

Migrants' choices pertaining to informal childcare in Italy and France: A complex relationship between the origin and destination countries

Eleonora Trappolini¹ | Elisa Barbiano di Belgiojoso² | Stefania M. L. Rimoldi²  | Laura Terzera²

¹Department of Methods and Models for Economics, Territory and Finance – Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

²Department of Statistics and Quantitative Methods, University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

Correspondence

Eleonora Trappolini, Department of Methods and Models for Economics, Territory and Finance – Sapienza University of Rome, Via del Castro Laurenziano, 9, Rome 00161, Italy.
Email: eleonora.trappolini@uniroma1.it

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Abstract

Childcare is a need that inevitably emerges once migrants establish themselves and their families in their destination country. However, migrants' use of informal childcare still constitutes an under-researched phenomenon. Using data from the 'Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens' survey (2011–2012) for Italy and the 'Trajectoires et Origines' survey (2008–2009) for France, this paper examines differences between migrants living in the two countries in terms of their use of informal childcare and, more specifically, their informal childcare arrangements. We employ a comparative analysis because we hypothesised that parental choices would depend on the migrants' region of origin, the institutional context of their destination country and the interplay between these two elements. The results suggest that migrants' choices stem from a complex relationship between the norms and beliefs of the country of origin and those in the destination country, which are generally characterised by different family policies and levels of childcare availability. We show that the use of informal childcare is higher among migrants in Italy than it is among those in France, even among migrants from the same region of origin. The results also suggest that the use of particular informal childcare arrangements varies by region of origin regardless of destination country, supporting the hypothesis that migrants' cultural values and beliefs play a critical role in determining childcare arrangements. Finally, we demonstrate that household composition and parents' occupational status strongly influence migrants' childcare choices.

KEYWORDS

childcare, France, Italy, migrants, welfare

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Childcare is a highly relevant topic because it greatly impacts parents' life opportunities in terms of, for example, female labour market participation and family fertility behaviour. Childcare arrangements depend on multiple factors, including cultural norms, social class, the labour market and the availability of social protections. These factors can either constrain or support parents' choices (Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999). Therefore, when considering childcare, it is crucial to consider the compromise between individuals' preferences and the availability of options (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). The latter factor here can be influenced by the prevailing welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), existing parental leave policies and the extent to which government policies promote parents'—and especially mothers'—labour market participation. Moreover, the availability of childcare services varies greatly by country (Rindfuss & Brauner-Otto, 2008).

The literature indicates that, for the most vulnerable families (including migrant families), access to formal childcare is limited by many exo-level (policies), macro-level (neighbourhoods), meso-level (services) and micro-level (families) factors as well as the interactions among them (Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). According to Archambault et al. (2020), access to formal childcare is dependent on multiple factors, including the abilities to recognise the need for childcare, seek and obtain it, pay for it and, ultimately, benefit from it. Families may face various obstacles in accessing formal childcare, including a lack of information, limited language skills, a lack of confidence in public childcare services, a limited maternal role in the household, a lack of a social support network, and the limited availability or excessive cost of services. The benefits of formal care ultimately depend on recognising that it can improve children's educational outcomes.

Informal childcare can be an alternative or supplement to formal childcare, especially when service provision does not align with the way families are organised (e.g., insufficiently flexible hours). Indeed, a substantial body of empirical research indicates that proper childcare often involves various concurrent forms of childcare rather than just a single form (Morrisey, 2009; Neilsen-Hewett et al., 2014). In some countries (e.g., those in Southern Europe), informal childcare (especially care provided by grandparents) plays a key role in balancing work and family responsibilities (Aassve et al., 2012; Albertini & Tosi, 2022; Arpino et al., 2014; Zamberletti et al., 2018).

Most existing studies on childcare focus on the choices of the overall population, generally considering migrants to be childcare providers rather than potential consumers of such services (Mussino & Ortensi, 2023; Williams & Gavanoas, 2016). Of course, childcare becomes much more complex when parents are migrants settling in a new country. Migrant parents generally face additional limitations and constraints when it comes to childcare options due to the lack of an existing social support network, especially in the early stages of migration (Bojarczuk & Mühlau, 2018; Ryan, 2007, 2011a; 2011b). Nevertheless, research on migrants' childcare choices suggests that migrants are more likely to use informal childcare than formal childcare (Ryan, 2007; Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017).

With regard to specific childcare arrangements, some studies show that migrants' choices are influenced by their race/ethnicity or country of origin (Early & Burchinal, 2001; Furfaro et al., 2020; Lin & Wiley, 2017; Radey & Brewster, 2007). Indeed, the cultural and behavioural values that migrants bring from their home countries play a crucial role in shaping their family lives and choices in their destination country (Barglowski et al., 2015; Da, 2003; Kim & Fram, 2009; Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017).

Still, when analysing migrants' childcare choices, it is important to consider their destination country as well. Assessing the effect of destination countries on childcare choices requires a comparative analysis, but many previous studies have only examined the determinants of childcare choices (both formal and informal) within a single national context (Biegel et al., 2021; Bojarczuk & Mühlau, 2018). Still, even among studies that have compared different national contexts, most have limited their analysis to formal childcare (Barglowski & Pustulka, 2018; Krapf, 2014; Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017).

This study aims to shed light on the various informal childcare solutions that migrant parents may use for both preschool and school-age children (0 to 11-year-old) in Italy and France. To do so, it employs a 'multi-origin/multi-destination approach', which has been used in previous studies on fertility among migrants (Mussino & Cantalini, 2022, p. 2). This analysis contributes to the existing literature on migrants' childcare, introducing the assumption that the use of informal childcare as well as the specific informal childcare arrangements used may be influenced by migrants' country of origin, destination country and the interplay between them. Notably, the interplay between them may influence the characteristics of the migrant family (in terms of household characteristics as well as parents' occupational status).

This study pursues three main aims. First, it analyses the differences in the use of informal childcare¹ between migrants living in Italy and those living in France, as these two countries have different welfare regimes and family policies. Second, it explores parents' choices with regard to specific informal childcare arrangements² in the two destination countries based on the migrants' country of origin to assess the stability of chosen informal childcare arrangements across groups in the two countries. Finally, it investigates the role of the country of origin and the destination country on migrants' informal childcare choices,³ hypothesising that the interplay between these two elements—country of origin and destination country—may determine the characteristics of the migrant family in the destination country as well as the parents' labour market participation, which, in turn, can affect their informal childcare choices.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the background of the two considered institutional settings. Section 3 introduces our conceptual framework and discusses existing evidence on the topic. Section 4 illustrates our research hypotheses. Section 5 presents the data and variables used

¹The 'use of informal childcare' refers to the parental decision to rely on any means of informal childcare regardless of the specific arrangement.

²'Informal childcare arrangement' refers to the specific type of informal childcare selected.

³Hereafter, we use 'informal childcare choices' to refer to decisions regarding both the use of informal childcare in general and the informal childcare arrangement specifically.

in the regression analysis. Section 6 presents the main results and consistency checks. Finally, Section 7 discusses the results and offers some concluding thoughts.

2 | THE MIGRATION PHENOMENON IN ITALY AND FRANCE

Differences in the degree of migration between France and Italy are largely attributable to the differing periods during which migration developed in the two countries. France has a long tradition of immigration, which developed in earnest following the independence of the former French colonies; Italy, however, did not receive its first substantial inflow of immigrants until the oil crisis of the mid-1970s (Bonifazi, 2008; Van Mol & de Valk, 2016). Consequently, for the period being examined in this study (2008–2012), there was a higher proportion of foreign-born individuals in France than in Italy (see Supporting Information S1: Table 1). Indeed, the proportion of foreign-born individuals was largely consistent at just under 12% of the total population in France, whereas in Italy, there was a rise from 7.4% in 2008 to 9.4% in 2012. Conversely, the share of foreigners over the population was fairly similar between the two destination countries, though it was slightly higher in Italy at 6.6% in 2008 and 7.3% in 2012 than in France at 6.1% and 6.4%, respectively.

The difference in migrants' rate of citizenship acquisition between the two countries stems from the average length of stay being longer in France but also from the particularly restrictive regulations on citizenship applications for migrants in Italy as well as the lack of origin-dependent advantages in citizenship acquisition, which were present in France in the past (see Supporting Information S1: Table 1). Finally, the greatest difference between the two countries (during the years considered) is evident in their inflows. More specifically, between 2008 and 2012, more than twice as many foreign individuals entered Italy as they did France, and this difference can be attributed to France's stricter immigration legislation. Overall, in both countries, family migration is the main reason for migration (OECD, 2015).

The two destination countries are considerably different in terms of diversity among their numerous nationalities. In Italy, between 2008 and 2012, the top 10 common nationalities represented, on average, 64.4% of all foreign-born individuals in the country, with Romanians being predominant by a notable margin. In France, the top 10 common nationalities represented an average of 57.1% of all foreign-born individuals in the country, though the immigrant population was more evenly distributed with no single nationality being dominant (see Supporting Information S1: Table 2). However, France's immigrant population had a more 'concentrated' distribution in terms of their regions of origin. In France, the large majority of immigrants had African nationalities, while there was a more balanced regional distribution among Italy's immigrants. Furthermore, foreign-born

individuals from highly developed countries (HDCs) were more common in France than in Italy (OECD, 2015).

Regarding the labour market, considering that the period being considered encompasses the economic crisis and a few years following it (see footnote n. 13), the data indicate that foreign-born men in France had a lower employment rate and a higher unemployment rate than their counterparts in Italy (see Supporting Information S1: Table 2). Conversely, there were no significant differences among women in terms of either employment rate (very similar, though lower than men in both countries) or unemployment rate (see Supporting Information S1: Table 2).

3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In this section, we first introduce the prevailing conceptual frameworks on childcare choices in the literature. Next, we provide an overview of the empirical evidence concerning the determinants of childcare choices among migrant populations.

The starting point of this paper consists of the works of Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999), Weber (2011), and Meyers and Jordan (2006). To understand parents' childcare choices, Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) propose a framework focused on mothers' demographic characteristics and maternal beliefs. Weber's (2011) summary emphasises the role of multiple dimensions: family characteristics (e.g., parental education attainment, family income, number of children/adults living in the households, ethnicity, culture), community characteristics (e.g., what is and is not available) and parents' values and beliefs with regard to childcare and education. Meyers and Jordan (2006, p. 64) incorporate the notion of 'accommodation' into parents' childcare choices: childcare choices are 'an accommodation to limited, imperfect and socially constructed information about alternatives and resources'. Therefore, parents may be obliged to renounce their ideal childcare arrangement due to constraints, limited resources or social expectations.

According to Chaudry et al. (2010), the accommodation notion is the most comprehensive. Indeed, it integrates the traditional economic framework of rational consumer choice with other social and behavioural science theories, such as the 'social network framework for decision-making' (Wellman, 1983).

According to the framework of rational consumer choice, individuals make decisions by maximising their satisfaction while considering whatever constraints limit their preferences. This framework assumes static and exogenous preferences and assumes that individuals have access to complete information. Nevertheless, empirical evidence on parental childcare preferences suggests that these preferences may not be exogenous but rather subject to frequent reconsiderations and changes based on previous childcare experiences, interactions with providers and shifting employment circumstances (Chaudry, 2004; Coley et al., 2006; Li-Grining & Coley, 2006). Moreover, parents often have incomplete or imperfect information when considering the childcare options available to

them, and this is especially true for migrant parents (Sprong & Skopek, 2023). In addition, empirical evidence shows that childcare choices exhibit strong interdependence with other choices, namely work- and family-related choices (Baum, 2002; Davis & Connelly, 2005; Powell, 2002).

The accommodation notion (Meyers & Jordan, 2006) also highlights the significant role of social networks, structures and contextual factors in childcare choices. The aim of childcare choices is to balance multiple points of satisfaction, including those of individuals, their families, children and overall social networks. Families routinely encounter both opportunities and constraints shaped by contextual factors, social structures and networks when making childcare choices. As a result, parents' choices effectively become complex negotiations involving family values, social identity, cultural norms and personal beliefs. These accommodations tend to 'crystallize into taken-for-granted patterns of action' (Meyers & Jordan, 2006, p. 59) through repetition over time within social networks.

The framework described thus far refers to childcare in a broad sense. However, when examining parents' childcare choices within migrant families, additional factors, such as sociodemographic and cultural differences stemming from migrants' region of origin, warrant careful consideration, as they may shape parents' childcare choices (Miller et al., 2013).

The earliest studies on migrants' childcare-related behaviour were conducted in the US and revealed that migrants were less likely to use childcare services than natives (Brandon, 2004; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Miller et al., 2013). Existing findings also indicate that migrants' varying childcare choices are often influenced by their country of origin. This suggests that, in certain cases, the country of origin may play a more significant role than economic situation in shaping the selection of childcare arrangements (Early & Burchinal, 2001; Lin &

Wiley, 2017; Radey & Brewster, 2007). This finding has also been confirmed by scholars in Europe (e.g., Furfaro et al., 2020; Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017). Indeed, the cultural and behavioural values that migrants bring from their countries of origin play a crucial role in shaping their family life and choices in their destination country (Barglowski et al., 2015; Da, 2003; Kim & Fram, 2009; Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017).

As previously discussed, the literature emphasises that childcare is more of an accommodation than a choice for the overall population (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). This aspect assumes even greater importance for migrants (Miller et al., 2013; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014) and is influenced by contextual factors (e.g., availability of social protection, social and cultural norms) (Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015; Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2015; Bonizzoni, 2014) as well as individual and family factors (e.g., parents' cultural preferences) (Barglowski & Pustulka, 2018; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011). Given these constraints, scholars have demonstrated that migrant parents tend to adopt several informal solutions, with differences driven by family migration patterns (Wall & José, 2004). Previous research has emphasised the role of family structure in the selection of childcare arrangements, such as children's age, the presence of siblings, a partner and grandparents (in good health, co-resident or living nearby), parents' employment status and local and transnational kinship relations, as certain individuals can represent important sources of childcare (Barglowski et al., 2015; Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2015; Grysole, 2018; Mussino & Ortensi, 2023; Ryan, 2011a, 2011b; Trappolini et al., 2021, 2023; Zanasì et al., 2022).

Drawing on the aforementioned frameworks and empirical evidence, we have developed the following conceptual framework (Figure 1) to capture the factors that influence migrants' use of informal childcare and their choices of specific informal childcare arrangements. The cultural values and beliefs of migrants' country of origin can significantly influence families' migration choices, thus

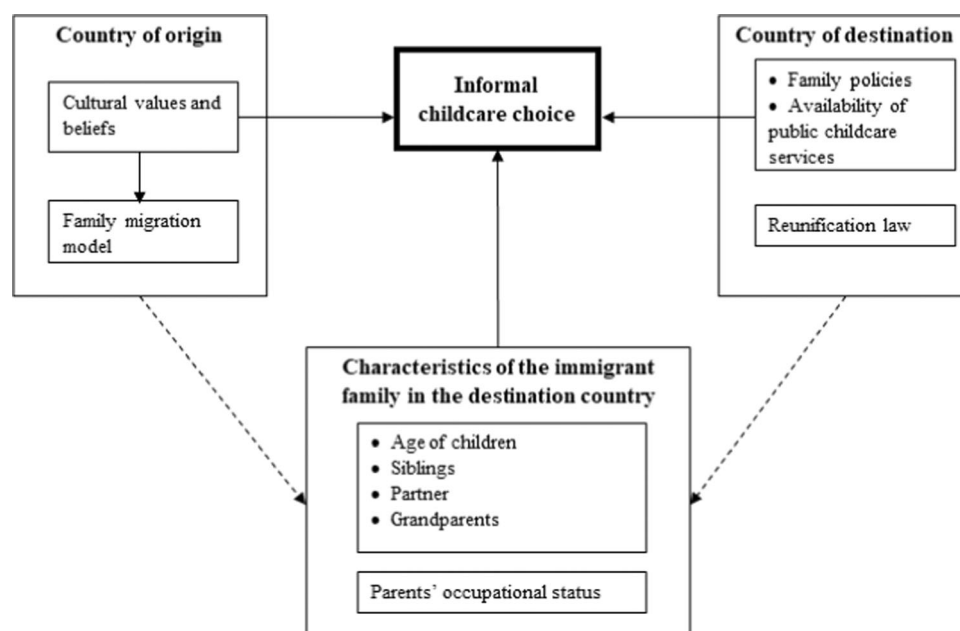


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework of informal childcare choice.

affecting the household structure in the destination country, including the number and roles of family members. Consequently, these factors can directly impact families' childcare choices.

Moreover, the reunification legislation of the destination country defines the eligibility and timing of potential family reunifications, influencing migrants' family structure in the destination country (e.g., children's ages, the presence of siblings, a partner and grandparents). Hence, in line with the accommodation notion's emphasis on the significant role of social networks, structures and contextual factors, family structure in the destination country emerges as a discernible outcome of the interrelationships among the aforementioned factors, including migrants' country of origin and destination country.

These factors, together with the contextual factors of the destination country (e.g., availability of public childcare services, family policies), can impact parents' employment status and shape their childcare choices.

Throughout the remainder of this section, we provide a comprehensive description of the elements included within our conceptual framework: the country of origin, the destination country and family characteristics.

3.1 | The role of the country of origin in migrants' childcare choices

Before going further, it must be cemented that the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 suggests that informal childcare choices are guided by migrants' country of origin, which can be considered a proxy for their cultural values and beliefs (Early & Burchinal, 2001; Lin & Wiley, 2017; Radey & Brewster, 2007), which are often retained following migration (Milewski, 2007). Indeed, focusing on the effects of migrants' country of origin allows researchers to indirectly consider various aspects, including cultural values, beliefs and norms (including gender norms), work attitudes, social class, social support and family structure, all of which may vary remarkably across migrant subgroups and play a role in explaining parental choices pertaining to informal childcare (Bassok, 2010; Barglowski & Pustulka, 2018; Liang et al., 2000).

Following migration, many immigrant families tend to adhere to the cultural values of their country of origin, including gender norms (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Indeed, if migrant families place great importance on cultural consistency in their children's care, they may prefer to care for their children at home and choose a care provider who is from the same country of origin or who speaks the same language (Brandon, 2004; Lowe & Weisner, 2004). Such families may even rely on transnational kinship relations (Grysole, 2018). For example, according to Wall and José (2004), Moroccans in Italy generally delegate childcare to stay-at-home mothers who organise their lives around their children's schedules. Conversely, if mothers work full-time, they need to rely on informal, low-cost (or no-cost) childcare after nursery or school hours. Among such families, the first-generation migrants who managed to immigrate with their parents can rely on childcare and help with household tasks from the children's grandparents. In the absence of grandparents, Moroccan

families occasionally rely on unemployed Moroccan women; notably, however, there does not appear to be a significant amount of support available in the Moroccan community.

According to Liang et al.'s (2000) US-based study, Latino migrant households are family-oriented. When choosing childcare arrangements, they prefer kin or family day care services with caregivers who share a similar background or are at least familiar with their preferred form of care.

Among migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, a common strategy is to rely on the local migrant community. Indeed, according to Mugadza et al. (2019), Sub-Saharan African communities in destination countries have a shared understanding that their society should constitute a platform for cultural preservation. Thus, childrearing among such families is often shared by the whole community.

In another study, Brandon (2004) demonstrates that Asian and Mexican children in immigrant families in the US commonly engage in both nonrelative and family care arrangements. However, in contrast to Asian families, families of Mexican descent (in which both the parents and children were born in the United States) persist in using nonrelative and family care; descendants of Asian immigrants generally shift to using formal care. Santhiveeran (2010) shows that Asian immigrants are more interested in seeking external help for childcare, a behaviour that Bhattacharya (2000) attributes to the typical nature of Asian immigrant families. This inclination is rooted in their emphasis on preliteracy parenting practices, through which a strong emphasis is placed on education to enhance family pride and prestige.

3.2 | The role of the destination country: Family policies, public childcare services and reunification laws in Italy and France

The second element of the conceptual framework (Figure 1) highlights the influential role of the destination country in shaping migrants' childcare choices. For the purposes of this paper, 'the destination country' encompasses that country's social and cultural norms, institutional dynamics and economic conditions as they are experienced by migrants (Mussino & Cantalini, 2022). This context plays a pivotal role in determining the opportunities, challenges and resources available to migrants in their new environment, ultimately influencing their childcare decisions. Notably, the two countries analysed in this study, France and Italy, take different approaches to family policy. France has explicit family policies aimed at maintaining the birth rate and ensuring equality between men and women. They also boast policies that provide financial assistance to offset the expenses associated with raising children, primarily through the provision of substantial monetary transfers, and to improve the availability and quality of early childcare services. Conversely, Italy is characterised by a general lack of supportive family policy, often opting for fragmented and less generous family policies (e.g., childcare, elder care) that are highly selective rather than universal. Additionally, the region's lack of comprehensive reconciliation policies has persisted for decades (Saraceno & Naldini, 2007).

There are several reasons for the poor development of family policies in Italy, including the familistic welfare regime, the influence of the Catholic Church and the history of authoritarianism, which reinforced a family culture with traditional and authoritative values and, in turn, contributed to an ongoing suspicion of state intervention in family matters (Esping-Andersen, 1990). A welfare system can be characterised as familistic if its public policy assumes and ensures that each family unit is primarily responsible for the well-being of its members through intergenerational solidarity (Esping-Andersen, 2016), with women primarily being the responsibility of the family (Mencarini & Solera, 2004; Saraceno & Keck, 2010). In addition, a familistic model assumes that the boundaries of the family extend beyond the limits of cohabitation, meaning that family obligations and duties extend to include relatives and kin (Da Roit & Sabatinelli, 2005; Saraceno, 2003).

Based on the OECD Family Database (OECD, 2021), France's public expenditure on family benefits is the highest of any OECD country, accounting for 3.8% of its GDP in 2009⁴ with a near-equal percentage of cash transfers (1.75%) and provision of services (1.32%), while a more modest share allocated to tax breaks (0.73%). Conversely, in Italy, public expenditure for families is quite limited, accounting for just 1.8% of its GDP in 2011 (the time of the survey examined in this paper) with a near-equal division between cash transfers (0.71%) and the provision of services (0.63%) and just 0.45% allocated to tax breaks. In addition to monetary benefits and services provisions, child-related leave entitlements constitute the third pillar of family policies (Thévenon, 2011). Policies in Italy are mother-centred, with longer paid leave (47.7 weeks in Italy vs. 42 in France in 2010) than in France for mothers (OECD, 2021). Conversely, paid leave for fathers is nonexistent in Italy but modestly present in France (0 weeks in Italy vs. 2 weeks in France in 2010). Despite Italy's efforts to protect mothers, their employment rate is lower in Italy than it is in France. Indeed, at the time of the surveys used in this paper's analysis, 34.3% of women with at least one child aged 0–14 in Italy were engaged in full-time work, significantly lower than the 53.0% in France. This figure leans toward Italy at 20.3% versus 18.4% in France for part-time work, but this difference is far less extreme. Achieving a work-life balance is more difficult in Italy due to the limited availability and high cost of public childcare services (Tanturri, 2016). According to OECD data (OECD, 2021), in France in 2009, enrolment rates in early childhood education and care services (0 to 2-year-old and 3 to 5-year-old) were 49.4% and 100.0%, respectively, while they were 27.4% and 97.6% in Italy in 2011 for the same age groups. At the time of the surveys, there was a higher proportion of individuals using informal childcare in Italy than in France: 32.0% and 15.0% in Italy and France among children aged 0–2, 39.0% and 19.0% among children aged 3–5, and 30.0% and 14.0% among children aged 6–12, respectively.

Based on these figures, migrants' status may impose an additional constraint on childcare options in countries where family support plays a significant role in childcare due to migrants' limited social and familial support networks. Furthermore, educational

policies have a significant influence on migrant families, as evidenced by the universal availability of compulsory education in both countries. Notably, children of undocumented migrants in Italy are compelled to provide a residence permit to enrol in school (Art. 5 of Law Decree 286/1998), although this is not enforced in practice.

Migrants' destination country significantly influences their family structure through the impacts of family reunification policies. While both countries take similar approaches to family reunification, they exhibit a few key differences. Italian law imposes some general criteria for reunification: having a regular residence permit; demonstrating a sufficient income to support the family members being reunified and possessing appropriate living space to accommodate the reunited family members. However, the Italian law imposes more stringent criteria for the reunification of parents and relatives, excluding spouses and minor children. For example, reunification with one's adult children is limited to cases involving a severe disability. Parents under the age of 65 are eligible for reunification only if they lack other children in their country of origin who can provide them with care. Furthermore, parents aged 65 or older can only be reunified if other relatives are unable to support them due to severe health problems in their country of origin. Additionally, in 2008, a legislative decree (n.160/2008) introduced an additional requirement for reunifying parents aged 65 or older: the provision of private health insurance or privately funded registration with the National Health Service (Bonizzoni, 2015).

In accordance with French law, foreigners have the opportunity to reunify with their spouse and minor children if they meet three conditions⁵ as requested in Italy. It is worth noting that the criteria for these conditions in France have gradually become more stringent over time (Eremenko & González-Ferrer, 2018). Most importantly, the 1993 reform mandated simultaneous family reunification of the spouse and (all) minors, effectively prohibiting partial reunification. This requirement makes meeting the income and housing prerequisites a far greater challenge. Additionally, unlike in Italy, France does not permit the reunification of parents and grandparents. As a result, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) for family reunion⁶ (2011), family reunification law in Italy is deemed more favourable than that in France, with Italy scoring 72 and France scoring 51.

3.3 | The role of the country of origin and the destination country on migrants' family characteristics

The two key elements introduced earlier—country of origin and destination country—may act on the characteristics of migrant families in their new context (see Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018 for related information in the case of Italy). Consequently, these family characteristics, which represent the third element in our conceptual framework, assume a pivotal role in shaping migrants' childcare choices.

⁴Here, we describe the situation in the two countries at the time of the surveys; for the most recent data, see Supporting Information S1: Table 3.

⁵For details about family reunification in France, see Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-Mer (2021).

⁶A higher score indicates more favourable laws for family reunification (range of 0–100).

The literature indicates that some family characteristics are associated with migrants' childcare choices. For example, in the United States, research by Kahn and Greenberg (2010) and Matthews and Ewen (2006) shows that parents' employment status (especially that of the mother), educational background, marital status, household structure, English language proficiency and income are strongly associated with participation in early education and care among migrant families.

Household structure is shaped by various factors, including migratory projects and patterns, family formation through marriage and destination countries' family reunification policies. Therefore, it depends on whether one or both parents reside in the household, the number and age of present siblings, and the presence of grandparent(s) and other relatives living in or near the household (Trappolini et al., 2023). In this regard, single-parent families face greater difficulty when it comes to balancing work and childcare responsibilities (Bonizzoni, 2014). The presence of relatives (e.g., grandparents, siblings) provides valuable support through informal childcare or other important family resources (Furfaro et al., 2020; Zamberletti et al., 2018).

Children's ages represent another significant element of household structure and are strongly linked to families' choice of childcare arrangements. Notably, parents of infants tend to prefer home-based and relative-provided childcare; however, when children reach preschool age, parents become increasingly concerned about their socialisation needs, so they may consider opting for formal childcare (Radey & Brewster, 2007).

Finally, another key family characteristic that plays a role in shaping childcare choices is economic resources. Limited economic resources prevent migrants from accessing both formal and informal paid childcare services. Consequently, the necessity of childcare affects the employment status of both parents. In fact, children whose mothers do not work outside the home are less likely to be enrolled in preschool services (Matthews & Ewen, 2006). This is particularly significant among migrants, who frequently engage in work during irregular hours, when the availability of formal childcare is limited.

4 | RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Drawing from the literature and following the conceptual framework laid out in Figure 1, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1 Due to the Italian familistic welfare regime characterised by a lack of support measures aimed at reconciling work and parenthood as well as the limited availability of public childcare services, we expect migrants in Italy to be more likely to use informal childcare than migrants in France.

H2 Given that the country/region of origin is a proxy for cultural norms and behaviours, we expect migrants from the same country/region of origin in both Italy and France to engage in similar informal childcare arrangements. More specifically, we expect migrants with strong family values to prefer to raise their children within family networks.

H3 The interplay between country of origin and destination country may influence the characteristics of migrant families in their new context, shaping their informal childcare choices. Thus, we expect the presence of older siblings, unemployed parent(s) and school-age children to reduce the likelihood of families using informal childcare, specifically grandparental childcare.

5 | DATA AND METHODS

5.1 | Data

We used two surveys—one conducted in Italy and one conducted in France—and created a pooled data set with harmonised variables. The Italian survey, 'Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens' (hereafter SCIF), conducted by Istat during 2011–2012⁷ contains information on households with at least one member that holds foreign citizenship (hereafter, migrant households).⁸ It features a two-stage design with municipalities as first-level units and households as second-level units. For this survey, households were randomly selected from the Population Register (Anagrafe), and all members of the selected households were included in the sample. The interviews were structured as computer-assisted personal interviews.

The French survey, 'Trajectoires et Origines' (hereafter TeO),⁹ conducted by Ined-Insee during 2008–2009 contains information on households in France. The respondents were selected from people aged 18–60 living in ordinary households in metropolitan France in 2008. The survey included both migrants and natives,¹⁰ but we considered only the migrants for the purposes of this study, excluding second-generation migrants due to the small sample size in the Italian survey. The French survey used a two-stage sample strategy: first, it selected dwellings to be considered and, second, individuals to be interviewed. The selected member of the household also provided some information on the other household members. If the respondent was not fluent in French (only 175 cases), an interpreter helped to collect the data (Ined-Insee, 2008).

Both surveys collected information on everyday life, including a wide range of variables on household structure and characteristics, childcare decisions and basic socioeconomic and demographic information.

This paper's basic statistical unit was the household. The SCIF survey collected information on 9553 migrant households, and the

⁷For further survey details (e.g., questionnaire, code, sampling strategy, metadata), see Istat (2012).

⁸It should be noted that the Italian survey uses an individual's citizenship, whereas the French survey uses an individual's place of birth. Migration in Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the country has stringent naturalisation policies, including a minimum length of stay of 10 years, a lengthy bureaucratic process (approximately 3 years) and a negligible naturalisation rate in the period before the survey year. Therefore, distinguishing between Italians and migrants based on citizenship does not affect our results.

⁹Trajectoires et origines (TeO), version réduite, 2008 (Ined-Insee), file name: lil-0494.

¹⁰For further details on the sample and survey methodology, see Ined-Insee (2008).

TeO survey collected information on 21,716 households, of which 8456 were migrant households.¹¹ Since, information about childcare in the French survey was available only for households with at least one child aged 11 or younger, we also restricted the cases in the Italian survey to households with this characteristic. Additionally, for both surveys, we restricted our sample to households with at least one parent.¹²

Since the Italian survey did not include childcare information on Italian children, we also excluded households with only Italian or French children. Therefore, the final Italian sample included 2121 households, the final French sample included 2587 households and the overall pooled sample included 4708 households.¹³

5.2 | Dependent variables

The outcome variable for our analysis was informal childcare choices, which was derived from two questions available across both surveys. The first question assessed whether the household made use of childcare, allowing us to create the variable 'childcare use' with the answers 'no' (reference category) and 'yes'. It should be noted that the wording of this question differed slightly across the two surveys. More specifically, the TeO survey asked about whether households 'occasionally' engaged in childcare use in 'the last 12 months'; the SCIF survey asked whether households 'usually' engaged in childcare use without providing any reference period.¹⁴ The second question asked about the specific 'childcare provider'¹⁵—meaning the informal childcare arrangement—and, in both surveys, each respondent was able to select multiple options. The available answers were slightly different in each survey but comparable. Supporting Information S1: Table 4 provides a clearer codification scheme for this variable. Notably, we created three dummy variables, one for each childcare

provider: grandparents, other relatives (excluding siblings¹⁶ and grandparents) and individuals outside the family.

5.3 | Main explanatory variables

We used four main explanatory variables:

- 1) Destination country: 'Italy' (reference), 'France'.
- 2) Region of origin¹⁷: 'Eastern Europe', 'Asia', 'Morocco', 'Other North Africa', 'Sub-Saharan Africa', 'Latin America' and 'HDCs'¹⁸ (reference);
- 3) Household composition, which is described along the following variables: family arrangement ('single-parent', 'couple' [reference]); household type ('nuclear household' [reference], 'composite household'); children in the household at preschool-age ('all preschool-age [0–5 years]' [reference], 'all school-age [6–11 years]', 'both preschool- and school-age'); and the presence of children over 11 years old ('no' [reference] or 'yes');
- 4) Parents' occupational status: 'both employed' (reference), 'mother unemployed/inactive' (and father employed), 'father unemployed/inactive' (and mother employed) and 'both unemployed/inactive'.

5.4 | Control variables

Below is a list of the included control variables:

- 1) Highest educational level in the household: 'primary or none' (reference), 'secondary' and 'tertiary';
- 2) Migrants' duration of stay, measured as the years spent residing in the destination country by the forerunner, namely the first family member arrived in the host country;
- 3) Self-rated household economic condition: 'very good or adequate' (reference) and 'scarce or insufficient'.

5.5 | Methods

In the first part of the analysis, we computed the descriptive statistics. Table 1 illustrates that the two samples had different compositions in terms of region of origin and children's age. To determine whether these differences impacted informal childcare rates, we applied the Kitagawa decomposition (1995). This method enabled us to distinguish the 'cohort effect' (in our case, the effect of

¹¹In both surveys, migrant households are defined as households with at least one foreign member. For the French survey, we classified a household as a migrant household if the respondent was an immigrant (GROUP1 = 1). In the Italian survey, we specifically selected households with at least one member that belonged to the 'immigrant' target group (TG = 1). It should be noted that, in the former case, we are considering only households of which the head is a migrant; in the latter case, we are including households with at least one migrant member. Despite the different approach, the adopted selection criteria ensure the comparability of the two subsamples (see Fellini & Guetto, 2019).

¹²This selection criterion reduced our sample sizes to 3730 cases for France and 3212 for Italy.

¹³Although the time periods covered by the two surveys do not overlap perfectly, they do span similar timeframes, and both include the onset of the financial crisis, which impacted migrants in Italy later than it did the general population. Notably, these surveys have been successfully used to compare labour market integration in Italy and France (see, e.g., Fellini & Guetto, 2019).

¹⁴In the French questionnaire, the original question (A_GENF) was whether they had engaged in 'Reliance on occasional and free assistance to take care of children during last 12 months with the possible answers being 'no' and 'yes'. In the Italian survey, the question (FAM11) was 'Who are the people that your child is usually with when he/she is not with his/her parents or at school?' with the possible answers being 'stay alone', 'adult people', 'minor people' or 'do not know'. For the Italian questionnaire, this variable was collected separately for each child. We created a variable at the household level for childcare use, coded 1 if the answer was 'adult people' or 'minor people' and 0 if the answer was 'stay alone'.

¹⁵In the TeO survey, the question was 'Who did you call?'; in the SCIF survey, the question was 'Who are the adult people that your child is with when he/she is not with his/her parents or at school?'

¹⁶Siblings are excluded from the analysis because, in the French survey, only 28 respondents chose this answer.

¹⁷We adopted these groups based on their sample sizes in the two surveys as well as their common cultural values and beliefs with regard to childcare for migrants coming from countries in the same region, as discussed in the literature.

¹⁸HDCs include (non-Eastern) Europe, North America, New Zealand, Australia and Japan. We grouped them together because they are all lifestyle migrants who can easily 'relocate due to relative privilege in terms of citizenship and financial or cultural capital' (McGarrigle, 2022, p. 169).

the composition by region of origin or children's age) and the 'rate effect' (the effect of the propensity to use informal childcare). We used Equation (1) to decompose the difference in childcare rates between France (FR) and Italy (IT), $\Delta\mu = \mu_{IT} - \mu_{FR}$, where μ_c (with $c = IT$ or FR) is the percentage of households using informal childcare in country c with respect to the region of origin whose modalities represent the cohorts:

$$\Delta\mu = \mu_{IT} - \mu_{FR} = \sum_j \left(\frac{p_{jFR} + p_{jIT}}{2} \right) \cdot \Delta\mu_j + \sum_j \left(\frac{\mu_{jIT} + \mu_{jFR}}{2} \right) \cdot \Delta p_j, \quad (1)$$

where j indicates the cohort (defined by the region of origin or the age of the children living in the household), μ_{jc} is the percentage of households using informal childcare for the j^{th} cohort in the country c and p_{jc} is j 's population share for the j^{th} cohort in the country c .¹⁹ Therefore, $\Delta\mu_j = \mu_{jIT} - \mu_{jFR}$ is the difference between the two countries' informal childcare rates for the j^{th} cohort, while $\Delta p_j = p_{jIT} - p_{jFR}$ is the difference between the two countries' population shares for cohort j . The first term, $\Delta\mu_j$, is the within-cohort change, which illustrates that part of the difference between the informal childcare rates stems from differences in the specific informal childcare rates (by region of origin or age of the children) between the two countries. The second term, Δp_j , is the contribution of the compositional effect, which shows that part of the difference in the childcare rates is due to differences between the two countries' population compositions (Table 2).

In the second part of the analysis, we used logistic regression models for each of the four outcomes to model the association between use of informal childcare, informal childcare arrangements, destination country and family characteristics while controlling for a set of sociodemographic characteristics. We opted for logistic regression because the respondents were able to provide multiple answers to the question on informal childcare arrangements in the surveys.

Model 1 refers to the first and third hypotheses and showcases the odds ratios (hereafter ORs) for the differences in informal childcare use and informal childcare arrangements among migrants by destination country and by family characteristics (Table 3). In computing the estimates for grandparental childcare, we excluded households whose grandparents did not live in the destination country.²⁰ Similarly, for 'other relatives' arrangements, we wanted to exclude households without any other noncohabitant relatives in the destination country; however, this information was not available in the French survey.

Model 2 pertains to the second hypothesis and demonstrates the predicted probabilities for informal childcare choices by migrants' region of origin and destination country. We computed

predicted probabilities to avoid the issue of the incomparability of coefficients obtained via different logistic regression models (Table 4). Additionally, we used sample weights in all of our analyses.

Finally, we performed two robustness checks. First, to better analyse migrants' informal childcare use across the two countries, we ran the models stratified by children's age: all preschool age or all school age (see Supporting Information S1: Tables 5 and 6). Second, to determine the effect of the difference in the option 'other relatives' between the two surveys (see Supporting Information S1: Table 7), we tested the effect of excluding childcare provided by 'other non-cohabitant relatives' in the Italian sample.

6 | RESULTS

6.1 | Descriptive results

With regard to outcome variables, two results emerged (Table 1). First, there was a considerably higher percentage of households using informal childcare in Italy compared to France (52.6% vs. 31.5%). Second, specific informal childcare arrangements varied between the two countries, with the greatest difference involving 'grandparents', who were more frequently childcare providers in Italy.

The data reveal information that was mentioned as valuable in Section 2. Indeed, the two populations showcased significant compositional differences in terms of region of origin and children's age, both of which are considered crucially influential variables in the use of informal childcare (Table 1). Most migrants living in Italy came from Eastern Europe or Morocco, while most migrants living in France came mainly from the North Africa and Sub-Saharan regions. The percentage of migrants from Asia overall in the two destination countries was comparable, but the primary Asian countries of origin were different. Moreover, in France, the percentage of HDC migrants was considerably higher than in Italy. As for children's ages, there were more households with all preschool-age children in Italy than in France. This initial result led us to explore whether the identified differences in informal childcare use could be attributed to the differing compositions in terms of region of origin and age of the children living in the household (cohort effect). As stated previously (Section 5.5), we performed the Kitagawa decomposition toward this end (1955).

The results (Table 2) show that, in both cases, the difference in informal childcare use between the two countries (0.2109) was almost entirely attributable to differences in informal childcare use within the same migrant group (the rate effects were 0.1935 and 0.2124), while the effects of differing compositions by region of origin or children's age were minimal (the cohort effects were 0.0196 and -0.0015 , respectively).

Moreover, composite households were more common in Italy than in France, women had a lower labour market participation rate in Italy than in France and, finally, as expected, the average stay duration in the destination country for the forerunner was considerably longer in France.

¹⁹The p_j summed to 1.

²⁰In the French survey, the possible answers were 'in France', 'DOM or TOM', 'in another country' and 'do not know'; therefore, we were unable to distinguish between households with and those without grandparents in the same municipality.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of the sample.

	Migrant households in Italy %	Migrant households in France %
Region of origin		
Eastern Europe	44.1	2.0
Asia	20.6	21.0
Morocco	13.7	17.4
Other North Africa	6.1	18.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	8.2	21.5
Latin America	5.6	3.2
Highly developed countries (HDCs)	1.7	16.4
Family arrangement		
Single parent	9.7	14.7
Couple	90.3	85.3
Household type		
Nuclear household	82.5	93.0
Composite household	17.5	7.0
Parents' occupational status		
Both employed (if a single-parent household, employed)	35.3	43.4
Mother unemployed or inactive	54.5	42.1
Father unemployed or inactive	4.4	5.8
Both unemployed or inactive	5.9	8.7
Highest educational level in the household		
None or primary	8.5	24.1
Secondary	77.5	43.9
Tertiary	14.0	32.0
Self-rated household economic condition		
Very good or adequate	49.2	22.2
Scarce or insufficient	50.8	77.8
Mean duration of stay in years of the forerunner (Standard deviation)	12.9 (5.5)	16.8 (10.9)
Age composition of children		
All preschool-age	47.4	37.4
All school-age	28.0	33.2
Preschool- and school-age	24.6	29.4
Children aged 11 and over		
No	74.5	59.5

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Migrant households in Italy %	Migrant households in France %
Yes	25.5	40.5
Informal childcare use		
Childcare provider		
Grandparents (only living in the destination country)	51.4	17.6
Other relatives	13.7	8.3
Individuals outside the family	12.2	11.1
N (unweighted)	2121	2587

Note: Percentages are weighted and should be read in columns.

Source: Authors' elaboration on the SCIF (2011–2012) and TeO (2008–2009) data.

TABLE 2 Kitagawa decomposition by region of origin or age of the children.

Variable	Cohort effect	Within-cohort effect
Region of origin	0.0196	0.1935
Age of the children	−0.0015	0.2124

Note: (1) Rates are weighted.

Source: Authors' elaboration on the SCIF (2011–2012) and TeO (2008–2009) data.

6.2 | Results of the multivariate models

Confirming the descriptive results, Table 3 illustrates that migrants living in France had a considerably lower rate of informal childcare use than migrants in Italy. More specifically, they relied less on grandparents and individuals outside the family (though there was no significant difference in their use of childcare provided by other relatives between the two destination countries).

As expected, the household structure plays a significant role in determining migrants' informal childcare choices. Compared to single-parent households, couples were less likely to use informal childcare, as they could divide the responsibilities of caring for their children between them. Furthermore, composite households were less likely than nuclear households to rely on individuals outside the family and more likely to rely on grandparents for informal childcare due to their cohabitation with the children. The age of the children was also significant in terms of informal childcare arrangement choices. Having preschool-age children, for instance, was highly influential on migrants' choices. Indeed, households with all children under 6 years old were more likely to rely on grandparental care compared to households with all school-age children and households with preschool- and school-age children. Moreover, households with children of both preschool-age and school-age children were more

TABLE 3 Logistic regression—Odds ratios and significance.

Variables	Informal childcare use	Informal childcare arrangement		
		Grandparents ^a	Other relatives	Individuals outside the family
Destination country (ref. Italy)				
France	0.46***	0.30***	0.78	0.77*
Family arrangement (ref. Couple)				
Single parent	1.96***	1.75**	1.05	1.95***
Household type (ref. Nuclear household)				
Composite household	1.53***	2.12***	1.31	0.48***
Age of the children (ref. All preschool-age)				
All school-age	0.91	0.55***	1.15	1.24
Preschool- and school-age	1.15	0.76	0.93	1.71***
Children aged 11 and over (ref. No)				
Yes	0.84*	0.51***	0.43***	0.61***
Duration of stay (in years)				
	1.01	1.04***	0.99	0.98**
Parents' occupational status (ref. Both parents employed)				
Mother unemployed or inactive	0.59***	0.66**	0.73**	0.77*
Father unemployed or inactive	0.67**	0.68	0.85	0.48**
Both parents unemployed or inactive	0.70**	0.86	0.68	0.96
Highest educational level in the household (ref. Primary or none)				
Secondary	1.20	1.01	1.03	1.19
Tertiary	1.20	0.87	0.82	1.51*
Household economic condition (ref. Very good or adequate)				
Scarce or insufficient	0.86*	0.93	0.82	1.05
Region of origin (ref. Highly Developed Countries)				
Eastern Europe	1.37*	1.31	2.32**	0.92
Asia	1.14	0.89	2.23**	0.57**
Morocco	0.96	0.97	2.33**	0.45***
Other North Africa	1.07	0.84	2.23**	0.89
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.27	0.35**	2.91***	1.45*
Latin America	1.58*	1.77	1.76	0.75
N	4708	1574	4708	4708

Note: Models are weighted. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Authors' elaboration on the SCIF (2011–2012) and TeO (2008–2009) data.

^aEstimates are computed only among households who declared having grandparents living in the destination country.

likely to rely on individuals outside the family than households with all preschool-age children. Finally, the presence of children older than 11 in the family was negatively associated with both the use of informal childcare and the use of all informal childcare arrangements, as the younger children could simply stay with their siblings.

As expected, parents' occupational status was a significant factor in informal childcare choices. Specifically, informal childcare use was

considerably less common among households with an unemployed or inactive mother than among those with two employed parents.

Moreover, the forerunner's duration of stay was significantly related to childcare provided by grandparents and individuals outside the family, with migrants who have stayed longer being more likely to choose grandparents to care for their children. Additionally, migrant families with longer stays were less likely to rely on individuals outside the family.

Finally, to obtain a more detailed understanding of informal childcare choices based on migrants' region of origin and destination country, we estimated the predicted probabilities based on each model and tested the difference between the probability obtained for Italy and that obtained for France (Table 4).

Table 4 presents some crucial results. Clear differences between the two countries with regard to informal childcare use and grandparental childcare were confirmed to be attributable to region of origin. Specifically, migrants living in Italy had a higher probability of relying on informal childcare and grandparents than their counterparts in France. This result may be interpreted as an effect of the destination country limiting or otherwise influencing migrants' choices. Still, region of origin clearly shapes migrants' choices. Latin American migrants had the highest probability of using informal childcare in both countries, while migrants from HDCs had the lowest probability of using informal childcare. Regarding grandparental childcare, in both countries, Latin American migrants had the highest probability of relying on grandparents, while Sub-Saharan migrants had the lowest probability. Moroccans had the highest probability of choosing other relatives for care, while migrants from HDCs had the lowest probability. Finally, in both destination countries, Sub-Saharan migrants were the most likely to rely on individuals outside the family, while Moroccans were the least likely.

6.3 | Robustness checks

First, we performed the same models while separately selecting households with all preschool-age children or all school-age children. As shown in the Supporting Information (Supporting Information S1: Tables 5 and 6), the results were similar to those of the overall model. Second, we assessed whether the results obtained from opting to use other relatives as caregivers could be attributed to a difference in the data-collection methods. Indeed, in the Italian survey, there were two options: 'other cohabitant relatives' and 'other non-cohabitant relatives'. However, the French survey offered only one generic option: 'other members of the family'. We repeated our analysis (see Supporting Information S1: Table 7) including only 'other cohabitant relatives' for the Italian survey and obtained the same result—no difference existed between Italy and France in the use of these individuals for childcare.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Childcare is a challenging issue for migrants settling into their destination country with their families. This study is one of the first to examine the use of informal childcare and choices pertaining to specific informal childcare arrangements among migrants using a 'multi-origin/multi-destination approach' (Mussino & Cantalini, 2022, p. 2), meaning that we looked at migrants from the same regions of origin across two destination countries. Previous studies on both

TABLE 4 Predicted probabilities based on logistic regression models.

	Italy	France	Difference and significance
Informal childcare use			
Eastern Europe	0.549	0.360	0.190***
Asia	0.503	0.318	0.185***
Morocco	0.462	0.283	0.179***
Other North Africa	0.487	0.304	0.183***
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.532	0.343	0.188***
Latin America	0.584	0.393	0.191***
Highly developed countries (HDCs)	0.471	0.291	0.180***
Informal childcare arrangement: Grandparents ^a			
Eastern Europe	0.511	0.238	0.272***
Asia	0.414	0.175	0.239***
Morocco	0.434	0.187	0.247***
Other North Africa	0.400	0.167	0.233***
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.216	0.076	0.139**
Latin America	0.585	0.297	0.288***
Highly developed countries (HDCs)	0.443	0.192	0.250***
Informal childcare arrangement: Other relatives			
Eastern Europe	0.115	0.093	0.023*
Asia	0.111	0.089	0.022
Morocco	0.116	0.093	0.023
Other North Africa	0.111	0.089	0.022
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.141	0.114	0.027
Latin America	0.090	0.072	0.018
Highly developed countries (HDCs)	0.053	0.042	0.011
Informal childcare arrangement: Individuals outside the family			
Eastern Europe	0.129	0.103	0.027*
Asia	0.084	0.066	0.018*
Morocco	0.067	0.053	0.015
Other North Africa	0.125	0.099	0.026
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.190	0.153	0.037
Latin America	0.108	0.085	0.023
Highly developed countries (HDCs)	0.139	0.111	0.028

Note: (1) Models are weighted and adjusted for country, household arrangement, children of preschool age, children aged 11 and over, parents' occupational status, duration of stay, highest educational level in the household, household economic condition. (2) * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Authors' elaboration on the SCIF (2011–2012) and TeO (2008–2009) data.

^aEstimates are computed only among households who declared having grandparents living in the destination country.

formal and informal have largely focused on a single pair of destination country and origin country (e.g., Mugadza et al., 2019), multiple regions of origin within a single destination country (e.g., Biegel et al., 2021; Liang et al., 2000; Santhiveeran, 2010) or two destination countries (e.g., Krapf, 2014; Wall & José, 2004) alongside a single origin country (e.g., Barglowski & Pustulka, 2018).

Moreover, previous research has almost exclusively analysed the effect of destination country on childcare in relation to *formal* childcare (e.g., Barglowski & Pustulka, 2018; Krapf, 2014; Seibel & Hedegaard, 2017). Therefore, in line with Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999), Weber (2011) and Meyers and Jordan (2006), among others, we defined a comprehensive conceptual framework that includes the influential roles of region of origin, destination country and the interplay between them in shaping migrants' childcare choices, hypothesising that migrant families' characteristics in the destination country may be largely attributable to this interplay. Using data from the 'Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens' survey (2011–2012) for Italy and the 'Trajectoires et Origines' survey (2008–2009) for France, we compared migrants' informal childcare choices in these two countries, which differ in terms of family policies and the availability of public childcare services.

First, to highlight the role played by the destination country in informal childcare use, we focused on the differences between the migrant populations in Italy and France. Second, we analysed the differences in informal childcare arrangements between migrants from the same region of origin living in the two destination countries to examine the interplay between the influences of the origin and destination countries. The use of Kitagawa's decomposition enabled us to verify that the differences in informal childcare use strongly depended on the propensity to use informal childcare, while the composition effect was limited.

We tested three hypotheses. The first one assumed that, because of the Italian familistic welfare regime, which is characterised by a lack of measures aimed at helping to reconcile working life and parenthood and the limited availability of public childcare services, migrants living in Italy would be more likely to use informal childcare than those living in France. The analysis confirmed our expectations; overall, migrants living in Italy relied more heavily on informal childcare than migrants living in France (H1). More specifically, in line with previous research (e.g., Aassve et al., 2012; Albertini & Tosi, 2022; Arpino et al., 2014; Zamberletti et al., 2018), migrants living in Italy relied more on grandparents than migrants in France. We also observed that migrants living in Italy were more likely to opt for informal childcare provided by individuals outside the family than their counterparts in France, though there were no significant differences when it comes to childcare provided by other relatives. This result may be attributed to the differences between the Italian and French welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 2016; Mencarini & Solera, 2004; Thévenon, 2016), which impact the childcare options available to migrants; this impact aligns with the role of social networks, structures and contextual factors emphasised by the accommodation notion (Meyers & Jordan, 2006).

The second hypothesis assumed that region of origin can function as a proxy for migrants' culture and beliefs. Indeed, we hypothesised that migrants from the same region of origin would choose similar informal childcare arrangements in the two destination countries and that migrants with strong family values would prefer to raise their children within the family network. The results confirm our expectations here, indicating that the region of origin is an important factor in shaping migrants' informal childcare arrangements (H2). In line with the results of previous studies, we found that, in both destination countries, migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa preferred childcare provided by individuals outside the family (Mugadza et al., 2019), migrants from North Africa tended to use other relatives (Wall & José, 2004), while migrants from Latin America leaned toward grandparental childcare (Liang et al., 2000). This result reflects the influence of parents' culture. As already mentioned in Section 3.1, families that place great importance on cultural consistency in their children's care prefer caregivers from the family network or, at least, the same country or region (Brandon, 2004; Lowe & Weisner, 2004; Trappolini et al., 2023).

Finally, our third hypothesis suggested that the interplay between region of origin and destination country may determine the characteristics of migrant families in their new context, thus shaping parents' informal childcare choices. The results supported our expectations. Indeed, we found that household structure strongly affected migrants' informal childcare choices (H3); since couples can share caring responsibilities, they were less likely than single-parent households to use informal childcare. In addition, we observed that composite households relied less on individuals outside the family but relied more on grandparents (if available) than nuclear households. Furthermore, even children's ages influenced informal childcare arrangements. More specifically, for preschool-age children (0 to 5-year-old), grandparents were the preferred choice, while the same choice was significantly lower for households with all school-age children (6 to 11-year-old). Households with children in both age groups (0–5 years and 6–11 years) were more likely to rely on individuals outside the family. Finally, the presence of children older than 11 in a household was negatively associated with the use of informal childcare, since older siblings can look after their younger siblings.

Confirming the results of previous studies (e.g., Kahn & Greenberg, 2010; Matthews & Ewen, 2006; Trappolini et al., 2023), parents' occupational status (especially that of the mother) was a crucial factor. Generally speaking, unemployed or inactive mothers are primarily responsible for caring for their children, while employed mothers generally entrust their children to someone else to reconcile work and family (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2023; Bonizzoni, 2014). We must emphasise that family structure in migrants' destination country represents the visible and measurable interplay between all factors related to both their region of origin (and, thus, its cultural values and beliefs) (Early & Burchinal, 2001; Furfaro et al., 2020; Lin & Wiley, 2017; Radey & Brewster, 2007) and their destination country (and, thus, its family policies, reunification law and public childcare services) (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018).

Notably, our study has some limitations attributable to *a posteriori* data standardisation and the fact that the surveys employed here were not specifically designed to investigate informal childcare. First, despite our efforts to obtain comparable indicators across the two countries, some small differences remain, such as with the precise meaning of the 'other relatives' category (though, it should be noted that we performed a consistency check on this, after which the results remained virtually unchanged) and the wording of the question regarding childcare choices. Regarding the latter example, the use of the adverb 'occasionally' in the French survey seemingly referred to 'recursive' occasional situations during the last year when the parents had needed help (which could potentially lead to an overestimation of the number of households using informal childcare, as 'occasionally' means even just once), while the use of the adverb 'usually' in the Italian survey implies more common use and does not consider, for example, those who use informal childcare just once or twice per month. Our results indicate that migrants in Italy were more likely to use informal childcare than those living in France despite the fact that the French survey asked about those who 'occasionally' use informal care. This suggests that, while the questions were asked in a slightly different way, they referred to the same phenomenon of informal childcare use in ways that did not cause any major reporting differences. Second, determining grandparents' place of residence does not determine whether they live in the same municipality as a household or at a suitable for helping with childcare. Third, there is little available information on formal childcare, preventing us from considering the two forms of childcare as competitive or complementary.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, our findings on migrants' informal childcare choices are highly relevant to migration and social policymaking. The influence of migrants' region of origin, and its interplay with the regulations and opportunities of the destination country represent a key theme in modern policy development.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from ISTAT, INSEE and INED. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available upon request from ISTAT (<https://www.istat.it/it/dati-analisi-e-prodotti/microdati>) for the Italian data and from Réseau Quetelet (<https://commande.progedo.fr/fr/utilisateur/connexion>) for the French data.

ORCID

Stefania M. L. Rimoldi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9693-9642>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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