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# ***Work and exploitation of women in the Piana del Sele area***



**Written by**

Giuseppe Grimaldi  
Anthropologist, "University of Trieste"

**Coordination and Editing supervised by**

Margherita Romanelli (WeWorld) and Bianca Mizzi (WeWorld)

**Layout by**

Studio Cloro

**WeWorld Coordinators**

Margherita Romanelli (International Advocacy, Policy, Partnership and Evaluation Coordinator)  
Bianca Mizzi (Policy and Advocacy Officer)  
David Wiersma (Project Manager)  
Rachele Ponzellini (Communication Expert)  
Andrea Comollo (Head of Communication)  
Stefano Piziali (Head of Advocacy Policy Partnership and European & Italian Programmes Departments)

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# Index

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>pg. 04</b>
<b>Note on method</b>	<b>pg. 05</b>
<b>I. Piana del Sele: the past and present of a production area</b>	<b>pg. 07</b>
1.1. From swamplands to the California of Italy: historical background	09
1.2. The agricultural production chain and its effects on the local area	11
1.3. The exploitation chain: exploiteering	15
<b>II. A gender-based perspective on labour exploitation in the Piana del Sele area</b>	<b>pg. 18</b>
2.1. Gender as an axis of inequality	19
2.2. Reunification? Gender-based oppression and the presence of women in Piana del Sele.	21
<b>III. The labour system for women in the Piana del Sele area</b>	<b>pg. 25</b>
3.1. Wages	26
3.2. Tasks	27
3.3. Work pace	28
<b>IV. The body as the place for labour exploitation</b>	<b>pg. 30</b>
4.1 Getting ill from work	31
4.2 The sexualised body	33
4.3 Selling the body	35
<b>V. Adapting, reacting and resisting exploitation</b>	<b>pg. 37</b>
5.1 Navigating systemic exploitation	38
5.2 Network actions against labour exploitation: the NoCap case	39
5.3 Gender and women's agricultural labouring resilience	40
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>pg. 42</b>
<b>Intervention suggestions</b>	<b>pg. 43</b>
<b>Reference list</b>	<b>pg. 45</b>

# Introduction

This report has emerged within the project **Our Food Our Future** (CSO-LA/2020/411-443), funded by the European Commission as part of the DEAR (Development Education and Awareness Raising) Programme. It is supported by WeWorld and another 15 European organisations with the goals of encouraging new consumption models, sustainable food supply chains, fair trade relations, and respect for male and female workers' human rights as well as of changing the economic systems that perpetuate inequality and the monopolising of resources, with serious consequences in terms of respecting the human rights of the most vulnerable groups and safeguarding the environment.

In recent years, several investigations and various fact-finding surveys conducted in Italy have brought to light the existence of widespread situations of exploitation, marginalisation and violence affecting female and male migrant workers, especially in certain areas of Italy and within the food production chain. While some areas have received public attention through national and international coverage, there are some places that, despite systemic exploitation being a distinguishing feature, still remain obscure during public and political debate.

Piana del Sele, in the Campania region of Italy, is an agricultural area of roughly 700 km<sup>2</sup> located in the province of Salerno and to the south of its provincial capital, and certainly stands

as a typical example in this sense. The area is well-known in public debate and among sector operators for its high agricultural production levels, yet is just as marked – but this remains greatly in the shadows – by practices exploiting the migrant and local labour force. A form of systematic exploitation that appears not only in the work context but is also repeated in the services themselves that shape social-sector action: from access to housing and healthcare through to relations with public services, there is the recurrent use of illicit brokering or intermediaries (known as caporalato – gangmastering and illegal hiring). The frequency of this practice does vary in relation to the workers' legal status and their level of local integration but is nevertheless cross-sectional. This report aims to contribute to spotlighting the dark side of Piana del Sele: the one producing labour exploitation and precarious living conditions for an ever-growing number of labourers, and which co-exists alongside fair practices. More specifically, the intent is to focus on the most vulnerable social component in this context: the female workforce. An axis of powerful gender-based oppression runs through this entire group, along with labour exploitation – factors that shape female agricultural labourers' lives.

## **Note on method**

This research stands within the context of studies in cultural anthropology, and aimed to provide insight founded on the existential dynamics that are generated by interpenetration between gender, legal status and forms of labour exploitation among the women in the Piana del Sele area.

The report is based on investigation conducted mainly with migrant women of Moroccan origin through biographical interviews, going over these labourers' work lives from the outset to current conditions. The diachronic perspective proved useful for understanding not only shifts in their lives over time but also processes of change affecting the agricultural models: more precisely, detailed historical investigation enabled an understanding of how exploitative work becomes part of people's lives and changes them.

This research was founded on an intersectionality perspective (Yuval-Davis, 2006) – an investigation model that enabled attention to be focused on how the gender variable, when combined with other inequality factors (geographical origin, legal status, social class), shapes the female workers' social conditions in Piana del Sele.

Given the vulnerability of the subjects involved in the research and the sensitive implications of the dynamics that emerged, it was decided to make participation anonymous.

Thus, the names of the people in this report as well as some place names are invented.

The delicate nature of the issues probed in this research created not insignificant difficulties in building a sturdy research framework, where gender (and my own potential gender implications) initially stood as a noticeable barrier to the participants opening up. The researcher's gender positioning is not in itself an obstacle to understanding the issues under assessment. The researcher and her/his body, ideas and social positioning are instead determining factors in the research, providing real scope for being able to achieve it (Abu Lughod, 1986).

Therefore, my presence in this project as a white male with a very different social and cultural background to the women interviewed could not be avoided or removed. Far from standing as a *deus ex machina* or a chameleon capable of camouflaging him/herself, the researcher is an integral part of the research context and shapes it with his/her social implications. For instance, the networks built on research activities and activism through the association *Frontiera Sud* played a fundamental role in facilitating these research activities. In parallel, my gender identity conditioned the research activity methods and so it was decided to opt for online interviews and to avoid lengthy face-to-face meetings in several cases.

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1. The association, whose name translates as 'southern frontier', operates in the Piana del Sele area to encourage the inclusion of agricultural labourers. See [www.frontierasud.org](http://www.frontierasud.org)

This report is based on 11 semi-structured interviews with women and stakeholders in the Piana del Sele area. Besides this work with the women, the study also involved action research (Elliot, 1993) within a social project set up to fight gangmastering in Piana del Sele (the NoCap project)<sup>2</sup>. This research played a central role in understanding the production chain processes that shape the agricultural model in the area.

In addition, retrospective analysis was carried out on the informal meetings held with labourers who were working off the books, and these brought to light the key aspects of the exploitation in the area.

The biographical and geographical information that could identify the interviewees (all of whom provided their consent) has been changed in order to protect their privacy.

The research involving the women may be divided into four broad areas of investigation, and the aim was to understand these aspects in more detail while tracing out the participants' work lives:

- Arrival in the Piana del Sele area and what brought them to work in agriculture
- Work dynamics
- Effects of exploitative work on the body
- Means adopted to respond to labour exploitation.

This entire study pivoted on these four questions.

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2. The NoCap project – 'cap' from 'caporalato', gangmastering – is a national Italian network to fight labour exploitation by setting up fair trade chains including labourers and distribution. It is referred to in this report many times. For information on the project, see [www.associazionenocap.it](http://www.associazionenocap.it)



**1.**

***Piana del Sele:  
the past and  
present of a  
production area***

Piana del Sele is a plain of about 700 km<sup>2</sup> in the province of Salerno, and owes its name to the River Sele that crosses it. The plain is closed off to the east by the Sele Valley and to the west by the Gulf of Salerno, and extends from the north (from the outskirts of the city of Salerno) down to the Cilento area in the south. It has an agricultural area of 33,500 hectares and, together with the Piana di Castel Volturno plain, constitutes one of the most fertile areas of the Campania region.

Besides pivoting on buffalo rearing, the Piana del Sele economy stands out today specifically for its intensive agriculture in the ready-to-use sector, involving the processing and packaging of the produce after harvesting. As well as the fruit and vegetable crops in open fields, the area is also one of the largest producers in Europe of what is known as ‘baby leaf’: these small leafy salad ingredients are grown in greenhouses, packaged on site and are ready to eat when leaving the premises. The agri-business model based on mechanisation and hyper-industrialisation of production processes is typical to Piana del Sele as a global agricultural enclave (Molineri, Avallone, 2018) with an annual turnover of €2.5 billion<sup>3</sup>.

This production model incorporates a significant labour force both for growing and for processing and packaging the produce. According to the ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) data for 2018, there were 10,886 people employed on seasonal contracts in Piana del Sele: 5,993 of these were non-Italian citizens<sup>4</sup>. These male and female labourers – who come mainly from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Indian subcontinent – often find themselves in conditions of severe social and work insecurity. There is a noticeable female presence among their number (in fact women make up the majority of foreigners from EU countries in the province of Salerno). Although this female presence takes on different connotations in relation to nationality, cultural identity and ways of interpreting the relationship with the local area, the whole group shares one aspect: social and work difficulties are combined with violent forms of gender-based oppression. Forms of oppression perpetrated as much outside as within the workplace. This interweave between the agricultural business, local social organisation and reference structures specific to the context of origin moulds the experience of women in the Piana del Sele area.

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3. <https://www.freshplaza.it/article/9110743/la-piana-del-sele-polo-europeo-degli-ortaggi-a-foglia-per-la-iv-gamma/>

4. Rapporto Agromafie 2018 report, p.302.



## **1.1 From swamplands to the California of Italy: historical background**

The agricultural identity of Piana del Sele is relatively recent. A main crossroads in the ancient times of Magna Graecia, the area became almost entirely insalubrious swampland from the 2nd century A.D. due to the flooding of the River Sele. Until the late 19th century the only signs of human presence were in the form of hunting lodges belonging to prominent local landowners, alongside bufalare – the masonry buildings used for breeding buffalo, the animal symbolising this area.<sup>5</sup>

Already in the latter half of the 19th century Piana del Sele began to show signs of human activity, with the first land reclamation and settlements. Nonetheless, it was during the early 20th century that the area witnessed full transformation of its lands and production system. Thanks to joint action by the landholders and investors from Northern Italy, a huge land reclamation project got underway, with the idea of making this plain the area chosen for growing tobacco in Italy (Benincasa, 1921). The aim was to break free from dependence on America for tobacco supplies. The project was enthusiastically backed with the advent of fascism, when tobacco plantations also featured in the regime's self-sufficiency project (Carrafiello, 2013): land reclamation was extended to these areas and the number of companies producing and packaging the product increased.

SAIM–Società Agricola Industriale Meridionale was established in 1935 and this brought together 14 local tobacco companies from the area: for 40 years or so – until the parasite-induced tobacco crash – SAIM stood as the epicentre of economic and land development for the area (Marciano, 2011). Towns and infrastructure in the Piana del Sele area were built around these financial flows. In addition, the physical characteristics of the land made it the chosen location for large-scale industrial facilities. And so, from after the Second World War onwards, the new urban settlements created around agricultural development attracted masses of people from nearby areas and other depressed regions of Southern Italy. Piana del Sele was structuring itself as what Rossi Doria (2005) would later describe as the 'fleshy lands' – of investment and economic/political attention – in contrast to the inland areas (the 'bony lands'). The town of Battipaglia, which is still the financial heart of the plain, was listed in 1986 as one of the 100 Italian local administration areas that, due to the economic and civic progress achieved, had contributed to making the nation greater during the first 40 years of the Italian Republic.<sup>6</sup>

The history of the 'birth' of the Piana del Sele area and its development lead to two types of consideration.

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5. Animals famous since the era of the Grand Tour, when Northern European travellers, including Goethe (2017 [1817], immortalised them on canvas or in notebooks as they freely grazed among the ruins of the temples of Paestum.

6. From the institutional website of Battipaglia local council: [http://www.comune.battipaglia.sa.it/le\\_origini](http://www.comune.battipaglia.sa.it/le_origini)

Considerations that are essential for understanding its current agricultural make-up and the ways in which the workforce is present locally.

Firstly, the area took shape as a place founded on the inseparable bond between agricultural space and conversion of its produce through factory-based processing. Piana del Sele was 'born' thanks to tobacco and prospered through the creation of industrialised facilities to process this crop. This characteristic is still fully manifest today in its sector of ready-to-use vegetables, which a significant portion of the area's wealth generation is founded on.

On the other hand, a vital component in the production process was the presence of women. They played a fundamental role, particularly in the tobacco processing plants for packaging the product, and were known as *tabacchine* – 'the little tobacco women' (Marciano, 2021). In this sense, Piana del Sele stood out for its high numbers of female workers as well as for a gender-based division of labour: a division that, as we shall see, still shapes work duties and wages.

Piana del Sele experienced an extreme slump

in tobacco production in the 1970s caused by a parasite, downy mildew, which made the crop useless and led to the gradual closure of all the tobacco factories in the area. During the '70s and '80s the lure of industrial development was pursued on the plain, while from the '90s onwards – parallel to the onset of an inevitable and slow dismantling process that is still underway – the Piana del Sele agricultural area was reshaped, both in terms of production processes and regards the labour force.

On the one hand, the first hothouses and facilities for processing ready-to-eat produce were built, creating the conditions to usher in a new golden era for Piana del Sele (it has unquestionably been the most economically productive area of Campania since the early years of the 21st century). Instead, on the other hand new labour resources arrived in the area. Starting from the late '80s, an ever-growing flow of foreign labouring power became present, in addition to the Italian workforce (Avallone, 2017). This new social-economic structure transformed (and is still transforming) the plain, its production models and the make-up of the local area.

## 1.2 The agricultural production chain and its effects on the local area

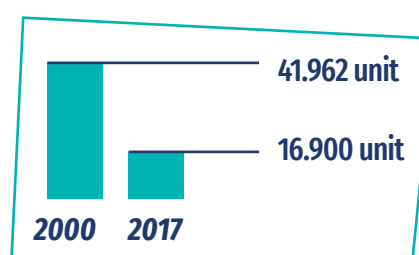
Piana del Sele can certainly be considered as a 'global agricultural enclave' (Avallone, 2017) on the basis of the economic and financial flows that it generates and attracts, the varied nationalities of the people residing there, the distribution extent of its produce, and the interaction with other farming and processing areas in Europe and worldwide. The effects of agricultural capitalism and what has been defined as 'globalisation of the countryside' (Colloca, Corrado, 2013) have obviously had their effect on the area, changing its physical make-up and structure.

This has happened firstly in a visual sense: looking at Piana del Sele from one of its surrounding hills stirs a sensation of bewilderment. The area stands as an authentic 'sea of plastic'<sup>7</sup> with a striking grid of greenhouses taking up a significant part of the plain, especially that extending to the right of the River Sele (and to be more precise, in the local areas of Pontecagnano, Bellizzi, Battipaglia and Eboli). This generates 'disfigurement' not only in terms of landscape: the greenhouses have great environmental impact on the area (from irrigation to the use of pesticides), so much so that erecting new facilities or issuing new licences require preliminary assessment of the impact.

Hyper-industrialisation of farming processes has generated another change. This may be less immediately obvious to the eye, but perhaps has a greater impact on the present context and future of the area.

The current agricultural system - particularly in terms of the economy of the ready-to-use vegetable sector - involves production and packaging costs that are practically unsustainable for small-scale farmers. As can be read in the most recent Rapporto Agromafie report (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2021), there has been a sharp fall in the number of agricultural firms in the province of Salerno in the last 20 years: between 2000 and 2017 the number of farming businesses went from 41,962 to 16,900. This drop cannot be fully explained through the simple rhetoric of the younger generations deserting the land but is essentially due – particularly in the Piana del Sele area – to structural reasons.

### Number of farms (Salerno)



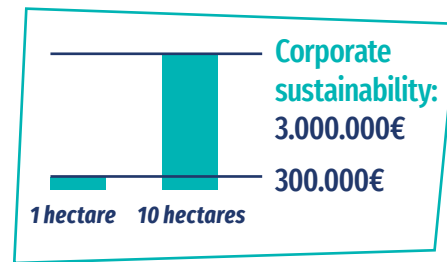
7. This definition was coined for greenhouse areas in the South of Spain, and its Italian version, 'mare di plastica', was then imported for Italian agricultural models such as the Piana del Sele one in the Campania region or the farming area of South East Sicily (see: Sanò, 2018).

Antonio, spokesman for a local farming business specialised in ready-to-eat green salad produce, explained what the profit margins are and the potential of the products he sells:

***“The ready-to-eat vegetable sector offers huge profit margins: we reason by the kilo. The selling price for us ranges from €5.80 up to €9 per kilo. It depends what we put in the packets. And then there are options to enhance product worth. For instance, if we include five organic edible flowers per packet, that product goes from €5.80 to a much higher price. Abroad they generally pay 20% more than the prices on the Italian market.”***

Yet at the same time he went into the question of production costs.

***“But if I tell you how much it costs to set up a hectare of greenhouses, you realise that the initial profit margins become slimmer. In general, production costs are very high. Specialisation is currently underway in this sector, and it’s unlikely things will return to how they once were. Company sustainability starts off at a minimum of 10 hectares. A hectare costs €130,000, building the greenhouses and buying the equipment is about the same amount again. If you add on the other various costs, the total is up to €300,000 per hectare, which means that 10 hectares takes an investment of €3 million”<sup>8</sup>.***



While owning land is a way of reducing rental costs (annual leasing of land is equal to about 10% of the purchase price), the costs of facilities and machinery still make this sector inaccessible to most local small-scale farmers. In areas where farming cooperatives have a history of rarely taking root, trends pivoting on ownership and showing the relentless abandonment of this agriculture segment by small-scale businesses become apparent.

In addition, according to Antonio’s narration, small-scale producers often “drug the market” by lowering produce prices to an unsustainable and uncompetitive level so as to entice buyers to turn to them as suppliers. As Antonio pointed out, ***“farming businesses often have incomes that do not even cover their outgoings”***. This price squeeze becomes a systemic issue for the businesses, which shift into a downward pricing spiral which they are then unable to get out of, constantly facing entirely unsustainable price requests from wholesalers.

The difficulty in staying in the market obviously affects the entire production chain: ***although it is already evident how semi-illicit work and gangmastering have a cross-cutting nature and do not depend on company size (Avallone,***

8. Interview, 24.08.2021.

2017), *reducing the labourers' hourly wage stands as the first fixed cost to lower for many employers.* The presence of a poor and precarious labour-force catchment basin – as has always been typical to farming on this plain – becomes systemic in this agricultural model. Added to this are the effects of the ever more widespread use of mechanisation processes: since this inevitably contributes to reducing the need for agricultural workers, it places these same labourers in an even more insecure situation. The following excerpt from an interview with Jadia, a woman of Moroccan origin employed in Piana del Sele to harvest rocket since 2001, shows how the changes mechanisation processes have brought to production models and the labour market can be easily noticed:

***“When I started in 2001 I was on rocket. I used to cut it by hand and put it in the***

***container. That's because there was no machine back in 2001, there was just this big scythe. Harvesting was by hand, inside the greenhouse. It was in Bellizzi. And my first job lasted for five years [...] After five years they got rid of me along with many other young people because the firm bought machines for cutting the rocket and no longer needed manual workers.”***<sup>9</sup>.

One of the effects of this split direction in the agricultural market (increased mechanisation in the ready-to-use sector and difficulties for small-scale producers) can be immediately perceived in the ethnic composition of the labour force. Today foreign labourers make up over half of the workforce in the Piana del Sele area. The most settled ones have for some time now come from the main immigrant communities, these comprising Romanians,

**Table 6: Piana del Sele. Main agricultural crops, Italian and foreign workers and prevalent communities. Year 2018 (r.a. and r.%)**

Piana del Sele	Busy			The prevailing groups
	Italians	Foreigners	Total	
Albanella	289	208	1.497	India, Marocco, Bangladesh
Altavilla Silentina	336	588	524	India, Romania, Tunisia
Battipaglia	1.135	1.158	2.293	Marocco, Romania, India
Bellizzi	494	261	255	Marocco, Romania, Ucraina
Capaccio-Paestum	816	1.040	1.856	Marocco, India, Romania
Eboli	1.330	2.507	3.837	Marocco, Romania, India
Pontecagnano	491	631	1.122	Romania, Ucraina, Marocco
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.891</b>	<b>5.993</b>	<b>10.884</b>	

Source: our elaboration on Flai-Cgil data, 2019

9. Interview, 18.08.2021

10. Table taken from the Rapporto Agromafie 2020 report, Table 6.

Moroccans (the oldest community) and Indians (employed mainly in buffalo breeding)<sup>10</sup>.

Nonetheless, recent years have also brought an increase in citizens from the Southern Hemisphere through the Mediterranean migration route (Dines, Rigo, 2015) and a strong presence of sub-Saharan Africans as they leave the migrants' reception centres in the area (Avallone, 2018). ***These people then spread into the Piana del Sele area, and its services, neighbourhoods and business enterprises.***

There are some zones such as Santa Cecilia – part of the Eboli local council district – where entire North African neighbourhoods with residential housing, businesses and offices have existed for decades, and are frequented by the local Moroccan community. ***Full-blown ghettos have also emerged***, as in the case of Campolongo, a stretch of coast in the Eboli district. Villa-like houses were erected in Campolongo the '70s and

'80s – the result of property speculation and which should have then catered to international tourism. They have become housing for foreign labourers who have created authentic ethnic islands in a context marked by almost total abandonment by the institutions and a widespread informal economy<sup>11</sup>.

These structurally complex conditions have given rise to parallel systems for managing the jobs and lives of local inhabitants: systems with particularly significant impact on the most vulnerable subjects, these being migrants and women. It is a system that Abdu, a young Moroccan man who lives in the illegally built Campolongo edifices and works cash in hand in the fresh produce sector, has described as “*approfittaggio*”<sup>12</sup>, ‘exploiteering’ – a mixture of exploitation and profiteering”.

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11. For a more in-depth look at the housing issue in the Campolongo area, see the report by the watchdog organisation O.S.A.RE (Osservatorio su Sfruttamento Agricolo e Resistenza) conducted in the Piana del Volturno and Piana del Sele areas, [www.osservatorioosare.org](http://www.osservatorioosare.org).

12. Field journal, 19.07.2021.



## 1.3 The exploitation chain: exploiteering

Approfittaggio is a sort of Italianisation of the French term profitage and is used to indicate a fully developed social context that interconnects the legal with the illicit, the formal economy with the informal. It is based on a universe of brokers and intermediaries who – in return for payment – allow the labourers in Piana del Sele to access not only jobs but a whole series of services and rights. The matter of intermediaries in Piana del Sele is unquestionably inherent to the local area, as has been demonstrated by studies on client relationships by Gribaudo (1991). Furthermore, the figure of the broker, as regards work mediation between labourer and employer, is today central in national public debate: what are known as gangmasters – called ‘bosses’ by the labourers – stand as pivotal figures in the Piana del Sele context (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2021) in bringing together the labour supply and demand.

***The gangmaster is a figure that is anything other than monolithic***, and may include within it unofficial or ‘informal enterprisers’ who supply labour and accompany these workers to the workplace, through to full-blown oppressors who feast on the labour force and the workers’ wages.

During my field research I had the opportunity to interview an ex-gangmaster, Said. He explained he had worked up to 20 hours per day to meet the labour requests he had received from employers during the periods of the most intense seasonal work (such as harvesting, planting or processing the freshly harvested produce). Not only did Said find workers (up to 100 a day and of various nationalities for various employers) and drive them to the workplace, but he would also often do a day’s labour with them to check whether they worked properly. In certain cases, he acted as an authentic union representative: for instance, he claims he broke off ties with one company since it wanted to pay ‘his’ labourers only €4 per hour while he was fighting to get them €5.<sup>13</sup>

The figure of Said, which the Piana del Sele labourers would describe as ‘a good boss’<sup>14</sup>, highlights a fundamental aspect of exploiteering and calls into play the companies’ central importance in this process.

Durante l’attività di ricerca non ho mai incontrato un bracciante (maschio o femmina) che percepisse la paga per le ore effettivamente lavorate.

During my research activities I never once met an agricultural labourer (neither male nor female) who was paid for the hours actually

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13. Field journal, 05.08.2021.

14. Regarding the gangmasters’ ambivalent role, see [https://www.adnkronos.com/i-mille-volti-del-caporale-da-tassista-ad-aguzzino\\_38CPRnaTSoYxuy5euGgK2T](https://www.adnkronos.com/i-mille-volti-del-caporale-da-tassista-ad-aguzzino_38CPRnaTSoYxuy5euGgK2T).

worked. This system of subtracting value from work – basically **'semi-illicit' employment** – is fully endemic in the area and can be explained in the few lines of the following paragraph translated from the Rapporto Agromafie 2020 report on Piana del Sele:

***“For instance, a labourer works 30 days in a row for an agreed daily pay of €30. However, the employer counts these as 19 days to reach a total wage of €900 (€52 is the daily pay set out in the established provincial contract, which is multiplied by 19 days = €988, less income tax), which becomes the official monthly pay packet, so that the agreed wage is in full, but without counting the number of hours actually worked, overtime or weekends and holidays worked. This system is widespread in the Piana del Sele area, standing as the standard way of operating by most of the business class of this high-performance agricultural district in the province of Salerno, regardless of company size.”<sup>15</sup>***

If working off the books is the case mainly for illicitly hired people in the area and is used generally for brief periods, semi-illicit employment is the standard way of operating in Piana del Sele. And anybody stepping outside this system can even have to face consequences. For instance, Abdu – a Moroccan labourer working off

the books and living in the Campolongo 'ghetto' – told me that one Piana del Sele company had been planning to pay its workers a wage that was higher than the so-called 'going rate' (about €30-€35 per day for men and €25-€30 for women) but received threats and was forced to keep its daily wage low<sup>16</sup>.

Semi-illicit employment is an inherent part of labourers' lives and is accepted as the standard. Even if the workers are often unable to read their wage packets, ***they are well aware of the discrepancy between what is marked on the payslip and what their earnings actually are.*** The agreement on the daily wage is in fact sealed in advance between worker and team leader or directly with the company owner. This generates paradoxical effects. The NoCap project was introduced in Piana del Sele in summer 2021 and this involved checking that wages were proportionate to the real hours worked: one of the difficulties encountered in recruiting labourers was in fact the inability to provide them with 'prior' information on their daily wage and them having to reason in terms of gross hourly pay<sup>17</sup>.

The 'normality' of this way of attaining an agricultural workforce not only shows ***the lack of local alternatives, the feebleness of union strength and the great power of companies over the labour force,*** but also reveals the shadow of a broader system of restrictions.

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15. Rapporto Agromafie 2020 report, p.311.

16. Field journal, 27.07.2021.

17. Field journal, 21.07.2021.



For the migrant agricultural labour force, for instance, **a work contract is needed to obtain a residency permit** – which therefore becomes essential to acquire at any condition. Another excerpt from the research conducted within the NoCap network shows what effects the fear of losing a residency permit has on agricultural labourers in the area.

A labourer was identified within the NoCap project as a potential candidate to join its network and as such he would have been guaranteed accommodation, decent working conditions and wages for the hours actually worked, as well as transport to and from the workplace. When he was told he would have to resign from the first job, the young man – who was initially enthusiastic about the new employment – began to hesitate and even decided to turn the offer down. The reason was that he was not prepared to hand in his notice because he would soon be needing to renew his residency permit and, without that contract, he feared he might lose the permit<sup>18</sup>.

This excerpt shows not only **how much labour exploitation processes are internalised by individuals but also a strong fear and mistrust of institutions**. This cultural mishmash is also a perfect breeding ground for another, perhaps even more pervasive, form of exploiteering

typical to Piana del Sele: a whole string of subjects and organisations (both migrant and local) earn their livings by brokering in relations between labourers, institutions and the local context. Some corrupt work consultants, accountants and tax assistance centres will – in return for payment – see to preparing the necessary paperwork regards family reunification, immigration quotas, sham marriage or regularising illicit employment. The presence of a social group of agricultural labourers in Piana del Sele is achieved through **persons acting as the binding agent between the official and unofficial economies**. One aim of this report is to investigate this type of labour in a specific key, that of gender.

It is through analysis of the Piana del Sele female labourers' biographies that the shape and form of the following emerges: the local area and the agricultural production chain, relationships of subordination with employers, dependence on unofficial or informal networks to remain in Italy or the local area.

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18. Field journal, 19.08.2021.

A high-angle photograph of a worker in a yellow hard hat and orange safety vest operating a blue pallet jack in a warehouse. The worker is positioned on the right side of the frame, moving away from the camera. The warehouse floor is concrete, and there are wooden pallets and metal shelving units visible on the left side. A large, semi-transparent cyan shape is overlaid on the center of the image, containing text.

**II.**

***A gender-based  
perspective on  
labour exploitation  
in the Piana del Sele  
area***

## 2.1 Gender as an axis of inequality

***“Don’t phone me. We need to communicate via WhatsApp and before 6:00. Then my husband comes home and I can’t do anything”<sup>19</sup>.***

This was the message forwarded by the person acting as the language and cultural go-between for field research activities when I was given availability times for Amira, a woman who was supposed to take part in an interview. The decision was then taken to go no further with Amira because there were so many obstacles that carrying on would have been counterproductive for the research and a risk for her. Amira stands as a borderline case in a

systemic situation that permeated the entire research. When you take a closer look at the women labouring in the farming sector, a whole world opens up: it is made up of exploitation and endemic violence, and the axis of gender-based inequality is anchored into its vulnerabilities (Shields, 2008) – a differential axis permeating the whole life experience of these working women. In this sense, gender becomes an inescapable constant through which to position the bodies and social reactions of the women in question: it is a constant that shapes work, presence in the local area and the building of futures.

### Box 1

#### ***Gender inequality: ranging from family groups to public spaces***

Any gender-based reading of the labour exploitation of women in Piana del Sele should reject every type of ‘cultural’ approach that tends to offload onto ‘other’ contexts of reference (culture of origin or religion) the gender-based inequality experienced by these female labourers, and therefore blots out the political and social responsibilities of decision-makers and stakeholders who should intervene in this context. ***In fact, gender inequalities are far from being merely ‘internal’ to the family group or community of reference: in public spaces – and more specifically the workplace – these inequalities lash women’s bodies, wage packets and work tasks.***

**Seven women** were interviewed, six of whom were of Moroccan origin and one Italian. They were women of different ages and backgrounds: from the woman who had just begun working in agriculture to the one who had been labouring in the fields when the lira was still circulating, from the migrant woman who had arrived just a few years ago to the daughter born in Italy to migrant parents, known as 'second generation' immigrants. One trait was common to all: every woman who decided to share her personal story tended to be independent from a husband or partner. Two women (one Italian and the other of Moroccan origin) were married to men who, for different reasons, did not have a steady job. Therefore, the burden of domestic responsibility and social productivity for the entire family was on these women's shoulders. The others had all come out of toxic relationships with abuse from Italian or Moroccan men who tended to relegate them to the domestic context and to limit (if not completely cut off) social contact with the outside world; in some cases, the women were victims of physical violence. For some of the women the interviews played a liberating role, becoming an opportunity

for narrating the oppression they had been subjected to and which they managed to free themselves from.

The women interviewed in no way wish to be seen as representative of the female labourers in Piana del Sele. However, they do stand as a very striking indicator of the significance of gender-based structures in creating possibilities for women working in Piana del Sele agriculture to 'have their say'. Added to this difficulty is the fear that what they say may drag them into a series of problems. ***"They're afraid we might end up in court, and we're foreign, so we have more to risk"***, said the go-between who was telling me about the Moroccan women's 'refusals' to be interviewed.<sup>20</sup>

This fear is the material manifestation of their submission to the exploitation mechanisms that they have to deal with. One of the young women, when suggesting that an interview might trigger legal action against her previous employers, stated: "They hurt us a great deal, but that doesn't mean that we have to hurt them too"<sup>21</sup>.

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20. Field journal. 12.09.2021.

21. Field journal. 15.09.2021.

## 2.2 Reunification? Gender-based oppression and the presence of women in Piana del Sele.

As the data in the table from the Rapporto Agromafie 2020 report shows below<sup>22</sup>, women make up a substantial share of the workforce in the entire province of Salerno and, both in terms of Italians and European Union foreigners, these percentages are even higher than those

for men in 2017 as far as the seasonal workforce is concerned. Nonetheless, this presence – especially regards the group I focused on, i.e. women from Morocco – still shows as being heavily invisible in public spaces.

**Table 4: Salerno. Italian, other EU and non-EU employees in agriculture by duration of work (Years 2017 and 2018)**

	Fixed-term workers (OTD)							
	Year 2017				Year 2018			
	Male	Female	Total		Male	Female	Total	
Nationality	v.a.	v.a.	v.a.	v.%	v.a.	v.a.	v.a.	v.%
Italians	7.880	11.207	19.087	66,3	7.746	10.420	18.166	65,2
Not UE	4.970	1.252	6.222	21,6	5.330	1.294	6.624	23,7
UE	1.427	2.048	3.475	12,1	1.226	1.846	3.072	11,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.277</b> (49,6)	<b>14.507</b> (50,4)	<b>28.784</b> (100,0)	<b>100,0</b> -	<b>14.302</b> (51,3)	<b>13.560</b> (48,7)	<b>27.862</b> (100,0)	<b>100,0</b> -
	Permanent workers (OTI)							
Italians	1.464	176	1.630	90,9	1.406	173	1.579	91,3
Not UE	126	11	137	7,7	122	8	130	7,5
UE	18	7	25	1,4	16	5	21	1,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.598</b> (89,2)	<b>194</b> (10,8)	<b>1.792</b> (100,0)	<b>100,0</b> -	<b>1.544</b> (89,2)	<b>186</b> (10,8)	<b>1.730</b> (100,0)	<b>100,0</b> -
<b>Total general</b>	<b>15.875</b> (51,9)	<b>14.701</b> (48,1)	<b>30.576</b> (100,0)	<b>-</b>	<b>15.846</b> (53,5)	<b>13.746</b> (46,5)	<b>29.592</b> (100,0)	<b>-</b>

Source: our elaboration on data provided by Dr. Domenico Casella CREA-PB on Inps data, 2019

22. Rapporto Agromafie 2020 report, Table 4, p.301.

During the research activities in the Campolongo ghetto, carried out during the spring and summer of 2021, many attempts were made to include women living and working in the area in the initiatives organised by unofficial local groups. Despite the insistence by fellow co-ethnic labourers taking part in the project, nobody participated. Abdu, the young Moroccan man interviewed, interpreted this decision with the following words: "(...) After work they return home and go out at most to do the shopping. Then they stay home for the rest of the time"<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, this explanation does not take into account a series of reasons why Moroccan women systemically refuse to be interviewed: these might be, for instance, customs in feeling shame, or being afraid that I might be a policeman in plain clothes. At the same time, all this is intertwined with the reasons for female presences in Piana del Sele, especially as far as the North African component is concerned. All the women of Moroccan origin involved in the research – with the exception of one born in Italy – said they had arrived in Italy through the legal mechanism of family reunification<sup>24</sup>: one, who was still a minor at the time, had been summoned by her family; all the others arrived as 'brides of' men who were already living locally.

One of these six married an Italian in Morocco before leaving for Italy. Her words on the effects of the wedding are eloquent: ***"He thought he was coming to get himself a servant, a slave"***<sup>25</sup>.

Fatima, a 50-year-old who has been in Italy for 15 years, made this opening comment when speaking of her marriage to an Italian 30 years older than herself. She has been living in the Piana del Sele area since she first arrived in Italy. When she got married she was 35 and he was already over 60. After more than 10 years of violence, Fatima finally separated from him. The problems with her husband began as soon as she arrived in Italy. It was an ordeal that saw her first segregated in a house belonging to her new husband in a farming village in Piana del Sele, followed by a gradual crescendo of verbal and physical violence.

***"He saw to it that I didn't go without anything, but I had to do exactly what he said, otherwise he'd get into a temper. And then he'd start shouting and knocking me about,"*** Fatima narrated<sup>26</sup>.

The man's ex-wife came and went as she pleased in the house Fatima was isolated in and would lash out at her and call her 'servant' or 'prostitute', depending on her mood.

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23. Field journal, 28.07.2021

24. The Italian legislative mechanism regarding family reunification is based on the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which regulated family reunification for workers within the European Union as a fundamental right. Since the Martelli law was introduced in 1986, this being when the first laws regulating non-European citizens in Italy came into force, the same inclusive principle for family reunification from non-European countries has applied. Despite the subsequent amendments to these laws over the years to restrict their applicability, family reunification – an occurrence accounting for 30% of immigration to Europe – can still be considered as structured to ensure the applicant's rights rather than to strengthen borders. For further information, see Grimaldi (2018).

25. Interview, 07.08.2021.

26. Interview, 07.08.2021.

**Fatima knew no one outside of the house and not a word of Italian.** That is how she lived and raised her son, from a previous marriage and who was brought to Italy when he was six years old.

On several occasions, she could have lost her life. It was the network of the many local Moroccan businesses that gave her respite and the chance to find a job. A job where she was exploited and underpaid for her skills – she has a Moroccan high-school diploma – and that took her to harvest vegetables in Piana del Sele. But this job did save her life.

As Fatima explained:

**“They used to pay me €18 a day when I started. But that was fine by me. I would have gone to work even for €10 a day just to get out of that house”.**

During the interview Fatima added that her main priority had been to gain independence, because she was convinced that things would not last long with her husband and she would need the certainty that once the relationship ended she would not be out on the street with a child to bring up.

This section of the interview draws attention to a fundamental matter: although agricultural labouring is underpaid and exploitative, it still offers vulnerable subjects such as Fatima a vital space for breaking free from far more draining forms of oppression. This concept that often remains concealed during public debate on labour exploitation should instead be firmly

brought into the discussion. **Labour exploitation is part of a broader cycle of oppression and paradoxically can even stand as an option for escaping from even more violent forms of marginalisation.** As has been seen in Fatima’s case, work acted as a mechanism to weaken the **male-dominated oppression** she was subjected to. Besides, if we take Italian legislation into consideration, **work becomes essential to all migrants in order to renew a residency permit.**

This permit, for instance, is what enabled Layla to come to Italy at the age of 17. The youngest of her family, she grew up in Morocco with her older sisters while her parents worked the land in Piana del Sele. When she was 17 her parents could finally afford and had the right bureaucratic requisites to ask for family reunification. This meant Layla had to break off her studies in Morocco and come to Italy. After just a year in Italy, when she was beginning to feel settled, she turned 18. From that day on, under the laws governing immigration, her residency permit depended directly on her job and no longer on her parents. And so she too started working at the agricultural processing premises. Today she is 30 and still works there, for the same farm-produce company she started with.

It should be said that while some of the interviewed women only do agricultural labouring, **others include this work as part of a broader ecosystem**, as a smaller or larger digression from their path in life – something to fall back on and a source of certain income

during a tough period. Others still make ends meet alone by working two jobs: in the morning they go into the fields, in the evening they do cash-in-hand work in a pub, washing dishes. Some ended up processing and packaging farm produce after attempting various other careers. Some worked the land for a while and then moved on to other things. **What emerges from this research is an exploitation system involving the entire local labour market, from its services to its factories.** It is no coincidence that for many of the women interviewed, the worst exploitation experiences took place not in the fields but in the factories or processing premises.

While the work is exploitative, **it is also unquestionably a source of income for families to live on**, whether these be Italian or foreign.

Jadia, for example, came to Piana del Sele from Morocco to weed the rocket crops because her husband was unwell and could no longer work. Anna, instead, had a husband who only worked occasionally and so she used to set out at 3:30 every morning in a minibus filled up with other women from her village in the hills an hour away from the fields where she worked for 13 years to support her family.

Anna's case brings up another vital aspect: **in order to reach the place of work in Piana del Sele, somebody has to take you.** Anna no longer works there but during her 15-plus years with the same company she saw the agricultural system change. Nonetheless, what stayed the

same was the transport question. She told us that **she lost €5 from her daily wage every day** as she had to give that to the woman who took her to and from work. During her whole time working there, two different women drove the minibus, and both charged the same price. But with the difference that the first took this money directly from Anna's wage packet (and so Anna would get €5 less per day), while in the second case the agricultural workers were paid in full and then the women on the minibus had to give the daily fare directly to the driver. This transport system is often essential for getting to work given **the distances and how remote the workplace is, which can often become a source of danger, especially for women**, as Anna explained:


**"I never went anywhere without the team leader, and I never dared move around alone. The fields were big and I was afraid of getting lost."**<sup>27</sup>

However, this system often opens doors to another world, the gangmastering one, which all of the interviewees experienced in a more intense or lighter way but which often makes this work unsustainable.

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27. Interview, 28.09.2021.



A vibrant green basil plant with a bright cyan pentagonal overlay containing text.

**III.**

***The labour system  
for women in the  
Piana del Sele  
area***

## 3.1 Wages

Given the production framework in Piana del Sele (a high level of mechanisation and good harvests all year round), few agricultural businesses hire workers off the books. Those who do, generally hire people for short periods or at specific times of the year, when they need a larger workforce such as, for example, during harvesting or planting. Whether the work is on the books or not does not significantly influence net wages or salaries.

Since he arrived in Italy, Abdu has been working cash in hand and never earns less than €30 a day. Although all the women I spoke to had work contracts, only one of these manages to earn almost the same amount as Abdu (€31 per day).

***The daily wage varies from company to company and in this sense is a lot more variable for women than for men.***

If we were to trace out an average, this would stand at about €25 per day – ***about €5 less than for a man working off the books.*** The reason for this gender distinction is well put by Jadia who now, at the age of almost 60 and after years spent earning €21 per day, has reached the point of earning €29 a day. In her opinion, ***“the men do more jobs than the women do and those jobs are more physically demanding than the women’s ones,”*** and so it is normal that they should earn more<sup>28</sup>.

This difference and discrimination in wages is clearly expressed by ***the female interviewees who never question the fact that men earn more.*** What comes into play is a sort of male-female interdependence that can be found in all sectors when deciding labour tasks.

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28. Interview, 18.08.2021.

## 3.2 Tasks

The gender difference can therefore also be seen in task allocation. For work in the rocket greenhouses (a context not yet fully mechanised), for instance, men are assigned to cutting while the women pick up the rocket and put it in the containers, or hand-weed the planted crops, to avoid the weeds ending up in the crates when the mowing machines comes through. Instead, in the factory and warehouse facilities women are assigned to cleaning and cutting produce and making up the pallets with it, while men are the forklift operators responsible for moving the goods.

In this gender-based division of work, one of the tasks most given to women – strawberry picking – stands out. The strawberry hothouses are low and, since this job does not demand physical strength, the picking is usually assigned to women.

Jadia spoke about the strawberry picking procedure and the difficult aspects of this task: **“You’re always working down low with strawberries. Because you have to bend your back. Picking them is tiring. But not because they get damaged if you’re not careful. Because if you damage one, you throw it away and it doesn’t matter much. The problem is that you have to get a heavy metal bucket to put the punnets of strawberries in. You put the bucket on**

**the ground near you and you begin filling the wooden crates. A lot of strawberries fit in these, and they all have to be arranged properly. But mainly you have to be really quick. There’s a team leader who says: ‘hurry up, hurry up’. My team leader was an Italian woman”**<sup>29</sup>.

**This gender-based division of work follows a precise ideal of stereotyped male and female roles: the strong but careless man and the weak but careful woman. And anybody who contradicts these dynamics is sent away or reassigned to different duties.**

For instance, Abdu, the Moroccan labourer interviewed during this study, has a slender physique and was assigned to what were considered ‘women’s jobs’. And so, while his male co-workers were harvesting the watermelons in July, he was hired to pick runner beans. He said he was the only man in his work team<sup>30</sup>.

This agricultural-work structuring based on male-female stereotypes and clichés is shattered in Piana del Sele when considering the **gruelling work pace that not only the men but also the women are often forced to endure to keep their jobs.**

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29. Interview, 18.08.2021.

30. Interview, 22.07.2021.

### 3.3 Work pace

When I asked Zewda if she preferred working the land or being in the processing areas she said she had no doubts about it:

***“When you’re working the land you do your hours, and you might work extra hours occasionally. In processing, you know that when you arrive you don’t know when you’ll leave. I had a young son and I couldn’t afford to leave him on his own at home”<sup>31</sup>.***

Zewda’s words are a bit of a litmus test for the Piana del Sele work model, where the systemic violence of exploitation is not exposed to external eyes. ***Just like in the case of semi-illicit employment, the exasperating labour pace is also often ‘concealed’.*** And the context of this farming enclave in growing and processing agricultural produce lends itself well to this outcome. The hyper-mechanisation of crop processing and the large volumes of produce to be delivered within given deadlines demand ‘overtime’ at the processing plants and warehouses as a routine procedure. Fatima’s words on this aspect illustrate the situation well: ***“I started working in the processing areas in 2014. I worked there four months, with no insurance.***

***I used to cut the curly endive and clean it. In processing, over the conveyor belt, I suffered a lot. Because I had to stand still for more than 10 hours. There was the woman who was in charge – the one they gave us as team leader. Italian. I was the only Moroccan. There were Romanians, Ukrainians... but I was the first Moroccan. That’s also why they didn’t hire me on the books I’d say. As if there was somebody who didn’t want me there. The owner’s son, I reckon. His mum said to him one time: ‘Don’t you see how good she is?’ But he pulled a face that, well... I don’t know...***

***I often worked more than 10 hours a day there. The work cycle was constant, 24 hours a day. And you worked for three or four hours more after your shift. They gave me €27 a day. €4 an hour<sup>32</sup>”.***

In this workspace, breaks, chatting and anything relaxing were absolutely forbidden. While speaking about one specific company, Fatima commented: ***“If you worked for that firm it was better to wear an adult nappy because they wouldn’t let you go to the toilet”<sup>33</sup>.***

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31. Interview, 31.08.2021.

32. Interview, 07.08.2021.

33. Interview, 07.08.2021.

All the interviews show that behind the closed doors of the processing premises, where work goes on 24 hours a day, the worst exploitation – and the form most difficult to track – takes place.

***The agricultural production chain is a burden on the woman's shoulders particularly in the processing factory and warehouse. Not by chance do they often internalise the narrative of their employers – men often called 'master' by the immigrant women who do not speak Italian very well.***

Many of the women interviewed in fact highlighted how important it was to do their jobs well and to meet delivery deadlines, and

how demanding it was for their employer to keep the business afloat, and how concerned he often was for his female employees.

It is clear that these ways of constructing working presence significantly impact the women's bodies.

***The body is the supreme 'venue' where labour exploitation shows its effects. The intense work pace, the toil, lack of rest, and the clear or less obvious psychological oppressions all inflict permanent effects on women's bodies, changing them, and shaping them in the image of their workplace.***





**IV.**

***The body as the  
place for labour  
exploitation***

## 4.1 Getting ill from work

One of the first considerations that should be made – as banal as it may seem – is that **exploitative labour almost always causes physical pain**. Physical pain that then becomes a constant in people’s lives. Fatima told how she first got backache while working in the ready-to-use vegetable processing area where she was working gruelling shifts.

A pain that she has had for over five years and has not managed to get rid of in any way:

**“It’s very sore here,”** she says, touching her back. **“There’s still a blue mark. From the suffering. Because it feels like being stabbed every time you pick stuff up. Like a sword. My son even photographed it to show me the mark, that is sometimes green and sometimes blue”<sup>34</sup>.**

Fatima’s suffering echoes Jadia’s: she began being in pain because of the strawberry picking. It was 2005. Since then her backache has not subsided. Jadia says she stopped working at a certain point because the pain was unbearable. She went for a CT scan and it showed a spinal cord compression. She was prescribed a medicine, which took the pain away but it pushed her blood pressure up too high. So she had to stop taking the medicine and the doctor advised her to wear a back brace when working. She was off work for just a few weeks: she

couldn’t afford not to work. And so she began again despite her backache. This pain started when she was 39, and now she is 55<sup>35</sup>.

Labouring in agriculture is not only invalidating but also dangerous. **The work is in environments that are not always safe, there is no basic training and, above all, the work pace is arduous.**

This is how Hayat, a 35-year-old of Moroccan origin who was born and grew up in Italy, sliced off part of her finger during her first days at work. She had been assigned to chopping up the fruit but, not knowing how to use a peeler professionally, she got hurt. In her opinion, these are **“things that happen when you haven’t got experience”<sup>36</sup>.**

Besides this aspect are the daily problems due to **the heat, cold and dampness in the spaces where the work takes place**. In summer the labour under the greenhouse roof is exhausting and suffocating, so much so that many labourers do not work during the months of July and August even if they could. Instead, in winter a fire often needs to be lit to warm the labourers’ hands, otherwise working becomes impossible due to the cold. In addition, there are the routine tasks of the workers in the processing areas: vulnerable work in itself, given the direct

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34. Interview, 07.08.2021.

35. Interview, 18.08.2021.

36. Interview, 29.09.2021.

and constant contact with wet produce. As Fatima explained, hands and clothes constantly get wet. And the rest is done by moving between hot and cold inside and outside the premises.

***Rheumatism and respiratory problems are commonplace.***

There are people like Anna who, in terms of the elements and working the land, had an unpleasant experience right on the first day: she did not know that rubber boots were needed. Even if they cause blisters, she considers them an essential to avoid getting wet feet. She had to trudge through mud and even through a stream to reach the work site on her first day, in 2001. She lasted three hours and then had to go away. She was planting fennel and, besides being constantly in contact with water, her eyes were always stinging, probably from the pesticides soaking the polystyrene crates holding the fennel seedlings for planting. She then gave up this job and promised herself she would never return to agricultural labouring. Three months later she was back again and stayed for another 14 years.

Anna suffered a great deal in those years and while talking about them she often spoke of 'faintings', which happened ever more frequently during her years of work. Initially these episodes were occasional, then after a short time they became almost constant, to the point that during her last two years of work she did the minimum amount of days to be eligible for agricultural

unemployment benefit – a privilege earned through her number of years working – and for the rest of the time she stayed home.

***Her fainting episodes would come on while labouring. By this stage she had learnt to recognise them. So when she 'felt' one on its way, she would leave the greenhouses, go off and black out. After a few minutes she revived, and then spend the rest of the day alone waiting for her co-workers' shift to finish so they could return home in the minibus.***

In her opinion, the fainting was due to the excessive amounts of fertilisers and pesticides and her low blood pressure. ***Nonetheless, women regularly fainting in the crop fields have a relatively long history in anthropological literature and has been investigated as a form of 'resistance' to the violence experienced during work.*** In fact, Anna's episodes of fainting were similarly described 60 years ago by Ernesto de Martino who wrote about the tarantate (2009 [1961])<sup>37</sup>.

In short, the connection between psychological unease and physical manifestation has powerful cultural references and, although a direct link cannot be established between the two, it does not seem to be a coincidence that when Anna left agricultural labouring, in 2015, her episodes of fainting stopped.

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37. A term that define affected women with a form of convulsing and hysteric behaviour originating in Southern Italy, popularly believed to result from the bite of the wolf spider *Lycosa tarantula*.



## 4.2 The sexualised body

One of the most complex issues connected with women's working activities in Piana del Sele concerns the relationship with men.

***Promiscuity between men and women at the workplace, the isolation of labouring in the fields, work premises shared closely in the processing facilities, and long shifts and night shifts all result as being a problem primarily outside of work, i.e. at home.***

Based on what Fatima said, for instance, a large number of her arguments with her then-husband were directly caused by the fact that she used to work nights – something that, in his opinion, only prostitutes would do. And so, when Fatima returned home from the processing plant, she had to then put up with his scenes and violence.

***Men's control over women's bodies at work is expressed in a series of behaviours turned to for limiting interaction outside of the workplace as much as possible.***

Hayat, for example, told of how her then-partner would always be waiting for her at the end of her shift to take her home, so as to avoid her catching a lift with a co-worker.<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of the restrictions and forms of oppression, one clear fact emerges: these men still wanted their women to work during the day. This can be explained on the one hand by the attraction of the income but also – and above all – to exercise control over the woman's body and to know where she was and what she was doing during the day while he was working. While it emerged that women could have trouble at home caused by 'unanticipated' work arrangements (as in Fatima's case) or by interaction outside of work (as in Hayat's case), it should be pointed out that for most of the women I interviewed ***the workplace stood as a setting for more or less explicit sexual harassment.***

This excerpt from the interview with Fatima is very telling of the difficulties in working in a context that identifies a woman as a sexualised body.

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38. Interview, 29.09.2021.

A difficulty she acknowledged as one of the main reasons prompting her to change job:

**G. “Were you ever touched by anyone while you were working?”**

**F. “All the time. And all over. Both by the bosses and the other workers. The more foreign you are, the more they dare. This thing really bothers me and so I kicked up quite a fuss about it. They try it on. But I always fought against it. I never stayed silent over it. But it always happened. And this is one of the reasons why I changed job.”**

**G. “Was it only Italians doing it or Italians and Moroccans?”**

**F. “The Moroccans are the worst. But when they see that a woman reacts aggressively, they think twice before making a further move. They assess things a bit better. Instead, Italians really don’t care. They just try it on, bit by bit and relatively lightly. It’s because they feel at home”<sup>39</sup>.**

Fatima’s words bring into play a whole series of differentiating lines that women’s lives in Piana del Sele pivot on. In fact, the gender difference intersects very strongly with racialisation: the fact of being a foreign woman immediately traces back to a whole repertoire of colonial attitudes to the sexualised black body (Pesarini, 2020).

As Fatima pointed out, **“Italian men act as they please, because they feel at home”**.

Yet at the same time these words reveal a fundamental class structure: **the ‘master’, the ‘boss’, the employer often takes part in the work and, particularly at the processing premises, he can take advantage of his role of command to exercise his power on female bodies.**

Layla, for instance, confirmed that her employer had had relations with several of her female co-workers at the processing plant and he generally never missed the chance to make a smutty remark or touch women who worked there with her. He never touched her, she said, because he had known her since she was a child and treated her like a daughter. Furthermore, she seemed amused by her employer’s behaviour, labelling it as normal and commenting that, when it came down to it, he wasn’t doing anything wrong<sup>40</sup>.

**Women’s bodies are so open to mistreatment that in some cases they are literally ‘snatched away’ from men’s eyes.** As Anna referred, her female team leader always categorically refused to allow her all-women team to work with male teams: **“We never saw men, we had to keep our distance. I don’t know why she wanted it that way but that’s how it was”<sup>41</sup>.**

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39. Interview, 07.08.2021.

40. Interview 29.09.2021.

41. Interview, 28.09.2021.

## 4.3 Selling the body

The ways of exploiting women in a marginalised context such as the Piana del Sele one obviously involve women's sexualised bodies. Prostitution, even if not directly connected to the work in agriculture, marks the local area and has repercussions on migrant women.

***“She’s a madam. She works in the fields in the morning and takes people back to her place in the evening. Especially at the weekend. There are another two women at her place. Moroccan men go there, but Italians do too”<sup>42</sup>.***

These were the words used by Abdu to tell me about an acquaintance of his we had seen in the street: a Moroccan woman of nearly 60 who lived in the illegally built housing in the Campolongo ghetto. Prostitution has existed in Piana del Sele for decades and, until a few years ago, was evident mainly on the coast that stretches from the outskirts of Salerno as far as Paestum, on the western edge of the entire Piana del Sele plain from north to south. As narrated by a female anti-human-trafficking operator who has been working in the area for decades, the forms of prostitution have changed in recent years and, aggravated by Covid-19, there has been a sharp rise in the number of women working in the sex trade at home. This

form of prostitution is far more complex to detect and act upon. Instead, various women sell their bodies in other places (for example in the Agro Aversano area) and work in Piana del Sele. Many of the women brought under the care of the Piana del Sele anti-trafficking centre are of Nigerian origin: they arrived through the Mediterranean migration route at some point over the last 10 years and belong to an ethnic group with a history in the sex trade, alongside Eastern European women. However, as the anti-trafficking operator reported, even Muslim and Moroccan women have now ended up in these rackets.

When I mentioned the Moroccan madam during the interview with the anti-trafficking operator, she specified that madams too may be victims, quoting the following exchange between a madam and a girl during a court hearing: when the girl asked her, “Why did you do this to me?”, the madam replied, “Because that’s what happened to me too. It’s what happens to us women.”

Many of the women who end up in the exploitation and prostitution system start off as victims of trafficking, baited and brought to Italy with the promise of an acceptable job. Based on this attraction, these women and

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42. Field journal, 03.08.2021.

43. Interview, 11.09.2021.

their families invest a substantial sum or get into debt, but then once they arrive in Italy and the Piana del Sele area, they end up working off the books or semi-illicitly in the greenhouses. The violence of an area and a political-economic

system for managing places and bodies are, in this sense, 'engraved' on a woman's body in Piana del Sele. Nevertheless, this is a system in which even the most vulnerable subjects can introduce resilience practices or even direct protest.





**V.**

***Adapting,  
reacting and  
resisting  
exploitation***

## 5.1 Navigating systemic exploitation

***Piana del Sele is not in the national spotlight as far as labour exploitation is concerned. Local- and regional-level institutional rhetoric have long overshadowed the problems of an area that shows huge structural weak points.***

Recent years have seen experimentation with system-based approaches aimed at strengthening the current institutional presence locally. Numerous regional, national and European funds are mobilising professional skills and roles in the area with the aim of closing the huge gap between migrants living in this area and public services. Several positive results are beginning to emerge, in the form of facilities and services in the Piana del Sele nerve centres. Nonetheless, healing the wound created during decades of political and institutional absence takes years. This can be perceived in the answers to questions on union representation in the agricultural businesses: all the interviewed women – and some have been working here for over 20 years – said they had never seen a union assembly at their agricultural firms, and every time they had a problem to report they had to turn to unofficial or informal networks.

Their distrust of ‘institutional monitoring’ is clear in the words Jadia spoke when I asked if

there had ever been an inspection at the firm where she worked:

***“Once, before an inspection, the ‘master’ said to me, ‘if they ask, say you earn 50-something euros’. (...) I even signed that I would. I said nothing, so as not to lose my job. I had to earn my own living”<sup>45</sup>.***

Jadia’s words also reveal another issue affecting inspections in Piana del Sele: ***Employers can be warned in advance about these checks.***

Layla’s interview confirmed this practice: she explained that the girls who worked off the books did not turn up for work on inspection days since the employer was aware of the schedule. Nonetheless, it should be said that even if this practice was quite common until a few years ago, ***now it seems to be on the decline.*** Layla in fact added: ***“They’re scared now, so they no longer hire people without insurance”.***

***This is the effect of Article 603-bis of the Italian Criminal Code, on Gangmastering in Agriculture, which seems to be bearing its first fruits and ushering in better practices in the area.***

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45. The interviewee used a Piana del Sele dialect word to express the idea of ‘earn’ in the original interview in Italian.

## **5.2 Network actions against labour exploitation: the NoCap case**

The first Piana del Sele team of agricultural labourers in the NoCap network was formed in summer 2021. NoCap is a project fighting gangmastering in agriculture and involves a production-chain agreement between mass distribution, producers and labourers. The work in this network starts from the top, with the supermarket chains. The network proposes products to the mass distribution entities, based on relationships built up over time with farm businesses in the local area. Once the supermarket chain has approved the product, its price is set and the work necessary to selling the product is mapped out. This latter goes from agreeing volumes and prices, through to product graphics and positioning in the supermarket<sup>46</sup>.

These agreements are essential in that they mean a whole series of steps influencing product price can be skipped. The NoCap association acts as a direct go-between, thus avoiding contracts with wholesalers, reverse auctions, and a whole series of practices that reduce production profit margins – margin losses that the producers tend, in turn, to compensate for by cutting labour costs.

This type of focus on the product is found alongside that defined as the ‘social’ part

of the project, which involves hiring groups of labourers to join the company while also respecting the project rules.

NoCap turns to local partners for this ‘social’ part, and these pinpoint labourers experiencing conditions of labour exploitation and find accommodation for them to live in. Accommodation that gives these workers the chance to have fixed residency and avoid the illegal housing arrangements that feed the informal markets and exploitation practices such as the sale of false residency declarations.

What is most striking about this whole process is the project’s capacity to reach the heart of a company. The NoCap brand acquires ‘negotiation power’ in the relationship with the employer and manages to establish a balance of forces with the firm. In fact, the association manages to enter and be constantly present in the company, to speak to the labourers and to organise assemblies.

The social aspect of the project also means involving male and female workers in creating a training path with the aim of enabling these to become union representatives themselves and therefore defend their rights.

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46. Interview with Yvan Sagnet, NoCap network coordinator, 28.08.2021.

Lastly, the network has important repercussions for the local area. Since the project began, the minibus transporting labourers to Piana del Sele, calling at the various points to pick up the workers, has been stopped more than once by labourers asking about how to join the project. Word of mouth on the opportunity to have rights respected in agricultural labouring is showing its first effects, and it is hoped this can trigger positive chain reactions in the area.

If these social projects bring hope for future improvement to the area, it should nevertheless be remembered that gender issues are not central in this action.

The female labourers' daily resistance is, among other things, based on individual or shared resilience practices that stand as bottom-up action. Old and new practices that try to reinstate human dignity in work conditions that can sometimes be dehumanising.

## 5.3 Gender and women's agricultural labouring resilience

***“This is a symbol of exploitation for me,”*** Hayat explained, looking at a photo on WhatsApp. It is of ***an apron that Anna sewed for herself for working in Piana del Sele.*** She had been shown one by the older women who worked with her when she was still young, 30 years old. It was made from cloth or jeans and had two large back pockets for holding water, a ‘snack’ (this being a sandwich), and various objects that could be useful during the working day: paper tissues, sweets in case of low blood pressure, but also a little rake to make weeding between the plants in the fields easier<sup>47</sup>.

***Work apron created and used by the laborers of the Piana del Sele.***



46. See photo above



When looking at the apron, Hayat was stunned that ***the women working in the fields didn't even have time to stop and drink some water and had to carry everything they needed with them.***

Instead, Anna was proud of her apron that she had sewn for herself with much love and care: ***that garment gave her a modicum of agency***<sup>48</sup>, a form of distraction from the imposed intense work pace and an item creating a sense of commonality with the other working women.

Anna told me the older women had taught her ***a song the female agricultural labourers would begin to sing whenever there were problems at work*** (regarding working hours, pay, treatment by team leaders):

***“A’ sera e nott nott,  
O’ juorn quase e nott  
Lor aizano e palazz  
E nuje...”***<sup>49</sup>

She wouldn't tell me how the rhyme finished because she described it as 'vulgar', but this song illustrates a form of explicit resistance to exploitation by power-holders. As the interviewed women stated, practices such as these – from singing through to chattering – have become less common in more recent years.

***Their employers no longer want them to speak during work hours. Very little remains for the female labourers: lighting a fire to warm up or sneaking a quick cigarette in the greenhouse – small daily episodes of rule-breaking that give back just a glimmer of freedom in an increasingly alienating workplace.***

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48. Agency is a sociology concept discussed since the 1970s and indicates an individual's ability to act independently in specific situations and to make decisions.

49. “The evening has already shifted to the dead of night, the morning is still almost night, they are putting up buildings while we...”

## Conclusions

This report goes over female labourers' conditions in Piana del Sele from a gender standpoint and in relation to the agricultural production chain. The specific history of Piana del Sele has taken it to update from an area for growing and processing agricultural produce to being well-known in the ready-to-use sector. Women and their work play a central role in this context and yet they are as invisible as they are essential to the functioning of the agricultural enterprises.

As has been seen, the issues connected with the women's context hinge precisely on their gender. It is what determines the lower wages they are paid, the work tasks they are assigned and the specific illnesses they develop. But gender is also the key to reading the forms of oppression that they are subjected to outside of the workplace: thus work takes on an ambivalent role in as much that while being a space potentially standing as a stage for gender differences it is also a form of liberation from more violent male-dominated oppressive contexts.

Within this dialogue, agricultural labouring reveals its contradictions, its intensive work pace, its identity as an arena for negotiation with the local territory, and its capacity for inducing women (particularly foreign women)

to the area, considering that it is inextricably linked to residency permits and therefore to their institutional existence.

In any case, a somewhat despondent picture emerges: ***the widespread absence of institutional presences to overcome the local networks structured on formal and informal economies and to provide the bare essential of services*** (usually only in return for payment) ***needed by the female workers.***

This ***invisibility of the female workers***, of their biographical history and likewise of their worth in the Piana del Sele area constitutes an indubitable fracture in the social and symbolic space of the area. A fracture that should be reset as soon as possible. Many of the women I interviewed or came into contact with are mothers to children who are now adolescents in Italy. These women are the present and future of these lands, and yet their presence is constantly made invisible.

***Reinstating this presence and integrating it within the community in Piana del Sele*** stands as one of the largest challenges for these areas in the coming years. A challenge that will finally be met by institutions and local civil society, it is hoped.

## Intervention suggestions

In light of this report, in conjunction with WeWorld, and continuing with what has been observed in similar research conducted in the Agro Pontino area (Lazio region) within the project **Our Food Our Future** by the sociologist Marco Omizzolo, the following measures are recommended for the purposes of preventing and fighting human and labour exploitation in agriculture, of bringing this exploitation – particularly when involving women – to the surface, and of offering its victims adequate protection and social and labour inclusion:

- **greater presence by institutions in the areas marred by systematic exploitation**, with the setting up of permanent monitoring centres and forms of integration between the migrant and local populations;
- advocacy activities and pressure to **reorient Italian and European legislation to make it more inclusive regarding entry visas, asylum, residency permits and granting citizenship** – legal status cannot stand as a cause of exploitation;
- an **information and awareness campaign on male and female workers' rights** in the informal settlements and in areas at risk of exploitation, aiming to increase awareness and the instruments available to migrants to fight any form of marginalisation or exploitation;
- a **campaign on gender equality** targeting the entire population, including migrants;
- **full application of Italian Law n° 199 of 2016 to fight gangmastering**, starting out by making Rete del Lavoro Agricolo di Qualità (network for quality agricultural work) widespread throughout Italy;
- **raising companies' awareness** – also through sector associations – regarding the application of rights and existing laws as well as assistance for small-scale farming businesses in managing recruitment procedures for female and male immigrant workers in Italy;
- **strengthening job placement** centres to manage the waiting lists for requesting agricultural labourers;
- **establishing a coordination group** to offer accommodation to seasonal workers in a specific area as well as to provide health, social and legal assistance;
- **networking transport companies** in order to respond to agricultural labourers' needs;
- **strengthening inspections at workplaces**, including the formal identifying of victims of labour and gender exploitation, also incorporating support from adequately trained male and female cultural mediators;
- strengthening other points, also through management by tertiary-sector

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84. W. Chiaromonte, Sanatoria 2020 in stallo. Il Viminale fa un passo avanti (e due indietro), 12 maggio 2021, <https://www.labourlawcommunity.org/ricerca/sanatoria-2020-in-stallo-il-viminale-fa-un-passo-avanti-e-due-indietro/>

associations, in order to **flag potential victims** and for the subsequent coordination with the appropriate institutions;

- **offering a range of assistance and accompaniment services for exploitation victims** with the involvement of professional figures, diversified in relation to gender;
- **offering social and labour inclusion courses** in conjunction with social services so as to include victims of social and labour exploitation and practices;
- **strengthening local multi-stakeholder coordination** (involving institutions, unions, representatives for employers, representatives for migrants, tertiary sector and services entities) on fighting labour exploitation;
- **effective implementation of national laws** (Legislative Decree n° 198 of 2021) **to enforce EU Directive 2019/633 on unfair trading practices** in relations between enterprises in the agriculture and food production chain;
- **application of social conditionality** to respect human, labour and environmental rights in the agriculture and food production chain, as set out by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and introduction of all other Italian governmental incentives;
- **effective application of ILO Convention 190** to eliminate violence and harassment in the workplace, as ratified by Italy but that requires adequate measures to ensure its enforcement;
- **supporting a European system of fair-trade certification** for products in the food production, supply and distribution sector,

setting out from public knowledge of the source price for fruit and vegetable produce on sale and raising consumer awareness regarding transparency in the labour, production and distribution chain;

- **prompt passing of an effective EU law on due diligence for companies in regards to environmental and human rights** in order to make this binding throughout the entire production chain in the agriculture and food sector and to identify specific civil and administrative responsibilities in the event of infringement or non-compliance with this law by companies. Small- and medium-sized production enterprises cannot be excluded from such responsibilities, so as to avoid 'externalisation' of exploitation. SMEs should nevertheless be supported, also through incentives, in being able to upgrade their organisational and monitoring systems without posing risks to their own sustainability regarding all aspects of the company, including the financial one;
- prompt **extension in the application scope of the EU Taxonomy** (EU Regulation 2020/852) to also **include social goals**, in order to guarantee a holistic ESG (environmental, social and corporate governance) approach that is also congruent with international standards regarding responsible company conduct (e.g. UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises).

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