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# Membership intermediaries: a study of pluri-generational mixed-status families in Italy and France

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## Abstract

Insider family citizens—that is, people who, according to their nationality/legal status and the possession of crucial resources for the settlement of their relatives in a foreign context—occupy an especially important place within a wide and diversified set of family relationships. Drawing on qualitative interviews with migrant women and children in mixed-status families in Italy and France, we argue that they can act as ‘membership intermediaries’ towards migrant spouses and a wider set of kin. First, facilitating non-citizen relatives’ formal incorporation in receiving countries through the provision of specially privileged forms of legality. Second, providing various resources for migrants’ informal incorporation, including housing ownership, additional income, emotional, and cultural capital. Nonetheless, the ambivalent dependencies these processes trigger can become sources of contention, heightening gender and inter-generational power imbalances in the household.

**Keywords:** Membership intermediaries, Family reunification, (In)formal incorporation, Female migration, Mixed-status families, Binational families

## Introduction

Insider family citizens are people who, according to their nationality/legal status and the possession of crucial resources enabling the settlement of their relatives in a foreign context (e.g. housing and employment opportunities, knowledge of the local language), occupy an especially important place within a wide and diversified set of family relationships. In this paper, their role is theorised as a form of membership intermediation (Ambrosini, 2017; Faist, 2014) taking place on two different levels. First, they facilitate the formal incorporation of non-citizen relatives in receiving countries through the provision of more or less privileged forms of legality. Secondly, they provide various resources for the informal incorporation of their relatives in the host context (including housing ownership, additional income, emotional support, and cultural capital). The ambivalent dependencies that this process triggers can become sources of contention, however, because the ‘legal capital’ that they convey is rooted in—and, at the same time, heightens—gender and intergenerational power imbalances in the household.

To illustrate these processes, we draw on qualitative data collected in Italy and France from the perspectives of migrant women who are (or were) the partners of insider family citizens: in this case, national citizens without an immigrant background. We compare the experiences of Latin American women in Italy and Filipino women in France, two migrant groups who share several characteristics. Both groups are strongly concentrated in the domestic and care sector, they often become undocumented after having entered countries as tourists, and they frequently care for their stay-behind children, who are sometimes subsequently reunited with them. Italy and France were selected as receiving countries in this study because they have seen massive immigration in recent decades, which has prompted restrictions on the entry of foreigners and has thus transformed their insider citizens into main legitimate citizenship intermediaries. These countries have developed different tools with which to regulate family migration. They are particularly interesting national contexts to compare for two reasons. The first is the different relevance of family-related routes as channels of entry and regularisation, which is greater in France than in Italy, where employment-based routes (in the form of amnesties and quota decrees) have been cyclically re-opened. The second is the privileged status that a connection to an insider family citizen can assume as regards family reunification provisions and family-based legalisation routes; this is more relevant in Italy, where the role of insider family citizens is also played by children born from mixed unions involving an Italian parent, than in France, where this role is only played by insider spouses.

We critically discuss the important academic debates on family-related forms of immigration controls and the role of intermediaries. We then summarise the relevant Italian and French legal provisions to illustrate how family ties established with insider family citizens can offer specific formal membership avenues to migrant women and their children in terms of family reunification, legalisation, and naturalisation opportunities. We then specify our data-gathering and data-analysis methods, present our selected sample, illustrate the role of membership intermediation of insider family citizens and highlight the ambivalences that it creates.

### **Conceptualising relatives as membership intermediaries**

A burgeoning literature explores the role of 'brokers', 'middlemen', or 'intermediaries', in facilitating cross-border movements and migrant adaptation and settlement in host countries (Ambrosini, 2017; Fernandez, 2013; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015; Lindquist et al., 2012; Renshaw, 2016; Spaan, 1994; van den Broek et al., 2016; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). This role can be played by several actors: professionals (private employment, marriage or tourist agencies etc.), NGOs and churches, state functionaries, and organised crime, as well as informal, privatised networks (on an ethnic, religious, or familial basis), whose operating logic extends from solidarity to profit. While the intermediation role can involve access to a wide range of resources (Faist, 2014), studies in this field mostly examine the infrastructure, such as marriage migration-oriented commercial agencies (Yeoh et al., 2017), which makes cross-border mobility possible. They argue that the importance of intermediaries grows as immigration control and management become increasingly strict and sophisticated. These works also highlight how the action of intermediaries generates further social inequalities (exploitation, fraud, indebtedness, coercion, etc.).

Studies of family migration and mixed families have long demonstrated the key role of kinship networks in facilitating the migration and settlement of non-citizen family members (Della Puppa, 2018; Fix & Zimmermann, 2001; Iwai, 2013; Riaño, 2011; Rodríguez-García, 2015; Schans, 2012). Research shows the tensions that can arise between familial and state-national belongings in a time of increasingly intensified and restricted population movement (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017; Bonjour & de Hart, 2013; De Hart, 2006; Turner, 2008). As family-related routes account for a growing proportion of legal entries (and legal residences) in immigration-receiving countries, the family has become a key site for contemporary forms of migration control (Kraler, 2010; Wray et al., 2014), leading to increased scrutiny of the intimate, bodily life of citizens and non-citizens alike. Countries have introduced specific measures to control family migration flows: raising the minimum age of spouses (Fair, 2010), banning cousin marriages (Rytter, 2010), raising the minimum income required to sponsor one's spouse (Kofman, 2018; Sirriyeh, 2015), complicating the reunification of elderly dependents (Horsti & Pellander, 2015), and introducing language and integration tests (Gutekunst, 2015). Consequently, immigrants find it increasingly difficult to comply with the socio-political construction of a 'good' family (Strasser et al., 2009). While these regulatory efforts are often targeted at specific immigrant communities, they end up affecting a much wider population, including native citizens (Fernandez & Jensen, 2014).

The intermediary role that relatives can play in favouring migration and settlement is twofold.

Firstly, relatives can mediate an individual's legal access to receiving states and can favour legalisation processes (Bélanger & Linh, 2011). Research shows the gendered effect of family immigration policies on binational marriages and migrant families. As women are much more commonly marriage migrants, they more often experience legal dependency on their partners, which can lead to greater legal insecurities (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018b; Faier, 2009; Strasser et al., 2009; Yang & Lu, 2010) exacerbated by the prolonged waiting times and/or other conditions required to obtain naturalisation or permanent residency (Odasso, 2021; Wray, 2012). In some countries, a biological link to the intermediary actor—the insider citizen—can be used as capital in order to migrate to and settle in their country: for example, some Japanese–Filipino children in the Philippines emphasise their consanguinity capital so they are able to migrate to Japan (Seiger, 2017). Moreover, when women act as sponsors, their weak attachment to the labour market (due to employment segregation in informal and/or badly paid jobs and to care/reproductive responsibilities) may complicate their capacity to perform the breadwinning role that family-migration policies often entail (Bonizzoni, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot and Merla, 2018a).

Relatives can also facilitate access to a wider set of 'informal' resources, including income and employment, housing and hospitality, and knowledge of the local language and institutions (Rodríguez-García et al., 2018). For instance, children are known as 'language brokers', linking their migrant parent(s) with their receiving country (Bauer, 2016; Orellana, 2009), and aged family members, such as grandparents, play a central role in 'kinkeeping' (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004) and the preservation and transmission of values and cultural practices from their country of origin. While the intermediary role of kinship ties cannot be reduced to the part played by insider family citizens, these citizens

can, however, play a crucial role due to the more generous family reunification rights that they enjoy in some countries and their privileged position as regards accessing 'local' non-material resources. Nonetheless, it is important to note that family ties are not always a source of help and often create constraints on individual lives (see Chiu & Yeoh, 2021). For instance, marriage migrant women in patriarchal societies generally experience oppression in the families of their insider citizen husbands. This situation stems from their receiving state's extension of privilege to their male insider citizens, allowing them 'to exert patriarchal privileges within marital relationships' (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013: 372). Women in these relationships find themselves dependent on their husbands due to their limited legal rights (see Yeoh et al., 2021), which are connected to their receiving state's 'marital citizenship' (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017). Marriage migrant men can also experience difficulties and limited freedom due to the intermediation role that the receiving state allots to their insider citizen wives (Charsley, 2005).

At present, most studies on immigration intermediaries/brokering pay little attention to the role of close family ties and their specific contexts. Indeed, research on mixed couples has mostly privileged the analysis of normative frameworks, with limited interest in how family members are practically affected by them and actively negotiate state-instigated controls. Studies of family experiences in dealing with immigration law mostly focus on transnational and reunited couples, overlooking the implications of these processes for intergenerational and extended family relationships due to interlocking aspects of immigration and naturalisation law. Even though different countries have distinct regimes of mobility, the specific socio-legal contexts in which membership intermediation takes place are often neglected.

We draw on sociological accounts of citizenship (Isin & Turner, 2002) to analyse how family ties with insider family citizens can favour formal and informal processes of membership intermediation. 'Formal membership intermediation' involves access to more or less privileged legal statuses deriving from the establishment of a family tie with an insider family citizen: while this may entail the facilitation of cross-border mobility, it also extends to the whole 'legal career' of a migrant (including legalisation, residence permit renewals, access to permanent residency, and naturalisation). We use 'informal membership intermediation' to mean the facilitated access to a wider set of resources mediated by the insider family citizen—income, employment, housing, counselling and information, language, and culture—which can, sometimes, be converted into forms of 'legal capital'. Recognising the importance of context, we situate membership intermediation in its socio-legal setting, as demonstrated in the next section.

## **Family-related routes to formal membership**

### **Routes to legalisation and naturalisation**

Despite some failed restrictive attempts by the state, regularisation opportunities via intermarriage with an insider family citizen are still more easily accessible in Italy than in France (Odasso, 2020). While only checks on the effectiveness of cohabitation are made in Italy, legalisation in France is subject to cohabitation proofs (at least 18 months of life together) and documentary evidence of legal entry (e.g. short-term visa) as well as residence in the country for at least 5 years. In Italy, the repeated chances offered by mass

**Table 1** Characteristics of the migrant women interviewed

Receiving country	Pseudonym	Age	Entry route	Legal status	Country of origin	Occupation
Italy	Anita	37	Tourist visa	Italian citizen (marriage)	Ecuador	Domestic worker
	Elizabeth	35			Ecuador	Domestic worker
	Ondina	40			Dominican Republic	Licensed practical nurse
	Lina	34		Family residence permit (marriage)	Dominican Republic	Domestic worker
	Virginia	38		Italian citizen ( <i>ius sanguinis</i> )	Ecuador	Domestic worker
	Karen	32		Family residence permit (Italian child)	Peru	Domestic worker
	Rosa	33		Family residence permit (marriage)	Ecuador	Domestic worker
France	Belinda	32	Family reunion	Residence permit	Philippines	Domestic worker
	Rosalie	28		Residence permit		Domestic worker
	Josefina	33	Student visa	French citizen (marriage)		Engineer
	Maria	42	Tourist visa	Resident card		Domestic worker
	Pilar		Family reunion	French citizen (marriage)		Domestic worker
	Gloria	49	Tourist visa	Filipino citizen (marriage)		Domestic worker
	Marissa	45	Tourist visa	French citizen (marriage)		Domestic worker

amnesties and the (misuse of) yearly quota decrees have long provided alternative legalisation routes, especially for domestic workers (Bonizzoni, 2016, 2018). While employment-based legalisation opportunities have reduced significantly in recent times,<sup>1</sup> they provided gateways for our interviewees (who had entered Italy in 2010 at the latest, see Table 1). In contrast, there have been two mass amnesties for undocumented migrants in France (1981–1982 and 1997–1998), and possibilities for regularisation have become limited (e.g. the Valls Circular of 28 November 2012 provides regularisation possibilities only for certain groups of undocumented migrants).<sup>2</sup>

Aside from opportunities for regularisation, marriage with an insider family citizen creates naturalisation opportunities in both countries, but this route is more restrictive in France because it requires an uninterrupted 4-year residence since the marriage date, high proficiency in French (B1 level), and the absence of a criminal record. In Italy, the naturalisation application can be made after 2 years of marriage, a period halved to 1 year if the couple has children born from their relationship. Familial, intergenerational

<sup>1</sup> The last amnesty was in 2012, and the quota decrees system has been drastically restricted since 2011 (Bonizzoni, 2016, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> This group includes those who are socially incorporated through their profession or work, those who entered the country when they were minors, those who are parents of minors studying in the country, those who are the spouse of a migrant with regular status, and those in a human rights situation (for example, victims of domestic violence), or those with exceptional talents/contributions in fields such as sports and business.

relationships are also especially valued, as descendants of Italian emigrants born abroad can draw upon their familial ancestry to access favourable, *ius sanguinis* naturalisation routes.

If intermarriage or a 'mixed' relationship leads to the birth of a child, then there are legalisation opportunities for the undocumented parent in both countries. In Italy, even the non-cohabiting parent of an Italian minor citizen (if they have not been deprived of legal custody) has the right to a residence permit for family reasons.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the cohabiting relatives of an Italian citizen under the second degree of kinship—that is, brothers/sisters, grandmothers/fathers, grandchildren—cannot be deported and consequently receive a family residence permit. In France, the parent needs to prove that they have been taking care of and raising the French child for at least 2 years. In both countries, because children born on national soil from foreign parents do not automatically obtain the host country's citizenship, this legalisation route is only available to those undocumented fathers/mothers whose child is born from a union with an insider family citizen.

#### **The family reunification rights of third-country nationals (TCNs)**

In both Italy and France, the term 'family reunification' in its legal sense only includes (relatives of) TCNs.<sup>4</sup> Only TCNs residing legally in Italy and France can apply for family reunification. These measures apply, first of all, to foreign relatives residing abroad, regulating their opportunity to obtain a family visa to legally enter the country.

A limited set of relatives can enjoy this right in both countries. In Italy, the spouse or the legally cohabiting partner and children (biological or adopted) can do so. In France, however, only spouses and children (biological or adopted) can access the right to family reunification, and legally cohabiting partners are excluded. In these countries, the age requirements are similar: older than 18 years for the partner and younger than 18 years for the children. The reunification of parents is regulated differently in the two countries: while they are excluded from family reunification provisions in France (where they can come, however, as short-term or long-term visitors), they are instead covered by family reunification provisions in Italy (although these routes are, however, quite restrictive<sup>5</sup>). Adult children (aged 18 or over) can be legally reunited in Italy only if seriously and permanently disabled, and they are excluded from family reunification provisions in France.

In both countries, TCNs willing to sponsor their relatives are expected to earn a specified monthly salary, which is contingent on the size of their family, and to satisfy housing requirements depending on the number of persons living in the apartment/house and on the area where the applicant resides. In France, TCN sponsors should be living in accordance with the basic family-life principles upheld in the country, namely a monogamous relationship, schooling of children, and gender equality in the home.

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<sup>3</sup> Art. 30, comma 1, Decree No. 286/98 (Unified Text on Immigration).

<sup>4</sup> Family reunion rights involving nationals and EU and Swiss citizens are subject to a different set of rules.

<sup>5</sup> Dependent parents are accepted only if they do not have other children living in their country of origin, or if they are aged 65 or older, they are accepted only if their (eventual) other children are unable to take care of them due to serious health problems. Dependent parents should not be legally married with any other legally residing spouse in Italy, and they should be covered by a private health insurance policy.

Both Italy and France offer routes for adjusting the status of TCN relatives who are already living in the country, and the requirements are the same as those for family reunification involving relatives abroad. In France, however, TCNs and their family members should possess a residence card of less than a year (such as students or visitors), while in Italy they are required to have been entitled to legal status (of any kind) not longer than 12 months before the application is made. While status adjustment for family reasons in Italy includes undocumented migrants, in France it therefore only represents a route for evading the short-term or non-renewable status of legal migrants.

Once a sponsor's application in France has been successful, their spouse in the country of origin can apply at the French embassy for a long-stay visa (4–12 months) and their children under 18 years old can ask for a 'family reunification' visa. These reunited family members are expected to apply for a 'private and familial life' residence permit after a 1-year stay in the country (in the case of the spouse) and at the age of majority (or at 16 years old if wanting to work) in the case of the children. Holders of a 'private and family life' permit are required to sign the 'Republican integration contract' (contrat d'intégration republicaine, CIR) after an interview in an OFII (Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration) office. This 1-year contract requires reunited family members to attend civic training (focusing on French institutions, republican values, and society and life in France) and French language training. With a residence card and signed CIR, reunited parents and children aged 16 can work and/or study in France. Non-compliance with the CIR will lead to difficulty renewing the stay permit.

An integration contract tied to a point system has also been introduced in Italy for those legally entering the country after 2010; however, family migrants (who receive a residence permit of the same duration as that of their sponsor, allowing them to study, work, and access social rights) have been exempted from the verification of points acquired/lost. The integration contract is therefore largely ineffective for such immigrants.

#### **The family reunification rights of the insider national citizen**

French and Italian citizens can have their immediate and distant family members join them by using various legal channels. Italian citizens are considered equal to EU citizens with regard to their family reunification rights, and they enjoy more favourable conditions. Firstly, they can be reunited by a wider set of kin: along with their spouse (or the legally recognised cohabiting partner), this includes children under 21 and ascendants (including those of the spouse/partner) as well as other relatives, if dependent. Secondly, sponsors are not strictly scrutinised according to specific economic and housing parameters. Thirdly, the reunited relatives of the Italian/EU citizen receive a longer (5-year) residence permit. Finally, legalisation routes for undocumented parents, grandparents, grandchildren, and siblings of the cohabiting Italian citizen are provided by the Unified Text of Law, providing more favourable routes even than those for EU citizens.

Insider family citizens in France enjoy more favourable family reunification rights than TCNs, even though this 'gap' in the rights enjoyed is not as wide as in the Italian case. Unlike TCNs, they can reunite with their young adult offspring (aged 21 or older and dependent on them). In contrast to Italy, the legally cohabiting partner of a French citizen is excluded from family reunification rights. Ascendants (parents and grandparents)

and (grand)parents-in-law can only come to France if they are dependent on their insider family citizen family member.

What emerges from this comparison is that while family reunification provisions are more favourable in Italy than in France, insider family citizens enjoy more favourable family reunification rights than TCNs in both countries, demonstrating their potential role as membership intermediaries.

### **Methodology**

The data analysed in this paper originated from several qualitative research projects conducted separately in Italy and in France, all focused on transnational caregiving by female migrants and on the family reunification experiences of both parents and children. Two studies were conducted in Italy between 2008 and 2011: they explored the transnational family relationships and reunification experiences of female migrants (from Latin America, the Philippines, and Eastern Europe) and reunited children in Milan through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Similarly, two studies were carried out in France between 2005 and 2015: one investigated the transnational family life of Filipino migrant mothers in the Île-de-France region, and the other examined family reunification in France between Filipino migrants and their stay-behind children in the Philippines. These studies generated many interviews (60 in Italy and 101 in France), but for the purpose of this paper we selected 14 of them (seven in Italy and seven in France), all with mothers who had been involved in mixed-status families.

These 14 interviews were selected because they were the most suitable to illustrate the intermediary role played by insider family citizens. Informants were recruited thanks to the intermediation of several institutions (schools, NGOs offering legal advice to migrants, migrant associations, trade unions, etc.) as well as through personal contacts and snowballing. Interviews were generally carried out at the informant's home: they followed semi-structured guidelines, enquiring retrospectively about family formation/reunification, employment experiences, and (ir)regular migration trajectories. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the informants, integrally transcribed, anonymised, and subsequently analysed through thematic coding. In order to carry out a meaningful comparison of the two cases, we paid attention to two aspects of the experiences of the migrants interviewed. Firstly, we examined their formal membership in their receiving nation-states in terms of access to their territories, the regularisation of migration status, naturalisation, and family reunification rights. Secondly, we investigated their informal incorporation into their receiving societies in terms of access to economic resources, legal information, housing, language, and culture.

Most study informants were reunited with their children in their respective receiving countries, but it should be noted that some Filipino informants were still separated from their stay-behind children at the time of the interview. These women had two offspring on average. The majority of Latin American informants were divorced, whereas Filipino respondents were mostly married. Similarly, informants in Italy had mostly acquired Italian citizenship, unlike many informants in France who remained Filipinos. We used a thematic analysis of the interview data and identified the role of insider family citizens in mediating the incorporation of migrants and their family members in their receiving country. This role lies at the intersection of the following themes: legal access to the



national territory, regularisation of migration status, naturalisation, family reunion, and (in)formal incorporation processes. We also addressed the structuring power of socio-legal contexts in Italy and France by comparing their state policies pertaining to the themes identified in our analysis.

### **Insider family citizens mediating (in)formal membership to the nation**

#### **Legal access to the national territory and regularisation of migration status**

The first route through which insider family citizens can act as intermediaries between TCNs and the state is facilitating TCN access to the national territory (through family reunification) and to regularisation procedures (on family grounds). As the data collected shows, this process had been differently experienced by our informants due to the different ways in which the two countries regulate the matter.

None of the Latin American women in our sample had entered Italy through their Italian partners. The informants had all entered as tourists (quite often relying on extended parental and friendship networks) and subsequently found employment in the domestic and care sector. Five of these women, after some years living and working undocumented, applied for one of the several amnesties and quota decrees issued by the Italian government and obtained their first residence permit through employment-related routes. These routes guarantee women a greater degree of independence from their partners, as they are not tied to them either economically or legally.

The Italian regulatory framework also allows children born to an Italian parent to play the role of intermediary, as they, receiving Italian citizenship at birth, can foster the legalisation of a wider set of kin. The cases of Elizabeth and Karen illustrate this point well.

Elizabeth is an Ecuadorean woman who gave birth to a baby through a relationship with an Italian man. Elizabeth brought her sister and father to Italy via the tourist route some years before, using the savings she had acquired by working as a live-in domestic worker. As her daughter grew up, and after separating from her Italian partner, Elizabeth went back to work with the support of her birth family members and was also able to sponsor the migration of her two oldest daughters, whom she had left overseas. She subsequently discovered that all her cohabiting relatives—including her sister and father—could obtain a family residence permit on the grounds of cohabitation with her Italian baby.

After some time spent in Italy, Karen met an Italian man named Mario, and a child was born from their relationship. Although she was not married to Mario, nor had she cohabited with him during their relationship before it ended, Karen could obtain a family residence permit as the mother of an Italian child. While she was not legally dependent on Mario, because it was impossible for her to go straight back to work due to childcare responsibilities, she was economically dependent on him, a situation which she thought would not change until she was able to put her child in kindergarten. This shows that the legal dependencies generated by immigration and naturalisation laws should be seen in the context of the gendered reproductive inequalities operating in the family.

In France, marriage appeared to play a greater role in the legalisation and settlement processes of female migrants. Four of the seven Filipinos interviewed in France indicated insider family citizen husbands as the key intermediaries of their legal entry

routes. Belinda, Rosalie, Pilar, and Josefina met their French husbands in the Philippines and reported that their visa applications to move to France had gone very well. Belinda said that her husband 'took care of her application' and accompanied her throughout the entire process. Similarly, Josefina's French partner suggested that she should enter France as a student and helped her during the application process.

Belinda and Rosalie decided to exclude their children from their visa application at the French embassy in Manila. Since it was their first attempt to migrate to France, they did not want to complicate the process further. Applying for family reunification with their children would mean, in fact, more challenges in order to meet the reunification requirements (as their husbands require a larger apartment to accommodate two additional persons instead of one). Belinda and Rosalie thus entrusted their respective children to the care of their families, negotiating the reunion with their children later on with their husbands. At the time of the interview, both women had residence cards and were planning to apply for family reunification once they had obtained stable jobs.

Three Filipino women regularised their status through marriage to insider family citizens in France. Gloria and Marissa had no initial plan to marry French men but tied the knot after falling in love. Gloria got married in 1987, a few months after her arrival, whereas Marissa got married in 2004 after a few years cohabiting with her partner. In contrast to these two women, who described 'love' as the driving force behind their binational marriage, Maria married a French man in 2002 explicitly to regularise her migration status. Prior to her marriage, she told her husband that she would pay him if he did not fall in love with her after 3 months of living together; he did fall for her and asked her to stay with him. Regardless of their personal motivations, the marriage of these women with insider family citizens did not immediately lead to the regularisation of their status: Gloria and Maria were regularised almost a year after marriage. Similarly, Maria waited for almost 2 years after her wedding and 'after passing through many things, including the tribunal,' before finally being regularised. Despite their long paths to regularisation, Gloria, Maria, and Marissa said it was due to their husbands that they finally received their 'papers,' which opened possibilities for family-related migratory projects.

A long waiting period before becoming regularised and/or anticipating a family reunion triggers dependency, however, on the insider spouse as well as power imbalances between couples. For example, Maria confided that although her French husband 'does not like phone calls nor (Filipino) visitors' in their apartment and although she was 'not in love' with him, she had no plan to divorce him. She explained what motivated her to stay with him in France: 'My plan now, I would like to get my two children [from the Philippines]; I will stay here as long as they are not yet 18. [...] I have 10 years [residence permit]; then, within 2 years, I will apply for French nationality.'

Our data show that, as regards the relevance of insider partners in facilitating entry to a country and obtaining legal status for the women interviewed, the relative availability of employment-related (entry and regularisation) routes in the Italian case means the ties established with insider family citizens are less important compared to in the French case, where routes other than those offered by family ties are far more limited. Moreover, Italian provisions make Italian children born to mixed couples key membership intermediaries, as they can promote the legalisation of a wide set of kin. While the French regulatory framework heightens power imbalances within couples due to the

important role played by insider citizen spouses in intermediating women's access to the territory (as well as their legalisation and family reunification paths), the Italian framework provides alternative routes for women. These, however, while marginalising the role of insider citizen spouses, do not necessarily make their support less relevant, as women are usually employed in demanding and poorly paid jobs and have strong care responsibilities for their children (whether in Italy or abroad).

In the following sections, we see how power imbalances within couples affected the family reunion projects of the women interviewed as well as the incorporation of their reunited family members in their new households in their respective receiving countries.

### **Marriage, naturalisation, and family reunification rights**

Insider family citizens can 'intermediate' membership in a number of ways. On the one hand, they mediate the access of non-citizens to more favourable reunification and naturalisation regimes; on the other hand, they can facilitate access to material and symbolic resources.

In Italy, insider family citizens came to play a significant role in relation to the more favourable family reunification rights that they could provide. All the women interviewed had, at the time of departure from their home countries, dependent children abroad, whose reunification was often delayed due to the time needed to legalise and qualify for family reunification procedures (e.g. earning a sufficient salary, finding suitable housing, etc.)

Insider citizen spouses supported them in two different ways. On the one hand, they let the women take advantage of the more favourable family reunification routes enjoyed by Italian citizens. For two mothers in the Italian sample, marriage to an Italian spouse implied not only naturalisation chances but also the right to reunite with children who had already come of age. This was crucial for Rosa (Ecuadorian) and Ondina (Dominican), whose older children had already turned 18 and would have been excluded from family reunification provisions if the women had not been married to an 'insider spouse.'

The experiences of two of the women interviewed in Italy (Rosa and Anita) show that their family reunification plans were strongly favoured by the role played by their insider spouses in a way that went beyond the 'mere' access to more generous reunification rights. While both women had always been employed, they took advantage of key resources provided by their spouses, including access to lawyers and consultants, housing spaces, and money to pay for travel fees and to translate and legalise documents. We also observed this in the case of Gloria and Marissa in France, whose French partners 'lent them a hand' during the family reunification process in many ways, including explaining/translating the forms that needed to be completing.

In France, the Filipino women only accessed French nationality through marriage, as children were born later in the family life of these binational couples. Becoming a French national via marriage was, however, not immediate, and took over 4 years in the case of Marissa, Pilar, and Josefina. Maria clearly expressed her intention to apply for French nationality for the purpose of family reunification: this intention was similar to that of Belinda and Rosalie, who, like Maria, were still separated from their respective children at the time of the interview. The importance of family reunification rights as crucial in choosing (or not) to opt for naturalisation is clearly reflected by the fact that the only

woman expressing a lack of interest in acquiring French citizenship was Gloria, who was already reunited with a child born from a previous relationship in France. Her story, however, clearly demonstrates how the support of one's insider partner can be decisive for women in binational unions in order to complete their family reunion project. This means that in spite of the legal possibility of family reunification, migrant women need to negotiate with their insider citizen husbands. Gloria, in fact, was only able to reunite with her Filipino daughter 3 years after her divorce from her French husband (who was the father of her second child, born in France): the main reason Gloria did not apply for family reunification earlier was that her husband was against it at that time.

*I had hoped to get my daughter when she was younger [than 18 years old], but my husband and I could not agree about it, as if he was not open to the idea. My husband was nice, but this was perhaps due to cultural differences between us. He almost did not agree; it was almost me [who did the paperwork].*

The help of Gloria's former husband, albeit minimal, was at any rate crucial and went beyond access to more privileged family reunification provisions, as we illustrate in the next section.

Among the seven Filipino informants, only Pilar experienced the immediate usefulness of French nationality for family reunification purposes, as she and her children already had dual nationality (Filipino and French) at the time of their first migration to France: she and her husband arrived in 2008 and were followed by their children a few months later. Pilar's case is exceptional, as the benefits deriving from marriage with an insider family citizen usually take much time and effort to be enjoyed. This was the case for Marissa. Apart from being in love with her French partner, she married him and acquired French nationality due to the failure of her first attempt to sponsor reunification with her children:

*I tried to get them in 2003 when I was not yet married [to my present husband]. It was in 2003 when my mother-in-law and my partner invited them to come. They were not able to arrive here because the [immigration] authorities impeded it, as I was not yet regularised. There were many [required] documents. I think I spent almost 30,000 euros; all my savings since I was here. I prepared the papers, and then my partner told me that this would mean double paperwork [regularisation of her migration status and family reunion application]. He told me 'let us get married,' but I did not want to get married. I was afraid. Although there is [divorce here], I don't like to divorce. I think that when I marry it should be forever. I got married [anyway] in 2004.*

Despite marriage to her French partner, Marissa was only able to reunite with her children in 2011, 3 years after becoming French. Marissa's experience reveals how state policy most often puts migrant women in a powerless situation, prompting them to marry an insider family citizen to easily access family reunion rights and prolonging their legal dependence on their partner. Women like Gloria, whose husbands are not supportive of their family reunification projects with their stay-behind children, could not easily negotiate with them due to their economic and legal dependency on them. Once regularised, these women find more stable jobs in the domestic sector or, as in the case of Gloria,

divorce their French husband afterwards and do the necessary paperwork for their children's immigration.

#### **(In)formal incorporation and its ambivalences**

Insider family citizens can intermediate access to the informal membership of their TCN spouses and relatives thanks to the circulation of various resources. Insider family citizen spouses continued to play a role as intermediaries even after the arrival of their partner's children. Marissa's husband, for example, helped her children with their incorporation into French society by talking to them in French and exposing them to the French way of life. The 'informal' incorporation of reunited children into a new household is not always straightforward, however. Where children are reunited with their mother through the help of a stepfather, this entails building a truly new family relationship.

While some women—such as Rosa, Ondina, and Lina in Italy—did not complain about difficulties, Anita's words, reported below, instead show the ambivalences of the unequal relationships of interdependence triggered by membership intermediation, which, in her case, led to her first daughter's exit from the household and later to divorce from her husband.

*I told him my story... He put 5000 euros in my hands and told me, "Go and get your children." I went to Ecuador, and the father of my children tried to blackmail me... he said that he was not obliged to sign the paper I needed to have the kids come with me. But I got mad, I told him that my new husband was very rich, and I would have ruined him... I paid him 1000 euros and got the paper I needed. [...] Once here, we started having trouble. My daughter could not stand the situation anymore... and finally, she left the house because my husband used to tell her: "Remember that I was the one that took you away from that shit." These are things that you cannot say, you cannot throw back in someone's face what you did for me.*

As previously noted, Elizabeth's family had all obtained legal status through her, but her pregnancy initially complicated Elizabeth's family reunification plans:

*In the meantime, I got pregnant, and this has made everything very complicated because I planned to work and save as much as possible to bring my older two daughters here... But I was undocumented, and we [she and her Italian partner] were not married. When he recognised our daughter, I got my documents, but I had to work live-in for more than a year and a half to save the money I needed to bring them.*

Tensions also emerged between formal and informal memberships mediated by the insider citizen, as her older daughters took a long time to accept the 'family membership' of their 'new' Italian stepsister.

Similar processes were also observed in France. Gloria, for example, had a hard time with her Filipino daughter, who, when she arrived in France, had jealousy issues with her French stepsister. A migrant child who had been reunited with his mother confided that he and his siblings had had a hard time adjusting to their French

stepfather (e.g. adjusting to his strict step-parenting style), although he also helped them greatly in improving their French.

## Conclusions

This paper brings new insights into the study of immigration intermediaries and brokering, bringing attention to the role played by close family ties. It also expands the research on mixed couples with an empirically informed analysis of how family members are practically affected by state-instigated immigration controls, showing how they can actively negotiate them. The neglected implications of these processes for intergenerational and extended family relationships are also brought to the light, focusing on the interlocking aspects of immigration and naturalisation law.

The cases examined in this paper suggest that insider family citizens can act as citizenship intermediaries by favouring formal membership of the nation-state, not only for their migrant spouses but also for their spouse's children and other relatives. This role appears to be different in the two countries selected. Given that Italy offers multiple opportunities for legal entry and regularisation on an employment basis and has also treated the role of the domestic and care sector with particular favour, the women interviewed did not experience the same type of legal dependence on their spouses that instead characterised migrant women in France, where family-related routes were instead more relevant.

Insider family spouses in Italy and France can act as catalysts to stabilise legal status, ranging from access to short-term residence permits for undocumented migrants to long-term residency and naturalisation. This process appears to be more relevant in France than in Italy, however, where migrant women had improved opportunities to obtain other forms of legalisation, mainly through employment-related regularisation routes, and where the role played by insider citizen children born to mixed unions is more relevant. The prolonged forms of dependency on a spouse that are highlighted in the literature in the field (Eggebo, 2010; JCWI, 2014; Liversage, 2013) are therefore less pronounced in France. While the role of the spouse may not be as crucial for legalisation in Italy, their greater family reunification rights can favour the formal incorporation processes of migrant women's relatives (something which is less clearly observed in France due to the less marked differences in the family reunification rights of citizens and TCNs) although this formal intermediary role can also be played by children born to mixed unions.

The cases discussed (specifically those of Elizabeth in Italy and Gloria in France) show the unevenness of the effects in terms of formal membership, mediated by factors such as age and time, leading to different statuses for children in these mixed-status families (documented and undocumented; TCNs and citizens), guaranteeing them different (and hierarchised) forms of inclusion. This is sometimes seen as a contradiction by parents, as it contrasts with the principle of equal treatment that most of them would have hoped for. This takes us to the second theme explored in this paper: the formal and informal sides of incorporation favoured by the insider family citizen.

In both France and Italy, spouses often played a critical role in favouring their migrant spouse's reunification processes in the form of economic support, legal advice, housing, knowledge of the local context and language, and so on. However, the intention of

insider family citizen partners to provide for their spouse's family members should not be taken for granted, as several cases explored in this paper have shown. Formal incorporation into the state through the family does not always run in parallel with a sense of membership, belonging, and shared solidarity in the family. Tensions can arise among members of 'reconstituted' families and should be read in the context of the sometimes-complex relational implications of family reunification. Comparisons of migrant experiences in Italy and France highlight how the (in)formal aspects of social incorporation triggered by the insider family citizens not only vary among countries but also intersect with each other.

We learn three things from our findings. Firstly, the extent of the intermediary role of insider family citizens is contingent on, and shaped by, interacting state policies on migration and citizenship. Formal and informal aspects of citizenship are mutually constituted, however: while relationships with insiders can be mobilised to acquire formal membership, familial power imbalances are exacerbated by the implications of the resources they bring in terms of legal, formal incorporation. By showing the reciprocal implications of these formal and informal aspects, this study thus contributes to the debate on immigration and citizenship (Isin & Turner, 2002). Secondly, (in)formal membership intermediation is a process with underlying consequences for the lives of migrant spouses and their (rejoining) relatives, which should be seen in conjunction with gendered, generational power imbalances in the family. This reflects the broader inequality implications of the intermediation/brokering function highlighted by the literature in the field (Faist, 2014). Thirdly, as regards which relatives of migrants can access family reunification, we observe that the emerging meaning of a 'good family' (Strasser et al., 2009) is a formally constructed notion, which clashes with the way migrants and insider family citizens experience and give meaning to their family ties. This is especially evident concerning the enforcement of (legal and economic) dependency on the insider family citizen sponsors because the extent to which dependency is established may become an issue of negotiation and conflict, as the information collected has shown.

It would be interesting to investigate in future studies whether the political construction and relevance of the 'good family' to citizenship intermediation evolve over time, especially in light of the 'double' (economic and immigration) crises that European countries are experiencing with regard to the spread of nationalist and populist reactions to immigration-related issues. In Italy, the salience of family-related routes might increase due to the significant reduction in employment-related routes, and recent reforms introduced by the so-called 'Salvini decree'<sup>6</sup>, extending the time that administrative offices can take to evaluate naturalisation requests, might de facto imply a prolonged condition of dependency on insider sponsors.

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#### **Author contributions**

PB conducted the interviews relating to the Italian case study, which she transcribed in full and subsequently analyzed. She is also responsible for the analysis of the Italian regulatory framework relating to family reunification policies. AF-F conducted the interviews relating to the French case study, which she transcribed in full and subsequently analyzed. She

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<sup>6</sup> Decree Law 113/2018 has doubled the waiting time (from 24 to 48 months) for obtaining an answer to a naturalisation application. The fee has also been increased from €200 to €250.

is also responsible for analyzing the French regulatory framework relating to family reunification policies. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Availability of data and materials

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#### Declarations

##### Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all study informants.

##### Competing interests

The authors do not have any competing interest to declare.

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