroines</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
<b>Suspended between two worlds</b>										
2a. <i>The treacherous Motherland</i>	*		*	*	*		*	*	*	*
2b. <i>Italy, land of God</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2c. <i>Ukraine in Italy: the motherland rediscovered</i>		*	*	*	*	*	*			
<b>3. What kind of mother am I?</b>										
3a. <i>The sacrifice</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
3b. <i>To fill the gap...</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
3c. <i>The uncanny</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
<b>4. An empty which we can't narrate</b>										
4a. <i>"your heart breaks into so many pieces, you can't bear it"</i>	*			*		*	*	*		
4b. <i>"Mum will go back early..."</i>	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
4b. <i>"If I go back..."</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

### 1. Rethinking gender roles

The first superordinate theme encompasses the internal and external dialogue of participants around gender roles and representations. The first subordinate theme describes the "failure" of Ukrainian men, as perceived by the participants. Despite Ukraine being described as a patriarchal society, in which the role to guide and support the family "should" be up to men, the experiences and stories of participants suggest the contrary. All participants describe, in fact, their ex-husbands and, all Ukrainian men in general as "good for nothing," absent, drunks, violent or persecutors, propulsive, in the migratory process undertaken by women. For example, one respondent told us: "I worked in a factory and earned very little money. I could not provide the necessary for my children, even though my parents helped me...What do I have to say... I was poor... and my husband did not help me...he drank...he was dangerous" [Lucy]. Another woman said, "the mother stays with the children', yes, of course, but the husband needs to help the family...that was the big change! In our country, men are 'good for nothing', but they want to command. Therefore, women need to take the place of men! I took all my husband's 'duties' ... so I need to earn money to give to my children a possibility" [Oxana].

Loneliness and the need to guide the family and feed the children made the participants *solitary heroines* seeking to assume both maternal and paternal functions. In a heroic feminine act, participants simultaneously wore the clothes of the head of the household, and of the mother: "I believe I was woman and man together...mother and father...it was heavy... my husband...nothing...he did not help me, when I left, our relationship and the one between him and our children stopped" [Gloria]. Another woman declared, "When I understood, I said 'If he does act like the man, I have to be man and woman. Unfortunately, your child cannot understand why their father does not work and earn money...' I forced myself to be stronger" [Svitlana].

### 2. Suspended between two worlds

The second superordinate theme covers the meanings participants attributed to their migration experience and its characteristics. First, *the treacherous Motherland* describes the feelings of anger and abandonment which the participants experience towards Ukraine. Symbolically, Ukraine became a treacherous mother, unable to feed her children who were rejected, refused, and forced to leave in search for support elsewhere: "aside from the crisis, the Ukrainian government does not support you...basically, you are alone with your problems and your children" [Irina]. Another relevant citation is the following: "I am very angry with Ukraine. My country left me and all the women like me completely alone. There is a patriarchal society, but no one protects women. If I did not leave, I would have ended up begging" [Luda].

The second subordinate theme, *Is Italy the land of God?*, describes the

representations of Italy as the host country and the migrants' first experiences lived here. Before departing, the participants had an idealized view of Italy, which emerges from their narratives as a sort of "promised land" where people can easily find jobs and richness. This is a real "dream" for many Eastern European women who need to develop this idealized image to justify their departure and separation from their children. Once in Italy, the women were quickly impacted by the experiences of migration, which made them feel like "foreigners." For example, "Italy has even been a dream for us...a lot of Ukrainian women decide to come here... and when I arrived, I really realized that everything was different compared to Ukraine...!! At the beginning I was frightened but also excited. Italians are good people, I had good experiences with them, but... after all these years, I still feel like a "foreigner"" [Micaela]. Another woman told us, "I remember the journey... 36 hours by bus... I arrived in Naples, and I was terrified and shocked. The rubbish was taller than me! At the station there were very strange people... Yeah... first times were very difficult... You can imagine, you arrive in a country in which you do not know anything, customs, traditions, nothing" [Lucy].

The reassuring presence of a large network of compatriots in Italy provided concrete help for women in these complex dynamics. The third subordinate theme, *Ukraine in Italy: the motherland rediscovered*, covers the function that the similar Others play for these women in offering a supportive instrument to resist to adversities. Community/group dimensions emerged from the narratives as facilitating the complex existential moments which women came across, motivating other women to do the same: "In Italy there were a lot of women like me...this was important because when I arrived, I needed to have friends and to know that other people like me... survived" [Michela]. Another woman declared, "I found work through other Ukrainian people who were already here...the migration flow at that time...around 2000... where your friends went, you went too... this was reassuring" [Oxana].

### 3. What kind of mother am I?

The third superordinate theme describes the meanings attributed by the participants to the experience of long-distance motherhood and the way in which women reacted to the separation from their children. The first subordinate theme, *the sacrifice*, represents the separation as a sacrificial dimension which women need to take on to guarantee a better life for their children. This emotional coloring seemed to assume important protective functions that made the pain and the guilt experienced by the participants more tolerable and acceptable: "I sacrificed for my children...I felt very bad for this, but it was necessary to guarantee them a future!" [Svitlana]. And again, "See... in our life, everyone needs to make a choice... you need to sacrifice yourself if you want to aspire to something bigger... if you cannot guarantee them a future, if you cannot guarantee for them to study or to have a good job, tomorrow they will live, not you. I either sacrificed myself or in the future they will sacrifice

themselves...!" [Sandra].

Torn from the pain, this traumatic experience seemed to produce a deep hole. The second subordinate theme, *to fill the gap*, described the changed maternal practices which symbolically tried to spoil the vacant space by filling it with gifts, remittances, calls, video-calls, and anything else that could help avoid the sense of emptiness: "When I started to work and to earn money, I sent my children everything they needed...shoes, clothes, money... I left for this, to make them happy...! As soon as I earned money, I booked them something" [Gloria]. Another woman said, "I always call them...now with WhatsApp we can do everything together. We can cook together, we can converse or chat, we can do shopping online...it is like I am there...!" [Natasha].

Finally, the third subordinate theme, *the uncanny*, describes the sense of "unfamiliarity" experienced by women in their relationship with the children, which was exacerbated by the experience of separation. This sense of unfamiliarity emerging from the narratives seemed to be reciprocal and affected the representation that the women had of their children as well as that of the children towards their mothers. This led to the questioning of maternal and child roles and functions, prompting participants to grapple with an important identity question arising from the demands of maternal care on their mothers and the resulting wounds it produced: "I left my daughter when she was 5, I found her when she was 12 years old...a woman to be... unrecognizable... it was absolutely shocking... there I realized I lost too much time...sometimes I asked to myself if my children really consider me as their mother or, instead, my mother, who raised them, is more authorized to be considered their mother... Often I am afraid to be only like an ATM" [Irina]. Another woman said, "My son, for example, he was angry, at the beginning he did not want to talk to me. He was a cute baby but when I left, he became another person. I knew he was suffering but I cried a lot because he was... different and cruel!" [Sandra]. Starting from the mandate of maternal care and the wounds it creates, a deep identity issue is established: for most of the children left behind, in fact, it is the grandmother who performs the role and function of a mother.

#### 4. An emptiness we can't narrate

The fourth superordinate theme encompasses the most emotional dimension connected to the maternal identity. In the first subordinate theme, entitled through a metaphorical image given by one of the participants, "your heart is broken in a lot of pieces, you cannot tolerate," the emotional payload of the experience of separation which emerged from the narratives as a real mourning work is explained: "The first three years were very difficult...you leave a little daughter...then you rediscover her adolescent...she was 12 years old, a little woman...[...]...the more terrible thing [of the distance from the children] is that you cannot be physically there...you miss the contact. For example, my son loves coffee, and I love coffee too...we both drink Lavazza, but I drink coffee here and he drinks coffee there...it is sad" [Marya]. Another woman told us, "well...I felt so bad that I often thought to die...(she cries)...it was very difficult, because when you are a mother and you leave four children...your heart is broken in a lot of pieces...you cannot tolerate it...even though you work for twelve hours and you are tired, you always leave almost one-two hours to speak with your children, you do homework with C., you hope that C. can study so she will have a different future" [Luda].

The following theme, "Mum will go back early," describes the salvific meaning attributed to the reunification with their own children. The thought of the reunification appears to nourish the hope and the strength of the women before, during, and after the journey. In this sense, the expressed desire to achieve reunification seems to act, in extremis, as a reparative act, aimed at reconnecting with the "lost object": "my idea has always been to bring my son with me in Italy, in five years I continuously thought this, and I think this was my safety...[...]...now as at that time, I leave with this hope, and I dream that we will be together" [Laura]. And another woman: "I want her to come here...I did backflips to get a secure work contract and my efforts were directed to this purpose. Now I need to have the consent from her father...but I am sure that this hope

protected me" [Lucia].

The third subordinate theme, "If I go back...", unpacks the emotional dimension of regret which retrospectively emerges to give women the awareness of how many things they lost due to the distance: "I feel guilty to have...abandoned because...if I had the possibility to restart...I would...I would choose another path...I would choose to stay with my children, rather than work...[...]...I lost my son, almost lost my family, now that's enough. Money cannot substitute family and the links...now I have understood this...I understood that my ideas were wrong...in my mind he must eat well, dress well...however, maybe he should only be loved by his mother...he should only have his mother close..." [Laura]. Another relevant statement is: "...I lost a lot of things, I did not see what I should see...every day, when my son woke up, when he went back from school, when he ate...I was not there...sometimes he fell, and I discovered wounds that I have never seen. He told me: 'I fell when I learnt biking' and I wasn't there...now I know that I made the wrong choice" [Maria].

## Discussion

The analysis of the interviews allowed us to capture the subjective meanings attributed by ten Ukrainian women to their personal experience of migration and transnational motherhood. This analysis produced five superordinate themes with related subordinate themes.

The first superordinate theme, *Rethinking gender roles*, contains the feminine and masculine representations expressed by the participants, stemming from the configuration these representations hold in Ukraine and the transformations they undergo upon contact with the host country. Within this theme, a reversal of family roles emerged as a result of the process that, since the second half of the 20th century, has made women the protagonists of migratory flows. From the narratives, a specific configuration of the Ukrainian woman as a *solitary heroine* emerged, portraying a mother who, with great effort and sacrifice, supports the family. Simultaneously, men were depicted as absent, lazy, and incapable of hard work. The men were frequently depicted as defective, parasitic, and incompetent in assuming the "role" of the head of the family, pushing women to leave their homeland. Migration was, therefore, depicted as a heroic act predominantly associated with the "all feminine", shedding light on a reunion, within the women themselves, of maternal and paternal functions.

The solitary experience of migration, combined with exposure to Italian cultural models and gender representations, seemed to restructure gender configurations. However, the evidence obtained from previous sociological studies (Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2015; Vianello, 2016) shows that this gender redefinition is not complete. We noticed that the women's narratives remained permeated by the rhetoric of sacrifice, sustaining the idea of emigration as the only way to take care of the family. Tyldum (2015) suggests that, through this kind of narrative, women must set aside their need to care for their children. As Solari (2014) evidenced, this narrative might help women to justify their migratory choice in the eyes of their homeland which, sometimes, stigmatizes migrant women in Italy by calling them "prostitutes". In line with Solari (2014), we believe that this narrative helped women support their choices. In this sense, we interpreted this as a psychic defense mechanism through which women sustained the load, but also the sense of guilt for their choice, submitting their choice to a higher ideal (family care).

The second superordinate theme, *Suspended between two worlds*, contained representations of the journey and arrival in the host country, describing the challenges of migration in terms of identity reformulations (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). Firstly, the motherland emerged as a treacherous mother, incapable of holding onto her children and guaranteeing them a secure place, instead rejecting them (Tessitore et al., 2022). Symbolically, this representation also described the way in which the women viewed themselves, feeling guilty for having abandoned their children (Francisco-Menchavez, 2019). In line with Beutel et al. (2016), the interviews revealed the ambivalent feelings of the women

towards the host country: Italy oscillated between an idealized view as a “promised land” and a rejecting, hostile representation that, even after many years, continued to evoke feelings of *uncanny extraneousness* (Freud, 1919).

If the motherland was represented as an abandoning mother and the host country as partially rejecting, the psycho-emotional condition of these women might be described as a state of suspension in time and space; a permanent instability that prevented them from fully engaging in present life, configuring the migration experience as a transitional period, awaiting an indefinite future that might involve a return to their origins. This state of suspension was fueled by the compatriot network, that, on the one hand, assumed a supportive and protective function but, on the other hand, represented an obstacle to the transformative process inherent in encounters with the cultural other (Margherita & Tessitore, 2023; Tessitore & Margherita, 2024).

The third superordinate theme, *what kind of mother am I?*, captured the meanings revolving around the construction of a new maternal identity. In this sense, the women's narratives reiterated the sacrificial dimension in which they understood their motherhood experience, as well as the incurable wound produced by separation and subsequent attempts at repair. We believe this theme is extremely representative of the feminine identity issue arising as a direct consequence of the required mandate of maternal care towards other figures. Although this aspect has been well described in literature (Bryceson, 2019; De Gourcy et al., 2021), our findings helped understand the consequences of this dynamic on the maternal identity of the women. Our participants vividly described the loss and confusion surrounding their maternal roles and functions and the tension experienced in their maternal identity. The doubt surrounding “who is the real mother of my children” perfectly described this tension, in which feelings of envy and anger intertwined with gratitude and appreciation towards the women's mothers who often took on the task of caring for their children. The separation assumed the semblance of an emptiness that needed to be filled defensively. This symbolic function was presented through the gifts, remittances, and continuous telephone contacts described by the participants, in addition to the more generic and concrete sense highlighted in literature (Bryceson, 2019; Nurick & Hak, 2019). Within this dynamic, the role of technology, widely described in existing literature, assumed an ambivalent character. On the one hand, the technologic instruments helped maintain contact with their children, however, on the other hand, it also served as a continuous reminder that the distance could not be eliminated.

This redefinition of the maternal role was influenced by the *extra-neousness* dimension: both the feminine identity, which cannot be recognized in the original familiar models, and the mother identity, which sought new channels of affective transmission and configured an unfamiliar self-image and perception. This condition produced what in psychoanalytic terms is defined as *the uncanny* (Freud, 1919), the co-presence of the familiar and the strange, requiring a complex psychic process of redefining the usual categories through which individuals interpret the word, the self, and the other.

The fourth superordinate theme, an *emptiness which we cannot narrate*, described the complexity of the experience of separation, which was difficult for women to emotionally engage with and narrate. These difficulties explained the traumatic nature of this complex experience, the pain of which seemed to be inevitably dulled. In this sense, the desire for reunification, although representing a realistic possibility for women, also seemed to be the only aspect that they could use to grasp and “contact” the separation experience. In fact, this desire for reunification emerged as the driving force that enabled women to endure separation from their children. From our point of view, it also represented the only aspect of the separation experience that women could conceptualize. In this theme, the dimension of loss which, described through a retrospective awareness of what women had lost when they emigrated, was accompanied by complex feelings of guilt. Despite its necessity, most women also recognized that they chose to prioritize

providing a comfortable life for their children, embodying the defensive mechanism that Parreñas (2001) described as the *commercialization of love*, rather than staying with their children.

The present study is not without limitations. First, the participant group needs to be expanded. The investigation also needs to be expanded to married women, delving into the different opinions held by married and unmarried women. Future studies should also combine qualitative and quantitative investigation measures to evaluate the traumatic nature of separation. Since the group of participants involved left children at the age of 5–10 years old, it might be interesting for further studies to explore how the perception of long-distance motherhood changes in different periods of parenthood.

Furthermore, given the contemporary social conditions and the war, it could be useful to extend this investigation to women who are still experiencing separation from their children and who have been enlisted into the Ukrainian army. In fact, it is true that the conflict has altered migratory flows, with the post-war arrivals consisting of Ukrainian mothers with their children. However, it is also true that the many Ukrainian women already residing in Italian territory, likely including our participants, are still grappling with the distance from the children and are now also living with the terror of the possibility of losing their sons and daughters due to the war.

## Conclusion

The present study explored the experience of long-distance motherhood among ten Ukrainian women living in Southern Italy, with a sensitivity towards gender issues. Although the topic has been extensively investigated from a sociological lens, this study has explored the complex experiences of migration and long-distance motherhood from a psychological and psychodynamically oriented perspective. Moreover, these experiences have been less investigated among Ukrainian women residing in Italy and, taking into consideration, their massive presence in the Italian territory, we believe this exploration was urgently needed.

Our results highlighted the psychic vulnerability of Ukrainian migrant women, who are grappling with a redefinition of identity that requires a period of suspension, full of blame, worries, and confusion. The experience of long-distance motherhood, combined with the challenges of the migration experience, necessitated the redefinition of women's identity, in terms of both their femininity and their roles as mothers. We show that the feelings of guilt and suffering associated with the separation from their motherland and their children, along with specific meanings attached to this experience, seemed to lack an adequate space for elaboration on the women's part. This resulted in an empty space in which the separation could only be contemplated in connection to the desire-fantasy of a future reunification. Our findings have significant implications for psychological practice, suggesting the need to help women to elaborate the meanings and consequences associated with their decision to emigrate, working on reflexive functioning and emotion regulation strategies. The results suggest the need to develop intervention programs targeted at this population, since the issues related to the redefinition of identity and the void of representation (i.e., the difficult in narrating about some experiences) might have repercussions on the women's quality of life, psychological well-being, and coping strategies, also influencing the integration and acculturation processes.

From our point of view, now more than ever, there is an urgent need to take into consideration the experiences of Ukrainian women who arrived in Italy several years ago and are still residing there, since they are also living the added burden of the war which threatens the safety of their relatives (including their children) remaining in their homeland.

In conclusion, this study could help better understand and promote further investigations on how the already traumatic experience of migration and separation from their children that Ukrainian women in Italy undergo is further exacerbated by the current war. Additionally, it could deepen how the experience of arrival and inclusion of Ukrainian

women already residing here can be useful in identifying new policies for refugee women forced to flee war.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Gina Troisi:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Francesca Tessitore:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Giovanna Celia:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Raffaele De Luca Picione:** Supervision. **Giorgia Margherita:** Supervision, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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