



# I-CLAIM

Improving the Living  
and Labour Conditions  
of Irregularised Migrant  
Households in Europe

*Country report*

## The public discourse on migration, irregularity and work in Italy

*The intersectionality of narratives in media,  
civil society and politics*

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## Executive Summary

This I-CLAIM report presents key findings from the analysis of public discourses on irregular migrants and migration across media, politics, and civil society in Italy between 2019 and 2023. It examines the lexical, narrative, and semantic dimensions of relevant texts, using large-scale corpus data to provide a comparative exploration of how these three domains represent irregular migrants and migration.

Our corpus-based analysis reveals that political discourse is primarily concerned with the political process itself, its representatives, and their “propaganda,” often conveying urgency and necessity—particularly regarding the rescue of migrants at sea and international obligations. Other issues related to the conditions and experiences of irregular migrants remain marginal. In contrast, media and civil society discourses, while also engaging with policy and politics, display a much broader range of concerns related to irregularity, regularisation, and, especially in civil society, issues surrounding migrant reception, detention, freedom, and rights. Notably, both media and civil society place significant emphasis on work, workers, and their exploitation, particularly in relation to domestic and agricultural labour.

In the political domain, concerns about labour and exploitation are minimal, and irregularity is not associated with workers but rather with immigrants—portrayed primarily as individuals arriving, requiring rescue, in need of accommodation, and potentially subject to repatriation. In contrast, both media and civil society discourses highlight labour and exploitation as central themes, depicting migrants as workers. Strikingly, across both the media and civil society corpora, labour and exploitation are framed along highly polarised lines, segmented by employment sector, gender, and origin—a pattern also observed in political discourse. On one side, female migrant workers are predominantly associated with the home-based care sector, while on the other, male migrant workers are linked to agriculture. Male farmworkers are often portrayed in connection with exploitation, irregular migration, and, in media and political discourse, issues of crime and public order. Female caregivers, however, are not associated with exploitation or migration per se, but rather with irregular employment. Interestingly, they are also distinguished from other female migrants, who are primarily depicted in relation to pregnancy, children, violence, and migration, rather than labour.

While civil society texts provide some disruption of mainstream narratives—particularly regarding migration status, origin, and crime—this does not extend to the overall polarisation of discourse, nor to its strongly gendered nature.

## 1. Introduction

This I-CLAIM report presents findings from a comprehensive corpus-based analysis of discourses surrounding irregular migration across Italian media, politics, and civil society<sup>1</sup>. Our research posits that the discourses produced within these contexts play a significant role in the representation and narrative construction of irregularity as a matter of public concern. Furthermore, we argue that these narratives have a substantial impact on shaping public discourses, perceptions, and actions regarding the broader phenomenon of migration.

For each of the three public domains, we collected corpora that we then analysed using quantitative methods of corpus linguistics as well as qualitative methods of discourse analysis. This report covers the main quantitative and qualitative findings related to lexical choices and narrative structures, and provides a comparative analysis across the three domains of media, politics, and civil society. In particular, it pays special attention to the issue of labour and exploitation, which emerged as particularly significant for the media and the civil society texts. Details on the methods used can be found in a separate methodological note.

## 2. The data: how we built the three corpora of texts

### 2.1. Media corpus data sample

The data was compiled manually from the respective newspaper's online archives, selected to reflect the media landscape in Italy in terms of circulation, quality of publication (tabloid – broadsheet), political leaning (progressive – conservative). We selected the texts by manually searching 12 combinations of terms in the following ways: each of the 4 terms migrant/immigrant/asylum seeker/*\*extracomunitario* were searched in combination with each of the following 3 terms: irregular/illegal/undeclared work (*lavoro nero*). This approach allowed us to include texts covering migrants in situations of irregularity by status as well as migrants in situations of irregularity because of undeclared work, which in Italy remarkably includes the case of asylum seekers, who are typically regular by status, and are allowed to work, but often perform undeclared work. A total of 146 texts (889688 tokens) from a five-year period (1.1.2019 to 31.12.2023) were included (see Table 1).

Name of publication	Spread 2022	Political leaning	Quality	No of texts	No of tokens
La Repubblica	136.759	Progressive	broadsheet	294	240.079
La Stampa	97.800	progressive-liberal	broadsheet	280	232.268
Avvenire	100.802	Centre-Catholic	broadsheet	245	198.080
Il Giornale	32.461	Right wing populist	tabloid	177	102.516
Il Sole 24 Ore	135.795	Liberal, financial news	broadsheet	150	116.745
TOT				1.146	889.688

Table 1: Media corpus data

<sup>1</sup> The author was supported by Alice Morino Baquette, research assistant of the Italian I-CLAIM team.

## 2.2. Politics corpus data sample

Data was compiled to reflect public political discourse about irregular migration and migrants in terms of Italy's institutions of representative democracy, policy-making and party politics at the national level. This included parliamentary debates, party manifestos and coalition papers of the main political parties, as well as reports and statements presented to or by parliamentary committees/working groups. The data was collected by manually searching websites of the parliament, ministries, government, parties, searching for the term 'irregular' in combination with the two terms 'migrants' and 'migration', and then snowballing. A sample of 262 texts were included, yielding a total of 9.547.833 tokens (see Table 2).

Type of political actor	No of texts	No of tokens
Parliament	89	9.088.493
Ministers and Government	47	351.712
Parties	126	107.628
TOT	262	9.547.833

Table 2: Politics corpus data

## 2.3. Civil society corpus data sample

The data was sampled from 33 civil society organizations (NGOs, unions, migrants' organizations) and projects that play a significant role in of the debate on irregular migration. The sampling was based on a mapping exercise carried out in collaboration with I-CLAIM engagement partner Action Aid Italia, and followed by snowballing. The texts covering topics related to irregular migration were collected either on the internet, or by asking the organizations themselves to provide them. While Italy has a large number of pro-migrant organizations and projects, a number of anti-migrant organizations are also present, which appear to be less oriented to producing texts. Therefore, a minority of 3 'uncivil society' organizations (i.e. far right anti-migrant organizations) active in the production of public discourse were also selected. The total of texts was 199 (579676 tokens).

Type of organizations	No of texts	No of tokens
Civil society orgs (33)	183	563632
Uncivil society orgs (3)	16	16044
TOT	199	579676

Table 3: Civil society corpus data

### 3. Lexical analysis: the terms used in the texts

#### 3.1. Most salient words

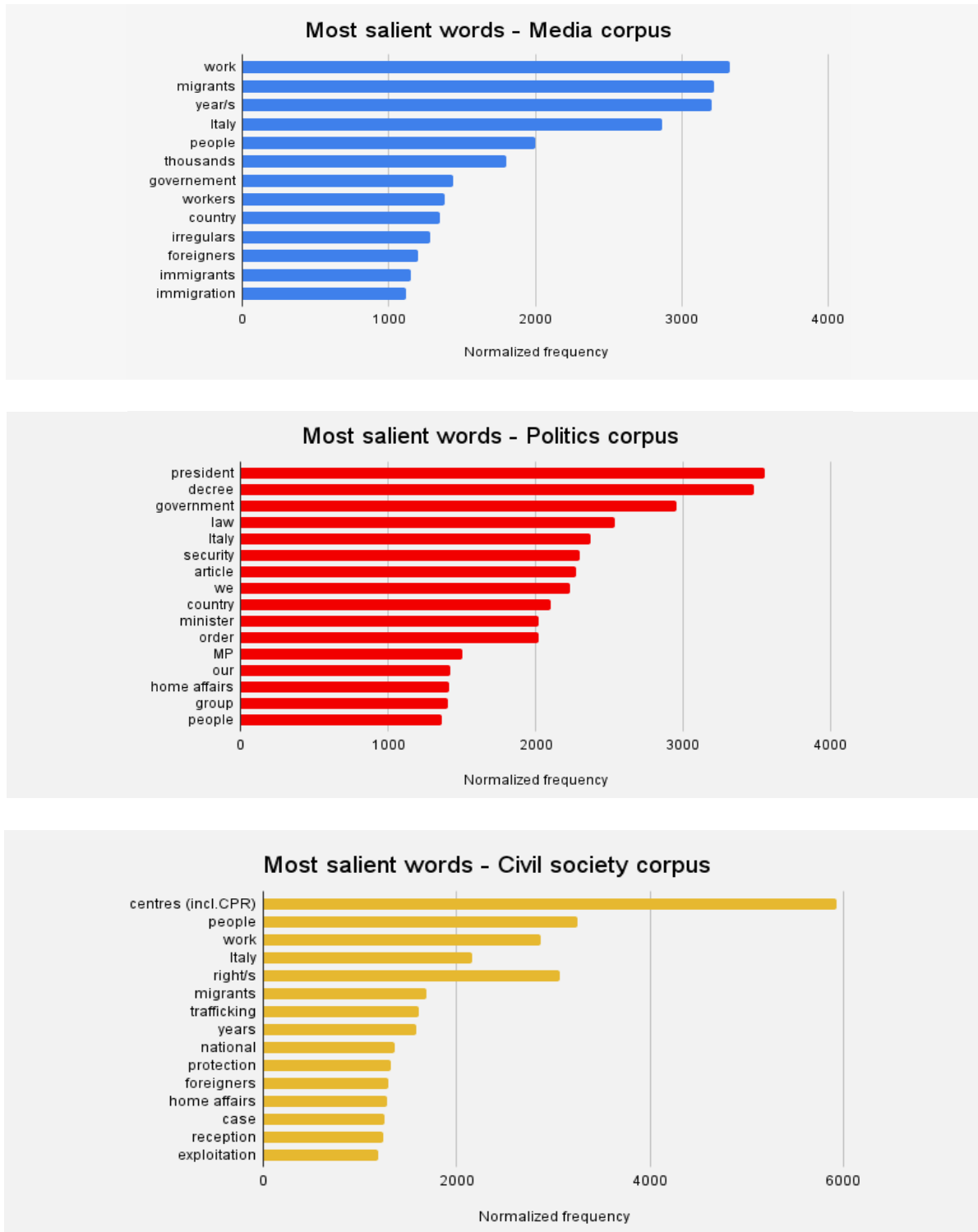


Figure 1: Saliency of individual words by frequency (in the three corpora)

Our quantitative analysis first focused on looking at the most frequent individual terms related to irregularised migrants, their working and living conditions, in the three domains of media, politics and civil society (Fig. 1).

While for media and civil society some words referring to migrants are very frequent, such as *migrants*, *people*, and *foreigners*, they are remarkably absent in the list of most salient words for politics. Significantly, in the case of politics, we can observe that the most salient terms are all related to the political process, and to 'us', presumably politicians in general, politicians of a certain party, or Italians; the absence of any word indicating migration or migrants is striking.

Interestingly, both in the media and in civil society corpus, the word *work* (*lavoro*) appears at the top of the list, and in the case of civil society, exploitation and trafficking are also among the most salient. For civil society, we can notice the salience of the terms denoting centres (including centres for first reception, asylum seekers reception, refugees, and pre-deportation centres: CPR). Terms related to the family and household dimension are much less frequently used in all corpora.

Finally, across our corpora, while *Italy* appears to be among the most frequent words, along with *Government* (for media and politics) or *Home Affairs* (for civil society), remarkably no word referring to *Europe* appears in any of the three corpora as most frequent words, suggesting that irregular migration is not seen primarily as a European issue.

### 3.2. Key words

The study of key words, or keyness, allows us to identify which words are most typical of each of the three corpora compared to the others. While salient words (§3.1) are the words that are most frequent, in absolute terms, in a corpus, key words are instead the words that are relatively prominent in a corpus compared to another corpus.

For the media corpus, we find that its keywords, in comparison to the politics corpus are the following (in order of keyness): *work*, *regularization* *farmworkers*, *domestic workers*. Instead its keywords in comparison to the civil society corpus are: *irregulars*, *immigrants*, *migrants*, *illegals*, *border*, *disembarking*, *regularisation*, *undeclared*.

Viceversa, when we looking at the politics corpus, we find that its keywords, compared to the media corpus are the following: *decree*, *president*, *MPs*, *votes*, *provisions*, *urgency*, *necessity*, *rescuing*, *propaganda*. When comparing the politics corpus to the civil society corpus we find that most of the keywords are the same, in a slightly different order: *decree*, *president*, *MPs*, *votes*, *provisions*, *rescuing*, *urgency*, *necessity*, *propagandistic*, *obligations*, *international*.

Finally, when analyzing the civil society corpus compared to the media corpus, we find that the list of most typical words is the following: *centres for repatriation*, *reception centres*, *detained*, *detention*, *Ombudsman*, *managing authority*, *freedom*, *rights*. Most of these same keywords also characterize the civil society corpus when compared to the politics corpus: *centres for repatriation*, *detained*, *Ombudsman*, *prefecture*, *detention*, *exploitation*, *trafficking*, *managing authority*, *freedom*, *rights*.

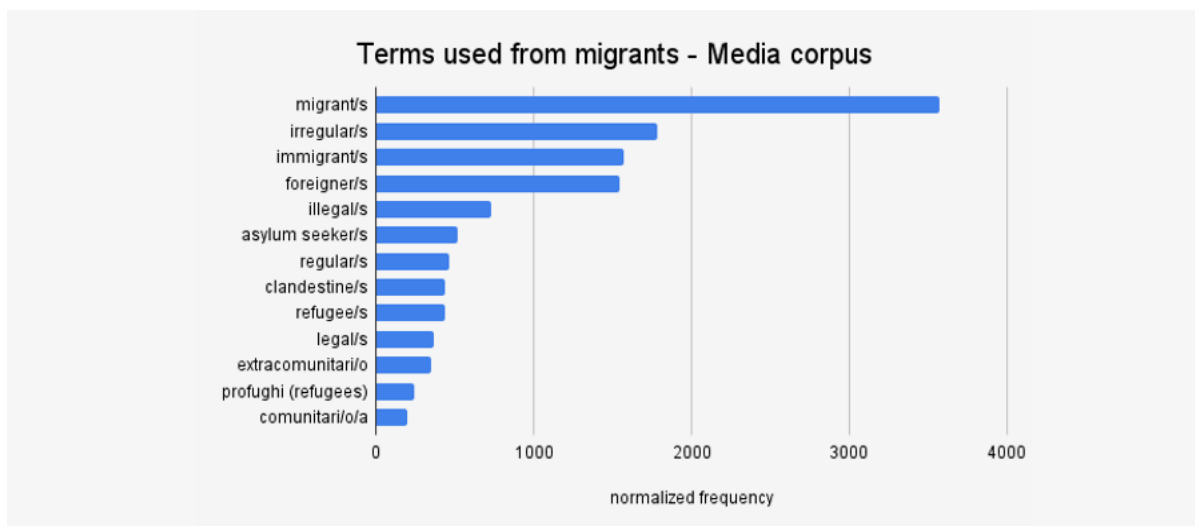
These keywords suggest some observations, which can complement the observations developed regarding the list of most salient words (§3.1). The politics corpus appears to be typically preoccupied with the political

process, institutions, and representatives (decree, president, votes, MPs, etc), and their ‘propaganda’, vehiculating urgency and necessity, in particular regarding the issue of rescuing migrants at sea and international obligations. The media instead appear to be typically preoccupied with issues of ir/regularity and regularization with borders and sea arrivals. However, it is also characterized by a focus on issues of work and workers, in particular domestic workers and agricultural workers. Finally, the civil society texts are characterized by an attention to (detention and reception) centres for migrants, management of those centres, but also with issues of rights and freedom. Also, they typically engage with issues of exploitation and trafficking.

### 3.3. Terms most used for migrants

When looking at the terms that are most frequently used to refer to migrants (Fig. 2) interesting to note that, across corpora, *migrant/s* are by far the most used terms, followed by *immigrant/s* (which both in politics and in civil society is only found in the masculine plural: *immigrati*). Also, the terms *irregular/s* are more used than *illegal/s* across all corpora. The terms *foreigner/s* are very present in media and in civil society, but rarely found in politics.

The terms *extracomunitario/i* (lit. from outside the community) which are often perceived as stigmatizing terms, are down in the list of frequency in media and politics, and are completely absent in civil society. *Clandestine/s*, which is also often perceived as derogatory, is also completely absent in civil society, but is instead the second frequent term used in politics, and quite spread also in the media. As we will see in Section 6, it is important to notice not only the frequency of these different words, but how they come to be associated to different groups of migrants, across gender, origin and work sector.



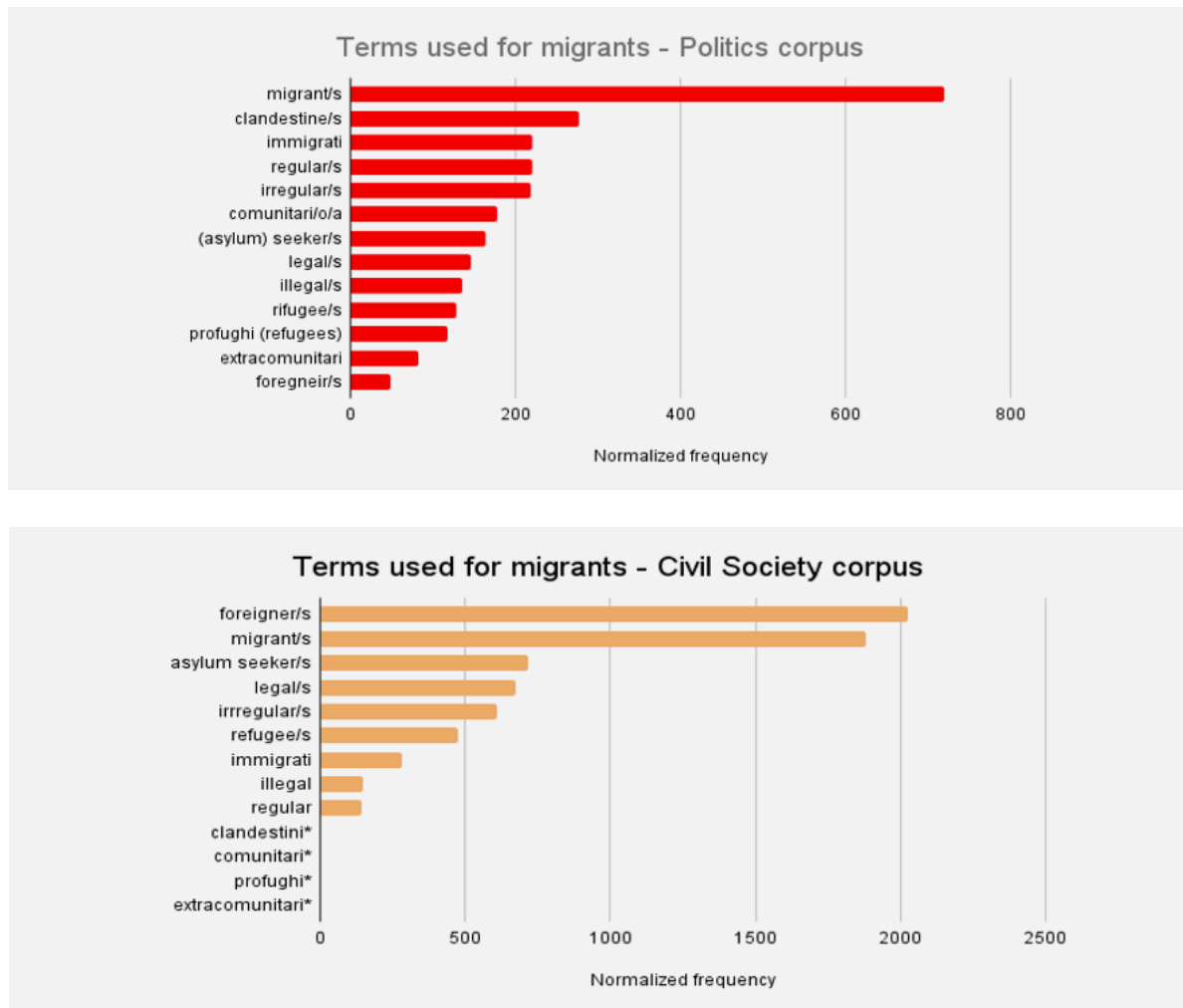


Figure 2: Most salient terms used for migrants (in the three corpora)

#### 4. Semantic preoccupations: the topics most present in the texts

As the lexical frequency of individual words does not always reliably indicate which topics are most dominant across a large number of texts, we also analysed large groups of semantically connected words, so-called macro-topics, to comprehensively map the semantic preoccupations in the data. We built 13 macro-topics, each comprising up to several hundreds of related words:

1. **LABOUR** e.g. work, worker, employee, employer, salary, unpaid, exploited. Includes subgroups: LABOUR and EXPLOITATION.
2. **MIGRATION&ASYLUM** e.g. migrant, migration, asylum seeker. Includes subgroups: BORDERS, ARRIVAL, RETURN, ASYLUM
3. **POLITICS**, including subgroups:
  - a. **THE STATE AND ITS INSTITUTIONS** e.g. government, ministries, parliament, debate, elections

- b. **POLICY/RULES AND LEGISLATION** e.g. migration law, asylum law
- c. **NGOs** e.g., CARITAS, Save the Children
- d. **LAW AND ORDER** e.g., police, arrest, detain, deport, deportation, justice, courts, sentence
- 4. **STATUS** e.g., status, refugee, resident
- 5. **RIGHTS** e.g. rights, freedom, fair, just
- 6. **CRIME** e.g. perpetrator, vandalise, assault, rape, violent, robbery, illegal, victim
- 7. **WELFARE** e.g. health, healthcare, school, hospital. Includes subgroups: **HOUSING, EDUCATION, HEALTH**
- 8. **SUBJECT** (individuals and groups), including subgroups:
  - a. **FAMILY and HOUSEHOLD** e.g., parents, mother, father, children, family, house, household
  - b. **SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE** e.g., live, life, eat, feel, laugh, cry, sleep, hungry, despair, think, say, happy, wait, hope, lonely, move, search, look
  - c. **IDENTITIES** e.g. man, woman, child, young, single, married, old, religion, religious, Muslim, Christian
- 9. **QUANTITIES** e.g. numbers, percent, dozens, hundreds, thousands, increasing, growing
- 10. **GEOGRAPHY** e.g. Italy, Ukraine, Lampedusa, Greece
- 11. **TIME** e.g. today, August, years, months
- 12. **CRISIS** e.g. Covid-19, attacks, war, terrorism, catastrophe, collapse, threat, disaster
- 13. **IR/REGULARITY** e.g. regular, regularity, irregular, irregularity, regularization

When summed up, the frequencies of all terms in each macro-topic give a comprehensive overview of the preoccupations that exist in relation to irregular migration in the domain of media, politics and civil society. Fig. 3 allows us to look in a comparative way at a selection of most relevant macro-topics.

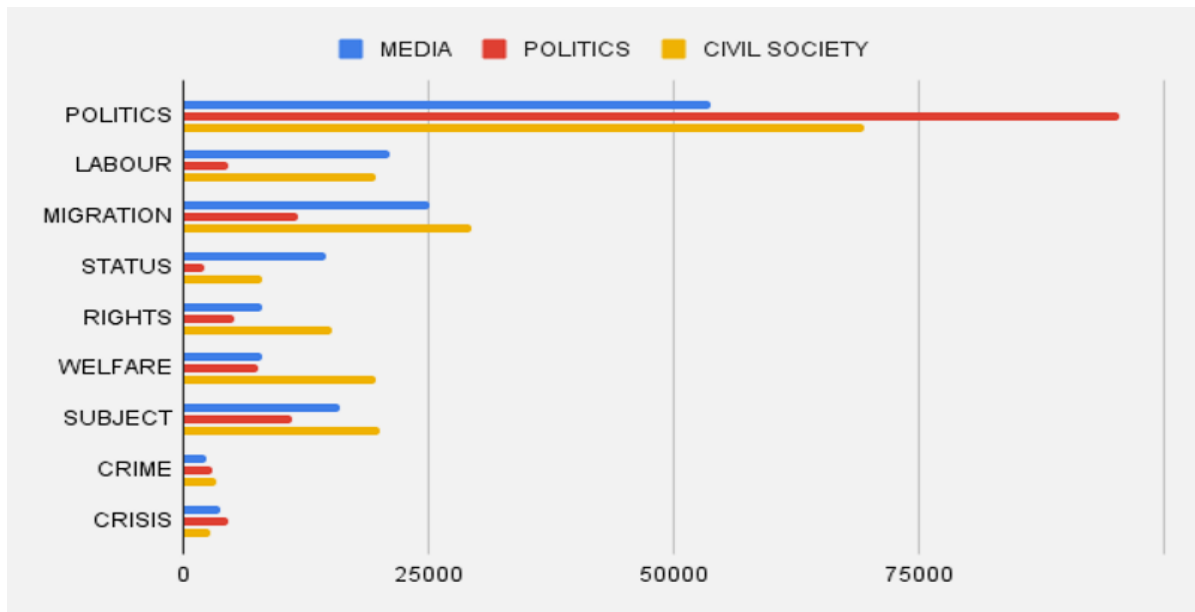


Figure 3: Salience of selected macro-topics (all corpora)

Some similarities may therefore be noticed: the largest semantic preoccupation in media, politics and civil society is with the macro-topic of POLITICS. When looking at Fig.4, we can see inside this macro-topic, as well as the macro-topics of MIGRATION and SUBJECT. We can affirm that in the case of the politics corpus, the preoccupation with politics is disproportionate, and this is due to a much larger attention to a subgroup of words related to the STATE and ITS INSTITUTIONS (Fig.4) , which confirms the fact that this corpus is mostly in-ward looking. Interestingly, there is a shared weak preoccupation with NGOs (Fig.4). Finally, the Civil Society corpus is very preoccupied with POLICY and RULES (Fig.4).

Another similarity concerns the macro-topic of CRISIS, which are almost irrelevant for all domains, which may be considered surprising considering that the period of analysis included the COVID-19 crisis. CRIME also remains very low for all corpora, while the preoccupation with LAW and ORDER is important for all (Fig.4).

The similarities across the three groups stop at this point, for the Politics corpus is not remarkably preoccupied with any other macro-topic. Civil society and media instead show a strong interest with the semantic area of MIGRATION, and it interesting to see (Fig.4) that this reflects primarily a preoccupation with the sub-topic of ARRIVAL (especially so for media), ASYLUM (especially so for civil society), and OTHER MIGRATION, while BORDERS and RETURN remain marginal.

Moreover, the macro-topic of SUBJECT is present, even though to a relatively small extent, both in civil society and in media: this means that these two corpora have some preoccupation, even though small, with the semantic area of individual and collective migrant subjects - while this preoccupation becomes really marginal for politics. It is noticeable that FAMILY and HOUSEHOLD is a very marginal preoccupation for all corpora (Fig.4). The civil society corpus also shows a remarkable preoccupation with the macro-topics of RIGHTS and WELFARE, which appear to remain low in media (Fig.3)

Finally, the media corpus and the civil society corpus show a strong attention for the semantic area related to LABOUR, which will be the object of Section 6.

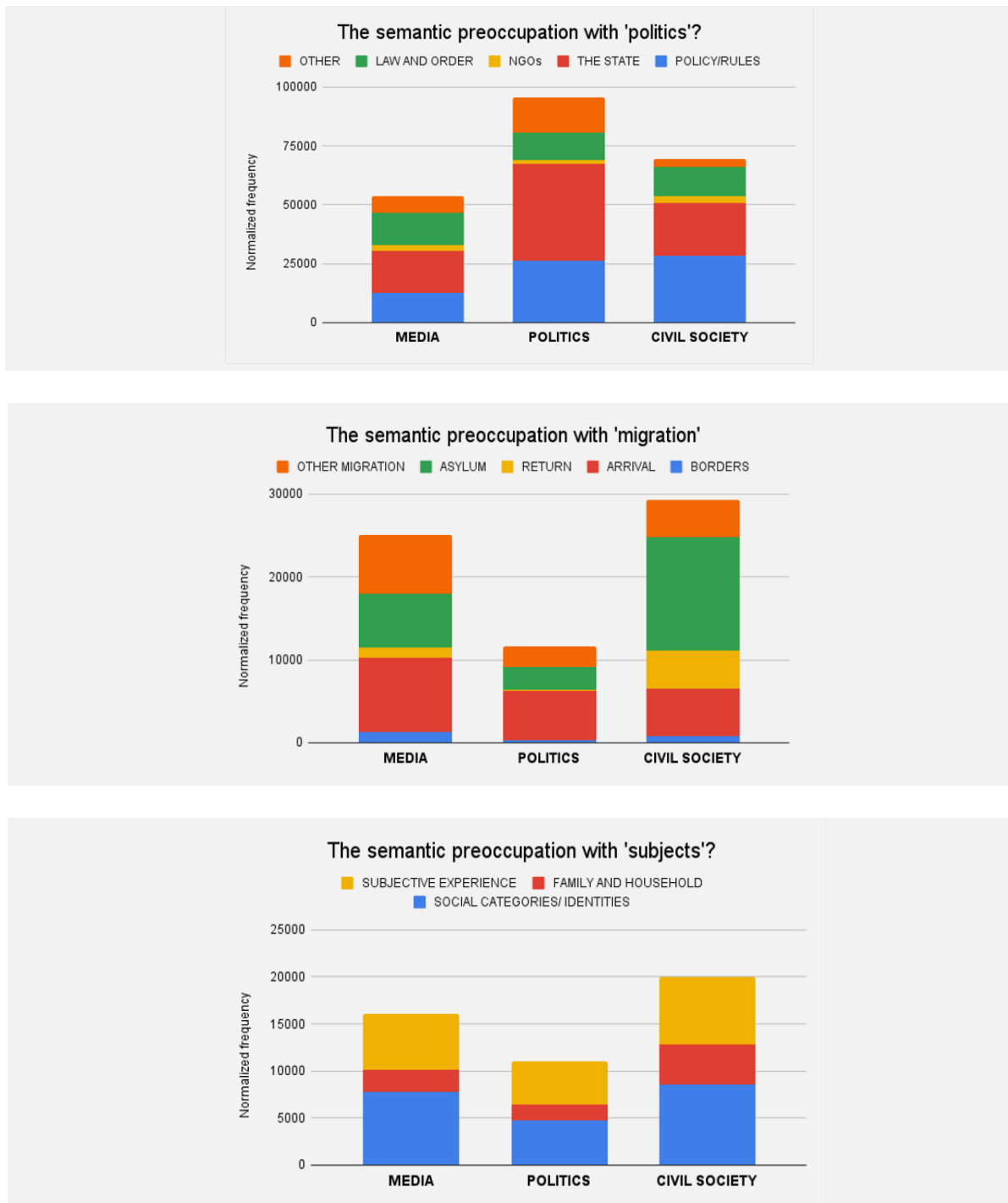


Figure 4: Relative weight of sub-topics in Politics, Subject and Migration (all corpora)

## 5. Narrative dimension: some of the typical stories on migration and migrants

In order to analyse the narrative dimension we first identified some proto-narratives (or narrative structures) based on the statistically significant relations between highly salient base words and strongly associated words to fill the narrative elements (1) characters/actors, (2) actions/activities; facultative: (3) settings or circumstances, (4) means, tools and objects engaged with, (5) a moral or evaluation. In the following, we listed some of the most recurrent pro-narratives that were generated in each of the corpora, using as base words the terms *migration* and *migrants* (more proto-narratives on work and workers will be analysed in Section 6).

Proto-narratives for the media corpus:

**INVISIBLE MEN AND WOMEN MIGRANTS LIVE IN OBSCENE AND UNCIVILIZED CONDITIONS, CLOSED IN GHETTOS WITH NO HYGIENE NO RULES NO SAFETY**

- NGO RESCUING BOATS ARE A FACTOR ATTRACTING IRREGULAR **MIGRANTS** TO ITALY
- THOUSANDS OF ILLEGAL **MIGRANTS** WHO ARE NOT CHECKED NOR VACCINATED DISEMBARK AND THEN RUN AWAY
- ILLEGAL **MIGRANTS** BIVOUAC IN KIDS PLAYGROUNDS AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE DEGRADATION OF THE PERIPHERIES
- OUR COUNTRY IS MORE DESIRABLE FOR ILLEGAL **MIGRANTS** COMPARED TO OTHER COUNTRIES
- **MIGRATION** IS A BUSINESS WHOSE COMMODITIES ARE THE PEOPLE
- **MIGRATION** IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF OUR TIMES E REQUIRES A HUMAN SOLUTION
- **MIGRATION** CAN BE FAVORABLE FOR EVERYBODY, THE DESTINATION COUNTRY, THE **MIGRANT** AND THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN
- A TOUGHER LINE AGAINST **MIGRATION** WILL NOT PREVENT PEOPLE FROM LEAVING BUT WILL INCREASE DEATHS AT SEA

Proto-narratives for the politics corpus:

- THE GOVERNMENT IS MAKING POLITICAL PROFIT ON THE SKIN OF **MIGRANTS**
- THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT REALLY INTERESTED IN SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF IRREGULAR **MIGRATION** BECAUSE THEY PREFER TO FEED THE PEOPLE'S FEAR AND THEN MAKE AN ELECTORAL PROFIT OUT OF IT
- NGOs SAVING MIGRANTS AT SEA ARE PART OF THE "**MIGRANTS'** BUSINESS"
- THE REAL MANAGEMENT OF **MIGRANTS** IS INTEGRATION

- IF WE REALLY WANT TO HELP THE **MIGRANTS**, WE NEED TO HELP THEM BACK AT THEIR HOME
- RESCUING IS NOT ENOUGH, WE NEED TO REDUCE IRREGULAR **MIGRATION** AND COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKERS
- **IMMIGRATION** IS A TRAGEDY AND WE SHOULD NOT INSTRUMENTALLY USE IT FOR POLITICAL AND PARTY GOALS
- THIS **MIGRATION** IN WAVES IS SYNCRONISED AND SYNERGIC, AND IS BASED ON COMMUNICATION WITH NGOs REGARDING DEPARTURES
- EVERYBODY KNOWS THERE IS A BUSINESS, A SUPPLY CHAIN OF DESPAIR THAT DEVELOPED AND THAT **MIGRANTS** ARE BROUGHT HERE ON PURPOSE
- YOU THINK THAT YOU ARE HELPING THE DESPERATE **MIGRANTS**, BUT YOU ARE HELPING THE HUMAN TRAFFICKERS

Proto-narratives for the civil society corpus:

- **MIGRANTS'** DETENTION HAS BECOME A BIG BUSINESS IN ITALY
- ALL KINDS OF ABUSES ARE ENACTED ON **MIGRANTS** IN ARBITRARY DETENTION CENTERS IN LYBIA
- **MIGRANTS** ARE UNFAIRLY ACCUSED OF BEING HUMAN TRAFFICKERS WHEN THEY HELP EACH OTHER
- THE EU DUMPS ON A FEW COUNTRIES, INCLUDING ITALY, ALL THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF ILLEGAL **MIGRANTS**
- NGOs RESCUING **MIGRANTS** AT SEA ARE UNFAIRLY ACCUSED OF FACILITATING ILLEGAL MIGRATION
- FAMILIES OF **MIGRANT** PEOPLE DISPERSED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA NEED TO IDENTIFY THEIR VICTIMS
- **MIGRANT** FAMILIES AND MINORS FACE MANY DIFFICULTIES IN ACCESSING RIGHTS TO HEALTH THAT SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE
- THE RECEPTION SYSTEM FOR **ASYLUM SEEKERS** CANNOT WORK WELL BECAUSE IT FOLLOWS AN EMERGENCY LOGIC
- A TOUGHER LINE AGAINST **MIGRATION** HAS NOT PREVENTED PEOPLE FROM LEAVING BUT HAS INCREASED DEATHS AT SEA
- **MIGRATION** IS A EUROPEAN CHALLENGE THAT REQUIRES A EUROPEAN SOLUTION
- **FOREIGN CITIZENS**, ESPECIALLY EXTRACOMUNITARIANS, ARE EXPOSED TO EXPLOITATION BY GANGMASTERS

When looking comparatively at the three domains, we can observe that in the media migrants are represented, sometimes in the same narrative, as being in complete despair, as dangerous, and as taking advantage of Italy. Migration is used to refer to a more analytical/political level, described as a challenge, as a problem, as a business. Regarding work and workers, we find a clear discussion of exploitative conditions. However, the media narratives often remain ambivalent with regards to the necessity to regularize or else repatriate migrants in situation of irregularity.

We can observe that, compared to the media, in the civil society narratives there is less insistence on the despair of migrants, and instead an analysis is provided of their situation, denouncing political choices responsible for the migrants difficulties. These difficulties are experienced during the travel, including in Libya, in reception and repatriation centres in Italy, in accessing rights and welfare, and in working. In particular, exploitative conditions are described as caused by employers and by unfair policies, with special attention to homebased caregivers and to farmworkers, as we will see in further detail in Section 6.

Finally, the study of proto-narratives of the political domain indicates that narratives tend to focus on a political analysis of irregular migration that does not give space to migrants per se, their experience or their challenges, the violation of their rights, their deaths at sea (which are referred to) but instead the space is given to political actors causing irregular migration, whether at home or abroad. The responsibility is put alternatively on the Italian laws impeding legal migration, on the NGOs rescuing migrants at sea, on traffickers, etc. The moral implied in the narratives regarding irregular migration changes according to the political positioning of the speaker.

## 6. Focus on labour and exploitation

In this section we investigate the ways in which the different corpora talk about work and workers, and ask whether the civil society texts interrupt or instead re/produce the mainstream narratives that we find in the media and in politics, regarding this topic. As we have already mentioned (Fig.3), and we can clearly see in Figure 5, media and civil society texts show a significant preoccupation with LABOUR, while the topic remains marginal in Politics. This is even more true for the subtopic of EXPLOITATION (Fig.6).

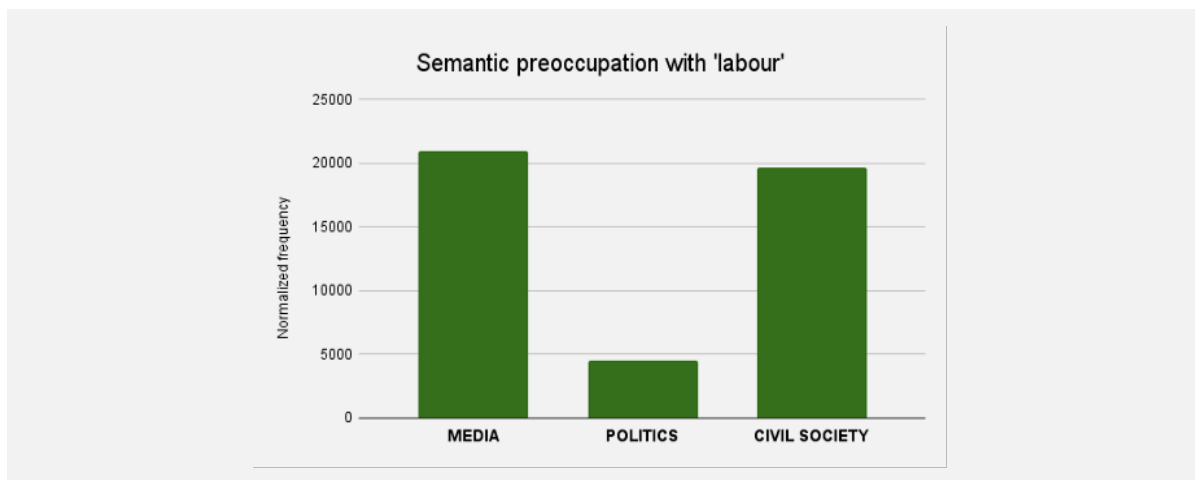


Figure 5: Salience of the macro-topic LABOUR (all corpora)



Figure 6: Relative weight of sub-topics in LABOUR (all corpora)

### 6.1. How do the texts talk about work, exploitation and workers?

In order to investigate the ways in which the texts treat the topics of work, workers and exploitation, we started by identifying and quantifying the semantic areas associated with some of the terms most recurrently used for this topic: *'lavoro'* (work/labour), *exploitation*, *workers* (in the feminine and masculine), *'badanti'* (female home-based caregivers), *'braccianti'* (farmworkers), *women*, *immigrants*, *'extracomunitari'*.

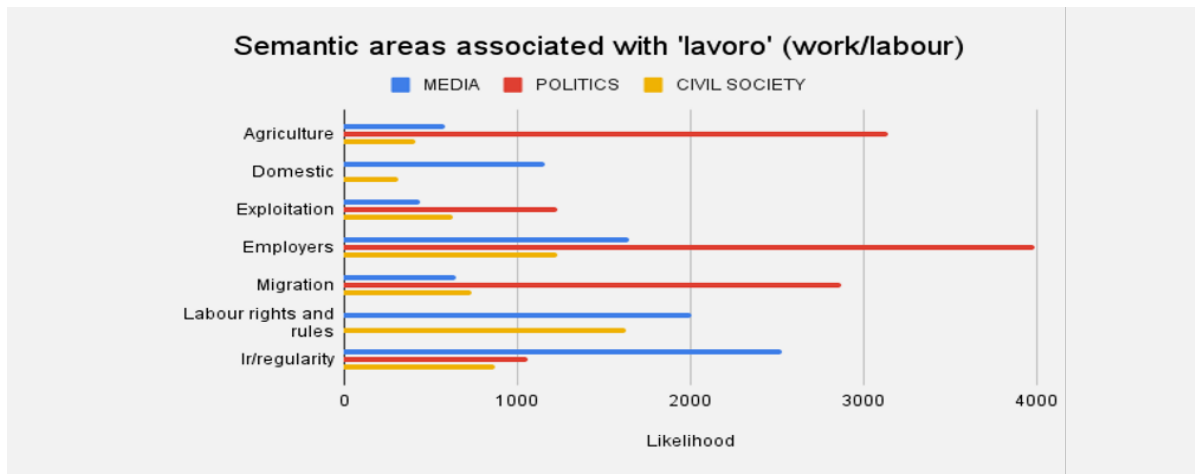


Figure 7: Collocations of work by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

#### 6.1.1. What is 'lavoro' (labour/work) associated with?

Based on Figure 7, we can see that, in the media, the term *work* is strongly associated with the semantic areas of ir/regularity (which includes terms such as *regularity*, *regular*, *irregular*, *regularisation*), of labour rights and rules, as well as of employers, much less instead with the topic of migration and exploitation. The sectors that are strongly associated with labour are domestic, and to a much small extent, agriculture.

For the politics corpus, where *work* has a very low frequency, it is interesting to note that the pattern of associations is similar to that of the media corpus, with the remarkable exception of the semantic area of domestic work, which is absent, and that of labour rights and rules which is association is much higher (likelihood is 20015 and was therefore removed from the comparative graph).

For civil society we see a similar pattern of associations, except that, compared to the media, there is significantly less association with the topics of ir/regularity and domestic work.

#### 6.1.2. What is exploitation associated with?

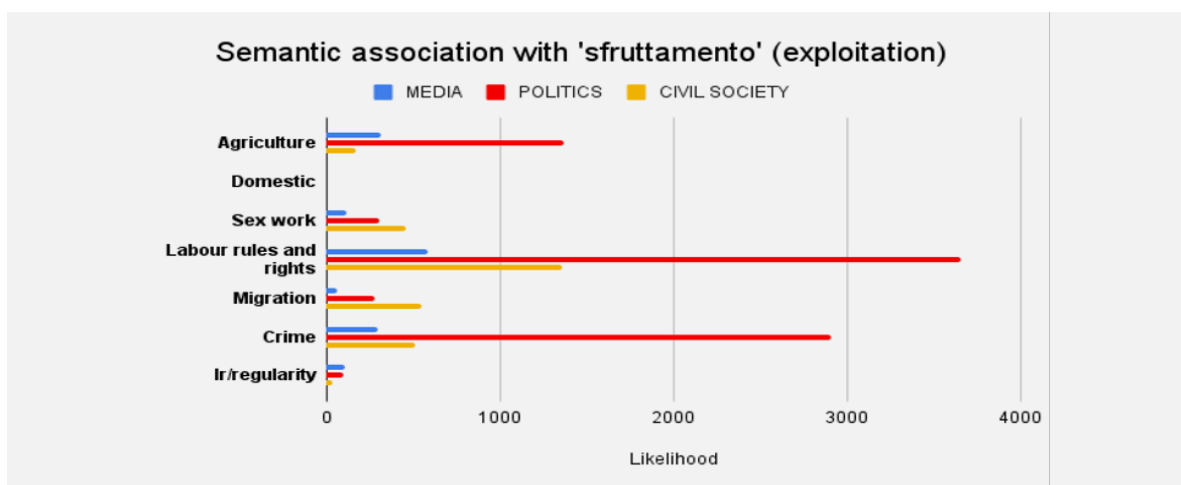


Figure 8: Collocations of exploitation by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

Based on Figure 8, we can observe that, in the media, the term *exploitation* has a significant association with the issue of labour rights and rules, and with the topic of agriculture, while not with the topic of domestic work, and to a much small extent with the topic of sex work. There is also a significant association with the semantic area of crime, but not with migration, nor with ir/regularity. For the politics corpus, where the frequency of the term *exploitation* is very low, the pattern of association is similar, but with a much stronger association both with the areas of labour rights and rules, and to the topic of crime. For the civil society corpus we find also a strong association between *exploitation* and the area of labour rights and rules, but also with that of migration, while much less with the topic of ir/regularity, still none with domestic work, and remarkably with crime.

### 6.1.3. What are workers associated with?

In the case of *workers*, we analyzed both the term *lavoratori* (plural masculine, also used when all genders are present), and the term *lavoratrici* (plural feminine, used when only women are present). Importantly, *lavoratori* is much more frequent than *lavoratrici* across all corpora.

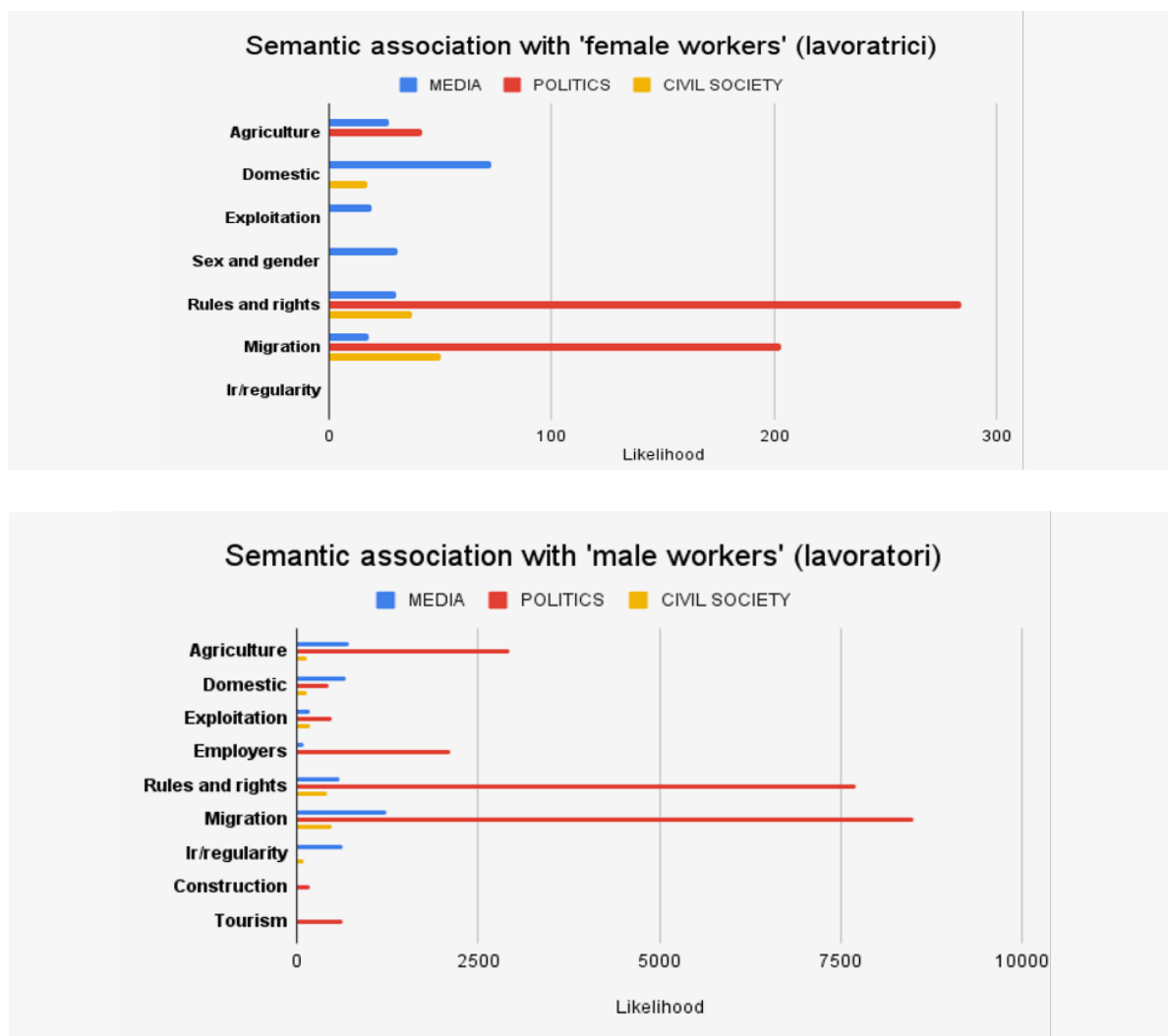


Figure 9: Collocations of female workers (*lavoratrici*) and male workers (*lavoratori*) by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

Based on Figure 9, for the media we can notice that while *male workers* is associated with the topics of agricultural and domestic sector, and significantly with migration, labour rights and rules, ir/regularity, it is much less used in association with the semantic area of exploitation. Instead, *female workers* is associated much less with the issues of migration and ir/regularity, much more with domestic than agricultural work and relatively more with exploitation. In the case of politics, we see similar patterns. We also notice some association with the sector of construction and tourism. In the case of civil society, compared to the other corpora, male workers have a much weaker association with ir/regularity, with migration and labour rights and rules, but, just like in the other corpora, compared to female workers, male workers are associated to both sectors, while female workers only to domestic and not agricultural work.

#### 6.1.4. What are 'badanti' (female home-based caregivers) associated with?

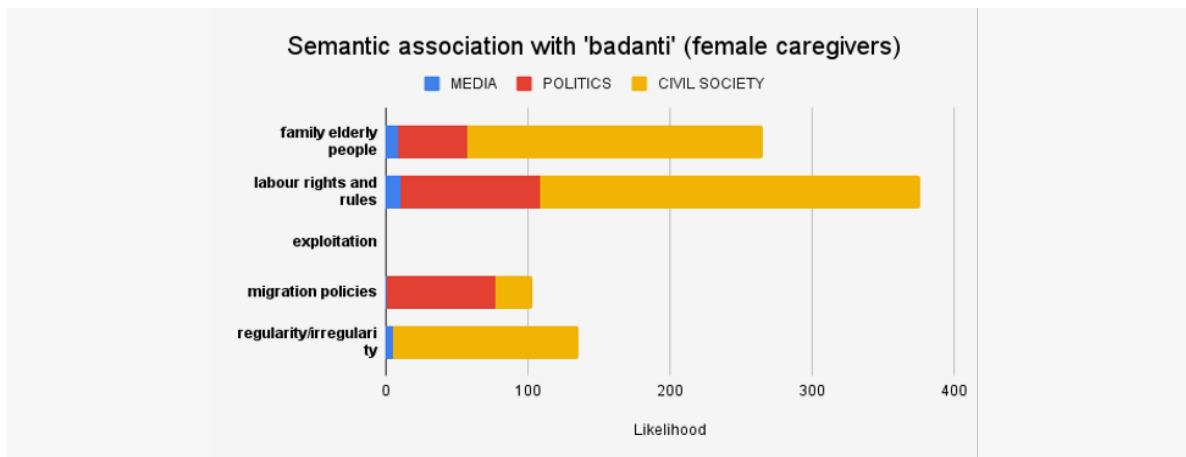
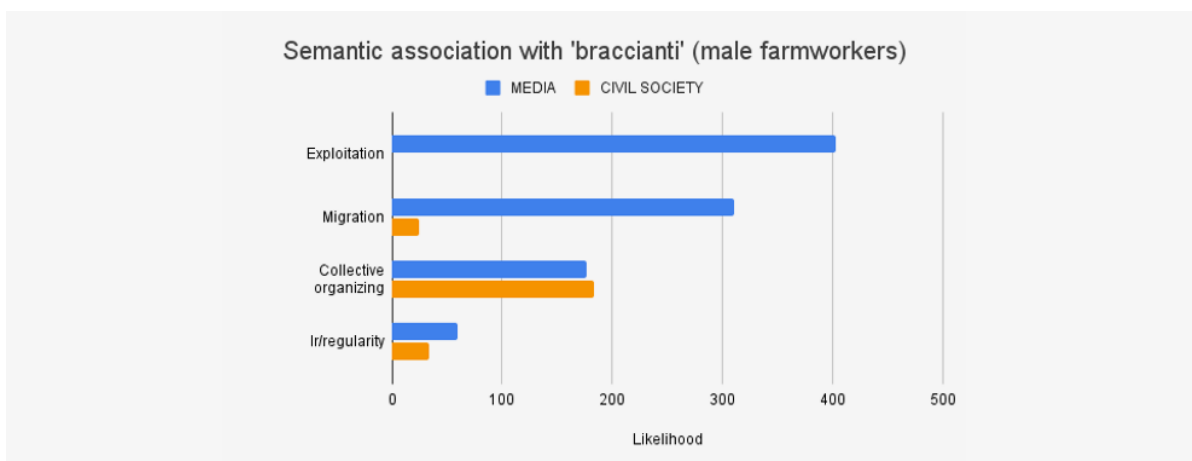


Figure 10: Collocations of *badanti* (female home-based caregivers) by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

Based on Figure 10, we can notice that none of the corpora there is an association between 'badanti' and the semantic area of exploitation, and in all corpora there is an association with family and elderly people, while migration policies are remarkably absent in the case of media. Ir/regularity is remarkably associated with badanti in the civil society texts.

#### 6.1.5. What are 'braccianti' (farmworkers) associated with?



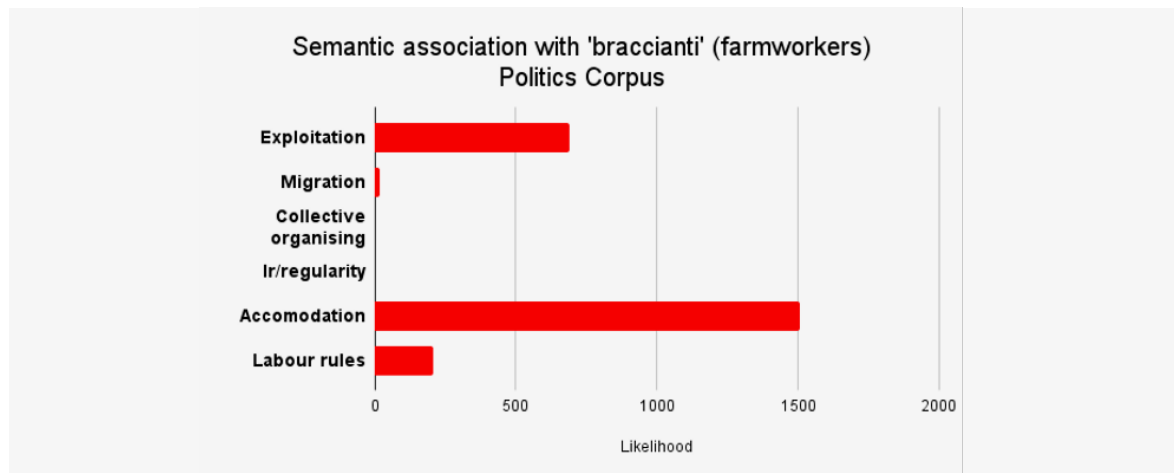
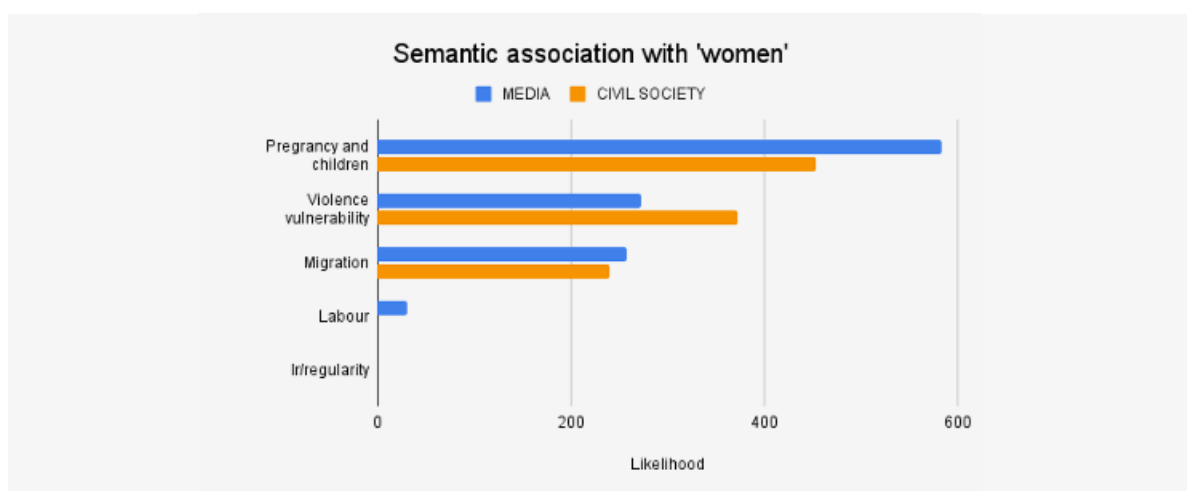


Figure 11: Collocations of *braccianti* (farmworkers) by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

Based on Figure 11, we can observe that *farmworkers* have quite different associations across the three corpora: while the area of exploitation clearly appears significant for media and politics texts, it does not for civil society. The dimension of collective organising appears significant for media and civil society but not for politics. The semantic area of migration is importantly associated with *farmworkers* for media texts, but not for the civil society and politics texts. Remarkable instead is the fact that *farmworkers* are strongly associated with the issue of accommodation in the case of the politics corpus.

#### 6.1.6. What are 'women' associated with?

Based on Figure 12, it appears that across all corpora *women* are strongly associated with the topic of pregnancy and children, with violence and vulnerability, with migration (much less so in the politics corpus), but not with labour, nor with exploitation or ir/regularity - nor in fact with crime.



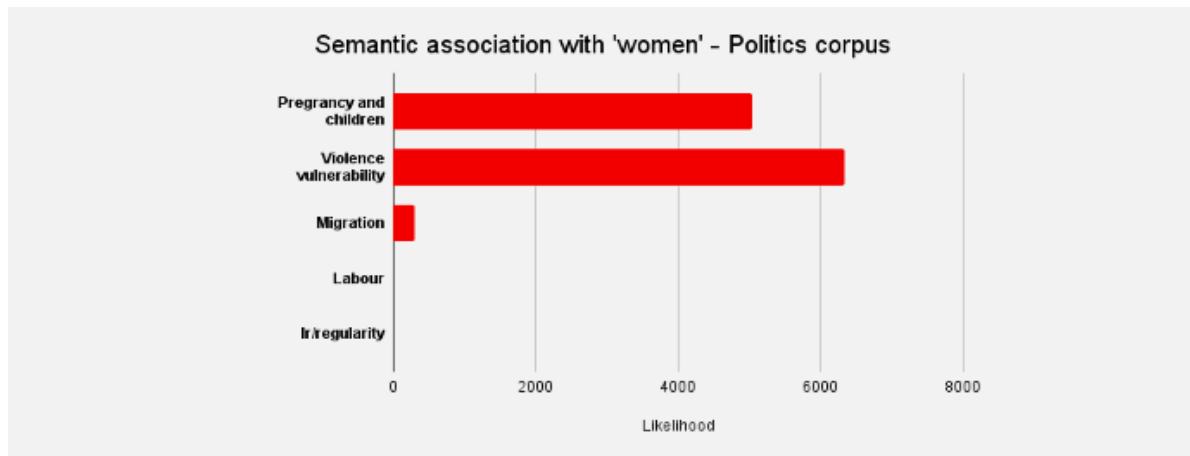


Figure 12: Collocations of women by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

#### 6.1.7. What are 'immigrants' associated with?

Based on Figure 13, it appears that, across all corpora, *immigrants* are associated with the area of ir/regularity, and much less so with that of work. In the case of media texts, there is an association also with agriculture, and with security/public order, while in the case of civil society texts a remarkable association appears with COVID. In the case of politics, strong associations are present between *immigrants* and the topics of arrival, rescue, accommodation and repatriation.

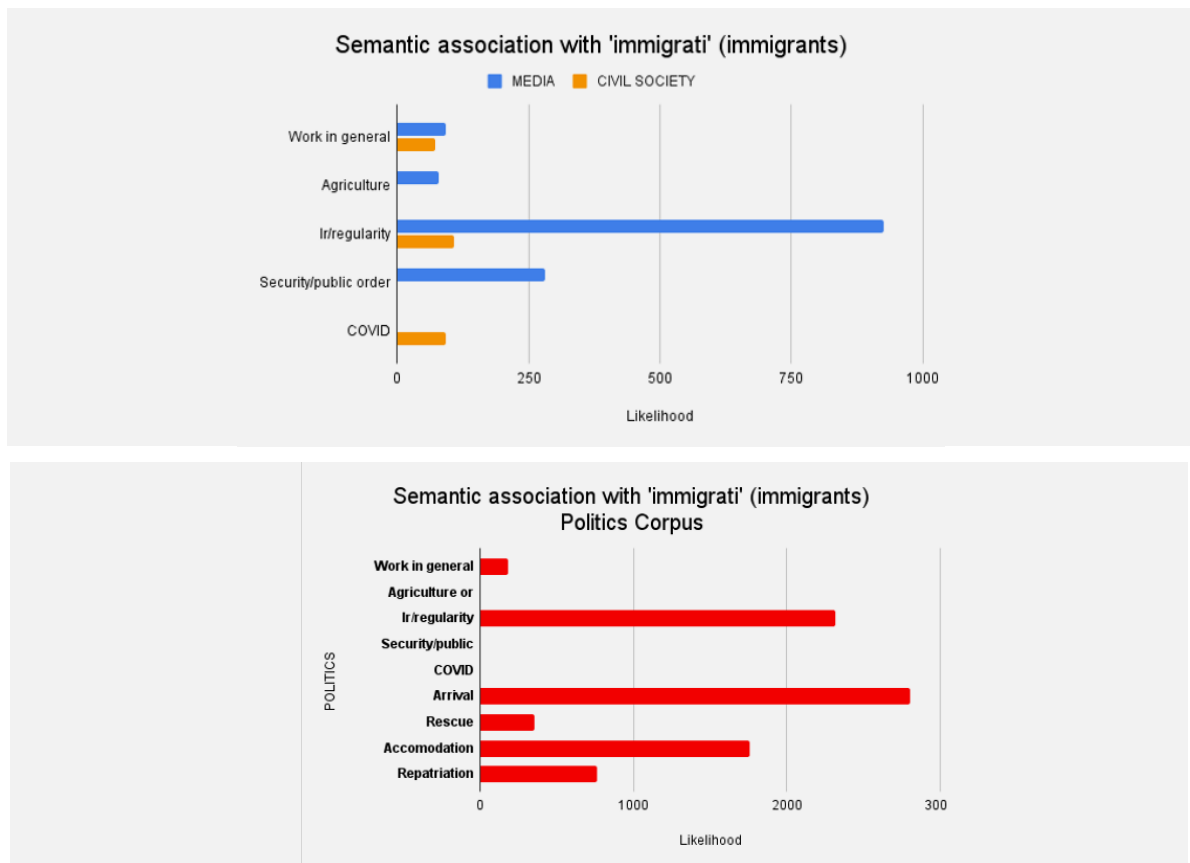


Figure 13: Collocations of immigrants (immigrati) by statistical likelihood (in the three corpora)

#### 6.1.8. What are 'extracomunitari' (lit. from outside the community') associated with?

Based on Figure 14, it appears that *extracomunitari*, in the context of the media corpus, are strongly associated with the semantic areas of labour rights and rules, crime and ir/regularity, agricultural work and migration, but not with the topics of domestic work or exploitation. For civil society texts, which very rarely use the term, *extracomunitari* is also not associated with exploitation or work. Instead, for the politics texts, which quite frequently use the term, *extracomunitari* are strongly associated with the labour dimension - in particular to agriculture and less so with domestic work - with migration, and with the semantic area of masculinity. Remarkably, in the politics texts, *extracomunitari* has no association with crime, as one would have expected.

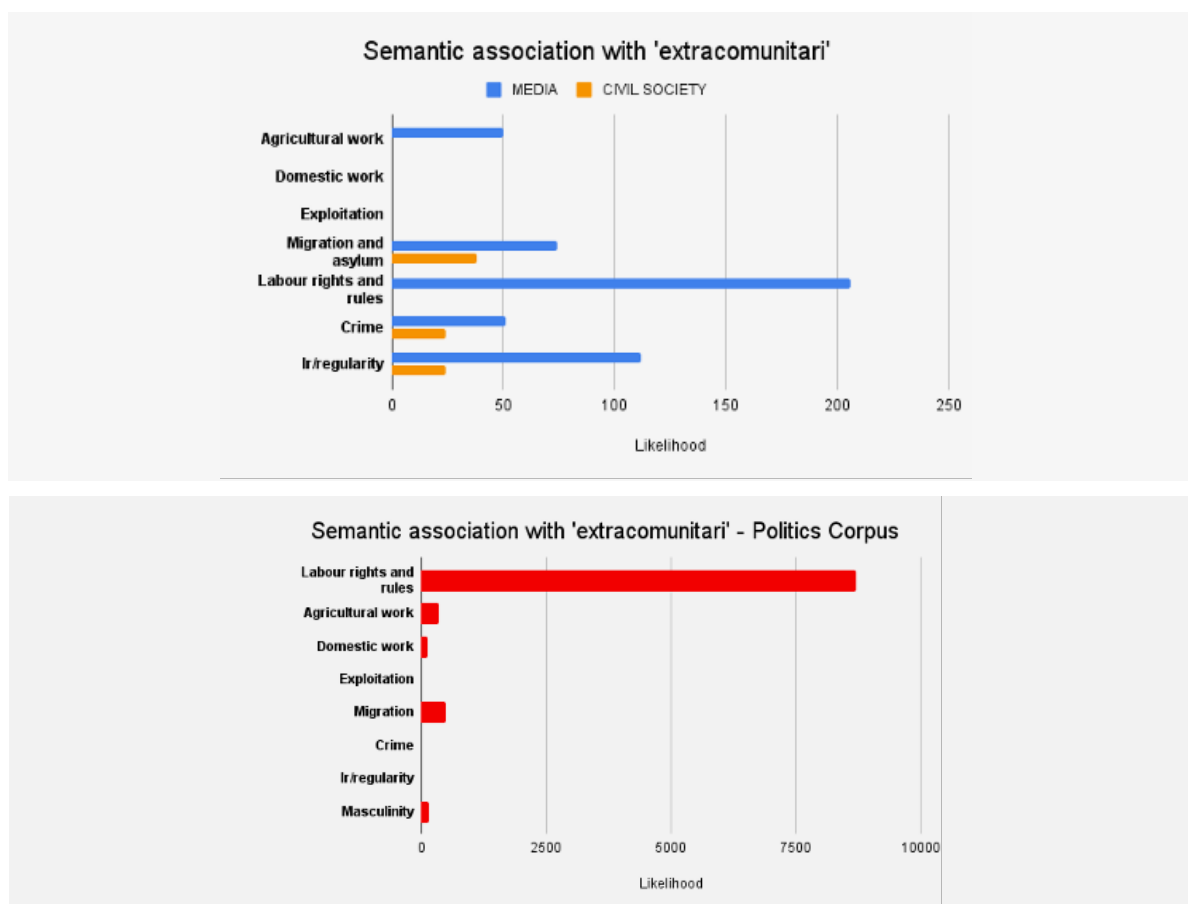


Figure 14: Collocations of *extracomunitari* by statistical likelihood (all corpora)

#### 6.2. Focus on labour and exploitation: What are some of the typical stories on work and workers?

Developing on our focus on labour and exploitation, especially in the case media texts and civil society texts, the two corpora where these topics are significantly present, we explored the proto-narratives generated using as base words the terms *work* and *workers*. The method is the same as the one used for base words *migrants* and *migration* as presented in Section 5. The results are listed in the following.

Proto-narratives on work and workers for the media corpus:

UNDECLARED **WORK** MEANS LACK OF RIGHTS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS BUT ALSO MISSED TAXES FOR THE STATE

- IRREGULAR **MIGRANT MALE FARMWORKERS** FROM AFRICA ARE IRREGULARLY EMPLOYED AND EXPLOITED BY ILLEGAL GANG-MASTERS, THEY LIVE IN DISGUSTING CONDITIONS, ARE DESPERATE, AND WHEN THEY PROTEST AGAINST EXPLOITATION THEY ARE BEATEN UP, IN SOUTHERN ITALY (PUGLIA, CAMPANIA) BUT ALSO IN SOME AREAS OF THE NORTH (SALUZZO). THE POLICE INTERVENES AGAINST THESE CRIMES.
- ITALIAN **FAMILIES** HAVE A HARD TIME BECAUSE THEY NEED **FEMALE HOME-BASED CARE WORKERS** TO LOOK AFTER THEIR ELDERLY AND DISABLED PEOPLE, AND THESE CARE WORKERS ARE DIFFICULT TO FIND, AND THERE IS NOT ENOUGH OF THEM AVAILABLE.

Based on this range of proto-narratives, we selected and analysed a small sample of texts containing versions of these narratives, including more detail. We focused on the representation of workers, in particular on the proto-narratives involving respectively *migrant male farmworkers* and *female home-based caregivers*.

To give an illustrative example for the proto-narrative around *migrant male farmworkers*, the following quotes highlight the moral evaluations in the story's conclusion, and the differences between a centre-leaning quality paper (La Stampa), and a right-wing tabloid (Il Giornale):

*LA STAMPA June 20, 2020 headline: Starved and beaten up, this is how labourers worked in vineyard. At the head of a "coop" a woman arrested for gangmastering*

*Exploited and threatened. Terrorized. Forced to accept starvation wages, live in dilapidated farmhouses with deductions from their "paychecks" for food, lodging and transportation.*

*30 workers have been identified by the Guardia di Finanza (Financial Police) of Canelli. They ended up in a ruthless exploitation network run by Brizida Gega, 46, a resident of Mombercelli. The method was gangmastering with a well-established business organization.*

*(...) The men of the Guardia di Finanza (Financial Police) of Canelli sensed from the start that the three were gangmasters. Deputy Prosecutor Francesca Dentis opens a file. Investigations begin. Two dilapidated farmhouses are found where the 30 workers are crammed in. They sleep on the floor and have to make do with the little food the cooperative sells them, at great price, for dinner. Those who complain are threatened. Those who want more money risk losing all of the money and those who complain about conditions are turned away without being paid.*

*IL GIORNALE December 13, 2019 Headline: Foreigner wanted in Lombardy was picking oranges in Sicily*

*In Ribera (Ag), Carabinieri (Police) chase three Moroccans without residence permits who were working in the harvesting of the famous DOP oranges. One of the three had a prison order against him in Lombardy (...) The committed Carabinieri (Police), who also acted undercover, followed a large group of workers and ascertained various crimes. In particular, a number of non-EU citizens, without residence permit, were noticed working in the surrounding countryside, engaged in the harvesting of oranges, without the minimum social security regulations (i.e., not regularly employed) but paid about 50 euros for over eight hours of work per day. (...) The investigation shows, once again, how in several areas throughout southern Italy (but not only, given the recent cases discovered in Tuscany and Latina), the scourge of undeclared work is widespread, which in several areas also becomes gangmastering. There are many foreign workers, both legal and not,*

*who are taken “by the day” in city centres and then transported to the countryside and destined to work longer hours, especially for the hardest seasonal agricultural work.*

In both extracts, we can note that the actors are the irregular male migrant workers, the gangmasters, the exploitative employers, and the police (esp. Guardia di Finanza). The implicit moral seems to suggest that the solution is in criminal justice and persecution. Especially, but not exclusively, in the right-wing version of the narrative, the migrants may also be described as committing crimes (drug-related, or just for the fact of being irregular migrants) and they are described as not necessarily collaborating with the police. In terms of irregularity of migration status, the moral remains ambivalent, as there is no explicit call for regularisation of status, nor for regular work - therefore it can also lead to the implicit moral that the farmworkers should not be allowed to come to Italy or should be repatriated. Also present sometimes in the centre-left newspapers is the moral that we the consumers should check for ethically produced food.

To give an illustrative example for the proto-narrative involving *female home-based caregivers*, the following quote highlights the moral evaluations in the story's conclusion, from a center-leaning Catholic newspaper (Avvenire):

*Avvenire December 12 2022 Headline: Domestic helpers and caregivers. Assindatcolf: there is a need for specific quotas for domestic workers*

*In Italy more than half come from non-EU countries, Ukraine in the lead. Demand from families increases but no one can be found to hire. Families are indeed increasingly in need of assistance particularly caregivers who can look after the elderly, and the lack of legal immigrants is forcing many to resort to illegal labour.*

In this case, we can identify the actors as follows: Italian families, elderly and disabled people, female home-based caregivers. The moral appears to be that it should be made easier for families to find and employ migrant home-based care workers. However, also in this case, the moral remains ambivalent regarding ir/regularity in migration or work.

Proto-narratives on work and workers for the civil society corpus:

- **MIGRANT HOME-BASED FEMALE CAREGIVERS** WORK FOR THE ELDERLY AND DISABLED, OFTEN IRREGULARLY EMPLOYED, THEIR CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK IS OFTEN NOT PROPERLY RECOGNISED AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS NEED TO REGULARIZE THEIR WORK
- **MALE MIGRANT FARM WORKERS** (AFRICANS, INDIANS, ETC.) LIVE IN REALLY PRECARIOUS HOUSING, ARE SERIOUSLY EXPLOITED BY EMPLOYERS WHO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEIR IRREGULAR STATUS
- WE NEED TO SUPPORT **MALE MIGRANT FARMWORKERS** IN THEIR COLLECTIVE STRUGGLES TO END EXPLOITATION, AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS NEED TO INTERVENE TO END EXPLOITATION.

Based on this range of proto-narratives, also for this corpus we analysed a small sample of texts containing fully fleshed-out narratives, in particular focusing on those involving migrant male farmworkers and female home-based caregivers. To give an illustrative example of these proto-narratives, we quote extracts regarding two campaigns (A Season of Dignity and Ero Straniero).

CILD (NGO) June 29, 2020 *Farmworkers. Civil society's call for a season of dignity*

*[A group of NGOs] launched the appeal "For a season of dignity," denouncing the condition of more than a hundred African workers who arrived in Saluzzo for the seasonal fruit harvest, and for weeks have been sleeping in unworthy conditions in city parks or under the arches of downtown buildings because they are homeless. (...) Invisible workers, but essential to an agricultural sector that in Piedmont alone has a turnover of more than 500 million euros, with exports also to China and England. (...) "We need national management of internal flows of workers" the organizations write "The only solution in our opinion is a public placement system, useful to ensure transparency and legality, to put an end to exploitation and gang-mastering. In order to organize it, it is also essential to know the companies' real labour force needs, data that the employers' organizations have, but on this issue we note that for too long they have not given an answer".*

In the text, it is possible to identify the following actors: the male migrant farm workers (the victims), we (good civil society), exploiters (the villains), and public institutions. The moral that seems to emerge could be stated as follows: we civil society need to act against exploitation, to support collective struggles, and the public institutions need to change the system. The moral around migration and irregularity is quite clear: their migration status and their work should be made regular in order to end exploitation.

**ERO STRANIERO (CAMPAIGN) January 06 2021 Regularization 2020: one year after its launch, 14 percent of applications examined and only 5 percent of the 220,000 of those who applied have a work permit in hand**

*"The phenomenon of abducted caregivers - this is exactly what it is - is widespread. A girl that we followed in the last ten months was able to leave the house eight times, no more. They don't let them out on their day off, nor during the two hours a day when they would be entitled to rest, never. Psychologically it's terrible." (C., social worker, Rome) (...) In light of the testimonies collected, we reiterate our request to the government, and in particular to the Ministries of the Interior and Health, to intervene immediately to speed up the application process so that the nearly 200,000 people left awaiting can get an answer as soon as possible; and to clarify to their offices that foreign nationals awaiting a residence permit enjoy, until the conclusion of the procedure, all rights related to the status of legal workers.*

When analyzing this text, it is possible to identify as actors the migrant female home-based caregivers (victims), the elderly and disabled (victims), we (good civil society), and the public institutions. The implicit moral that emerges is that all of us need to recognise care and domestic work as full work, and public institutions need to regularize their work and their migration status.

### 6.3. Focus on labour and exploitation: concluding remarks

Based on the analysis on focused on labour and exploitation presented in Section 6, we can identify the following points for each of the corpora.

**In the context of politics:** the preoccupation with labour and exploitation is very marginal. Irregularity is not associated with workers, but is instead associated with immigrants, who are not seen as workers but as people arriving, to be rescued, in need of accommodation and perhaps repatriation.

**In media and civil society** instead there is a significant semantic preoccupation with labour, and with exploitation, and with migrants as workers.

Even though they are talked about as linked to each other, labour and exploitation appear to carry quite different associations: labour is associated with the semantic areas of employers, labour rights and rules, ir/regularity, and domestic work, much less with agriculture or with migration. Exploitation instead is associated remarkably with the semantic areas of crime, and it is associated with agriculture and not to domestic work - instead, we find an association to sex work. Exploitation is also not strongly associated with the semantic areas of ir/regularity, nor with employers, and is instead associated with migration in the civil society texts, less so in the media texts.

Moreover, across the two corpora, both labour and exploitation are represented along very polarized lines, built along sectors of employment, gender and origin - an aspect which can in fact also be identified in the politics corpus.

On the one hand we find a representation of female workers who work in the home-based care sector: all the corpora strongly associate them to employers, in particular families and their elderly, to labour rules and rights, but not to exploitation. In the case of media and civil society, home-based caregivers are associated with ir/regularity, but only in the labour field, not in relation to migration, and in fact migration remains a topic only marginally associated with them. In the case of politics, they are associated with migration, but not at all with Ir/regularity, whether in migration or in work. Crucially, the three corpora distinguish these female workers from *women*, who instead are not associated with labour (nor with exploitation) but with pregnancy and children, violence and migration (in particular migration origin for the media: Morocco, China, Nigeria, Afghanistan).

On the other hand, we find a representation of male workers who work in the agricultural sector: all corpora associate them with exploitation. The media associate them also with migration (in particular migration origin: Africa and Romania), and, indirectly (through their association with the term *immigrants* and *extracomunitari*) to security/public order and crime. Civil society texts instead avoid the farmworkers' association with Africa, and with ir/regularity of migration status, as well as the farmworkers' indirect association with crime and security/public order (through dis-association with the terms *immigrants* and *extracomunitari*). Instead, the civil society texts significantly associate farmworkers to exploitation and collective organizing.

Therefore, it is possible to state that civil society texts, concerning the issue of work and workers show some interruption of the mainstream (media) narratives in terms of migration status, origin and crime, but not with respect to the polarization itself, and its gendered character in particular. Namely, they appear to operate an alternative narrative on male workers, but not on the female workers or the women migrants more generally. Just as the media and the politics texts, the civil society texts appear to reproduce similar associations for home-based caregivers, they use very rarely the word *female workers*, and they associate farmworkers to men only.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, our corpus-based analysis reveals a diverse landscape of discourses on migration and irregularity across the three domains of media, politics, and civil society. Discourses in the political domain are primarily concerned with the political process itself, its representatives, and their "propaganda", often conveying urgency and necessity—particularly regarding the rescue of migrants at sea and international obligations. Meanwhile, other issues related to the conditions and experiences of irregular migrants remain

marginal. In contrast, discourses produced by newspapers and civil society, while engaging with policy and politics, address a much wider range of concerns related to irregularity and regularisation. In civil society, in particular, there is a strong focus on migrant reception, the detention system, freedom, and rights.

In the political domain, concerns about labour and exploitation are minimal. Irregularity is not associated with workers but rather with immigrants, who are perceived not as workers but as people arriving, in need of rescue, accommodation, and potentially repatriation.

Conversely, in media and civil society, there is a significant semantic focus on labour, exploitation, and migrants as workers. Notably, both labour and exploitation are represented along highly polarised lines in these domains, structured by employment sector, gender, and origin—patterns that also emerge in political discourse. On one hand, female migrant workers are predominantly depicted in the home-based care sector; on the other, male migrant workers are associated with agriculture. Male farmworkers are linked to exploitation, irregular migration, and, in the media and political corpora, issues of crime and public order. In contrast, female caregivers are not associated with exploitation or migration but rather with irregular employment. They are also distinguished from female migrants, who are not linked to labour or exploitation but instead to pregnancy and children, violence, and migration.

While civil society texts provide some disruption of the dominant media narratives concerning migration status, origin, and crime, this does not extend to the broader polarisation of discourse, particularly its gendered dimension.

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