States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode 31 "Migrant Women, Care Work, and Italy's Broken Immigration System: A Conversation with Elena Bonetti"

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte – with the assistance of Andriana Lagoudes

Abstract: In this interview, former Italian Minister Elena Bonetti breaks down immigration policy in Italy—where migrant women fill vital domestic and eldercare roles but remain trapped in irregular work and legal limbo. Drawing on her experience under the Conte II and Draghi governments, Bonetti, who is currently a leading figure in the Renew Europe group in Parliament, reveals why Italy's *Decreto Flussi* is failing, how the Bossi-Fini Law still shapes migrant precarity, and what it would take to shift toward a more effective immigration policy. We discuss care work, demographic trends, the informal economy, and regularization programs.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: Why has Italy—a country deeply reliant on foreign care workers—struggled to formalize their status or integrate their families? And how do political agendas shape the visibility or invisibility of migrant women in national debates?

In this interview, I speak with Elena Bonetti, former Minister for Family and Equal Opportunities in Italy and now a leading figure in the Renew Europe group in Parliament. With a background in mathematics and a career that spans academia, civic engagement, and politics, she offers a rare perspective on how migration intersects with family policy amid institutional constraints, bureaucratic incentives, and political trade-offs.

Together, we explore several critical fault lines in Italy's migration governance:

Why has policy often prioritized labor market needs over family unity?

Why do migrant women dominate the domestic care sector yet remain legally marginalized?

And what do past regularization programs reveal about state capacity and political intent?

Drawing from her cabinet experience, Bonetti dissects how decisions are made—or avoided—at the highest levels of government.

Mrs. Bonetti, thank you very much for being with me today.

Elena Bonetti: Thank you. It's truly a pleasure to have this discussion with you. I believe the topic you're investigating is not only urgent but also strategic—not just for Italy, but for Europe as a whole and the broader international framework. The phenomenon of migration is deeply connected to other major transitions, such as the demographic shift and climate change, and it has profound implications for our societies.

I'm especially pleased to contribute from my perspective—not only as someone with a background in mathematical analysis, but also as someone now deeply engaged in legislative activities. Currently, I serve as President of the First Commission in the Italian Parliament, which is investigating the social and economic effects of the demographic transition. Immigration is one of the core issues under discussion in this commission.

Early Encounters with Immigration

Emmanuel Comte: Very interesting. How did you first encounter the issue of immigration in your career? When did it become a significant concern for you?

Elena Bonetti: That's a good question. Let me answer from both my political and pre-political experiences.

As a young professor of mathematical analysis, I quickly realized that immigration was already a tangible part of Italian society. I encountered many students whose names clearly indicated non-Italian origins, yet their education, culture, and spoken language were entirely Italian. These were children of immigrants—second-generation Italians. I taught at the Faculty of Engineering, and it felt entirely normal and positive to have such diversity in my classroom.

Additionally, I have long been involved in the Scout movement, which has a strong tradition of civic engagement. In that community, we held debates and organized events focused on social justice. There was a strong sense among young people that Italy needed laws enabling the regularization of immigrants and especially the granting of citizenship to youth who were born or raised in Italy. For them, this seemed natural and just. Yet, as you know, this remains an unresolved issue in Italy.

Later, during my time as Minister for Family and Equal Opportunities, immigration became central to several of my responsibilities. One of my key roles was combating discrimination. In Italy, the National Office Against Racial Discrimination (UNAR), which operates under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, leads these efforts.

Furthermore, when I developed policies for families and children, I had to recognize the reality that many of the families living in Italy are not formally recognized as citizens. They live in our communities, work, and send their children to school, yet they remain excluded from some legal frameworks. I made it a priority to ensure that the policies I introduced would also benefit these families. It was essential to write laws that reflected this demographic reality.

Labour vs. Family Migration Policy

Elena Bonetti: Italy is now in what I would describe—deliberately—as a dramatic situation regarding demography. My personal experience illustrates several key aspects of immigration policy.

First, we must fight discrimination and promote equal opportunities for all people living in Italy, regardless of their citizenship status.

Second, we need to implement policies that support integration and inclusion. Migrant families can play a crucial role in addressing our demographic challenges, especially in terms of education, skills development, and labor market participation.

And third, we must craft comprehensive policies that both combat irregular immigration and build a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society for Italy.

Emmanuel Comte: You first encountered the issue of immigration in an academic context, as a teacher, when you began to notice increasing diversity in terms of national and cultural backgrounds among your students. But you really began to engage with this issue more seriously once you entered politics. It became a part of your agenda—something you had to address.

In that political context, what was your impression of Italian immigration policy? More specifically, did you feel that the policies were oriented more toward labor-based migration or family-based migration? Family plays a central role in Italian society, after all.

Elena Bonetti: Currently, our legislation is mainly focused on labor migration. Immigration is regulated by the "Flow Decree" (*Decreto Flussi*), a law through which the government annually sets quotas for the number of migrants who can be legally regularized.

The problem is that Italian immigration law is not efficient or effective. It operates under the assumption that one cannot request a migrant to come to Italy without having already met or known that person. This approach essentially accepts irregular entry as the primary path for migrants to come to Italy, after which they can request regularization. This system is fundamentally flawed.

As a result, we are dealing with a high number of irregular migrants and undocumented residents. The real question is why Italian policymakers haven't reformed this law. I served in two governments, and neither had the opportunity to revise it.

Public debate around migration in Italy tends to conflate the issue with concerns about security and crime. Fear of migrants has become a powerful tool used by ideological and populist movements. However, on the other hand, many businesses and labor market stakeholders are asking for more migrants—specifically, qualified workers—and for more efficient, less bureaucratic immigration procedures.

The challenge is reconciling these two demands. On one side, companies need labor and are actively seeking migrants to fill workforce gaps. On the other, politicians—particularly some from populist factions—continue to associate increased migration with rising crime and social instability.

I truly believe that the current legislative framework lacks sufficient attention to family-based migration. I think we should reorganize our laws to also consider family reunification. This would allow us to better respond to integration needs and help local governments support social cohesion. When people are not integrated—when they are isolated and vulnerable—they are more likely to be excluded from community life, which in turn increases their risk of becoming involved in illegal activities.

Emmanuel Comte: To clarify, you're saying that there is a strong fear among the public regarding immigration, particularly involving young men who are often isolated. Some may have networks, but they typically do not come with their families. Additionally, many have arrived irregularly.

At the same time, employers are putting pressure on the authorities—not necessarily to recruit workers abroad—but rather to provide documentation and work permits for migrants who are already present in Italy, so they can meet labor market demands.

You also mentioned that the current legislation is still heavily influenced by the *Bossi-Fini Law*. Is that correct?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, that's correct.

Emmanuel Comte: Could you clarify what this law actually states, and why it continues to be influential?

Elena Bonetti: Sure. To explain it simply, the law assumes that the government sets a fixed number of migrants allowed each year. For example, it might declare that we need 100,000 or 500,000 migrants in a given year.

Following the decree, there is a specific day when companies—say, my family's business or any other—can apply for a set number of migrant workers. Employers must register the names of the individuals they intend to hire on a designated platform, requesting their regularization.

Once the request is submitted, the Ministry evaluates it and provides either approval or denial. If approved, the employer is allowed to legally hire the migrant, who can then enter Italy through a regularized process.

However, this process is largely theoretical. In reality, what often happens is that the migrant is already working informally—off the books—for the employer. When the designated day arrives, the employer then submits their name to the platform. If approved, the migrant becomes regularized.

This system is inefficient. It essentially promises that people can arrive in Italy and be regularized if they have employment. Afterward, they can apply to bring their family members as well.

Emmanuel Comte: So, if I understood correctly, the legislation strongly links immigration to employment?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: So, it's also a way to ensure integration—by guaranteeing that migrants have jobs and don't enter the country without clear employment prospects. But what you're pointing out is that this system is unrealistic. In practice, employers first want to know the person before going through the paperwork.

Elena Bonetti: Exactly. And it's not just about knowing the person. Many companies need workers with specific skills. That's why several companies have created positive experiences by training future employees—migrants or refugees—before officially hiring them. Once these individuals have acquired the necessary skills, the companies proceed with their employment and regularization.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. Now I also understand more clearly the point you made earlier—that employers in Italy today are often the ones initiating immigration processes. This happens when they want to regularize someone already working for them informally. It seems that the number of such requests has been increasing recently.

So that's essentially how the mechanism works. Interesting.

The Situation of Immigrant Families

Emmanuel Comte: Let's now turn to your core area of expertise: families. Let me ask you first, how do you see the situation of immigrant families in Italy today? Specifically, what challenges do women and children face? I know there's a lot of diversity in these cases, but could you give us a comprehensive overview?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, of course. It's a complex issue, but let me start with a key point. Immigrant families in Italy often find themselves at the lowest end of the socio-economic spectrum. This is frequently due to only one parent, typically the father, being employed. Many of these families have limited or no extended family support networks, which exacerbates their financial struggles.

If a mother has children and wants to work, she needs access to adequate childcare services. Unfortunately, in many parts of Italy, such services are lacking. There's also insufficient support from local communities or social networks. In today's Italy, living on a single income often means living in poverty—especially if the job is low-paying, which is commonly the case for migrant workers.

Another major issue is integration. Language is fundamental. The first step toward integrating immigrant families is ensuring that both men and women speak Italian. However, in some migrant cultures, women are expected to remain at home and have limited contact with others. This leads to isolation.

There are many cases where communication between a mother and her child's teacher is mediated by the child themselves. This dynamic alters the structure of authority within families and is something we need to address.

Italy lacks sufficient policies to support the integration of women into society, especially in the labor market. In general, we face challenges in promoting female participation in the workforce, and these challenges are even more severe for migrant women.

In many schools—particularly in smaller towns or certain neighborhoods—we now see more children of foreign origin than Italian ones. We need to increase the number of teachers who are specifically trained to support the integration of these children, not only in terms of language but also by building stronger connections between families and the broader society.

Civil society plays a vital role here. There are many valuable and effective initiatives led by community organizations. While many are Catholic, such as Caritas, others are secular or interfaith. Their work with immigrant communities has been incredibly impactful.

Another key issue is citizenship. Currently, the debate around *jus scholae*—or *jus culturae*, as it is sometimes called—is resurfacing. This concept would allow children who complete a cycle of education in Italy to gain citizenship before turning 18. It's an important step for integration.

These children live in Italy, speak Italian, and feel like part of our classrooms. Yet they don't have the same rights as their peers. This disconnect affects their psychological well-being. They often feel like foreigners in their own country, and that's troubling.

By recognizing their place in Italian society through citizenship, we not only support their development but also benefit the nation as a whole. Italy needs immigrants—not only to maintain but to improve the size and quality of our workforce. Without this, our economic system is unsustainable, especially when you consider the low birth rate and the growing proportion of elderly people in the population.

Emmanuel Comte: Here, we're focusing on migrants from lower-income countries. We're not referring to European migrants in Italy, for example. The challenges these families face—as you've just outlined— can be grouped into three main areas.

First, access to childcare, which is essential for enabling both parents to work and become a two-income household. Second, the language barrier, which is related to the first point—some family members do not speak Italian. And third, the issue of children accessing Italian citizenship.

I understand these are significant challenges. As a result, some migrants choose to send only one family member abroad—usually the primary breadwinner—while the rest of the

family remains in their home country. Historically, Italians did the same: the man would emigrate, and send remittances back home.

But now, for migrant families who come to Italy together, these challenges persist.

Social Benefits and Integration Efforts

Emmanuel Comte: I'm wondering: does Italian legislation provide any specific benefits for families when they arrive in Italy?

Elena Bonetti: Generally speaking, the legislation does not specifically target these challenges. However, there are some forms of assistance—such as Italian language courses—that are typically provided by civil society organizations or local municipalities, rather than the state itself.

That said, families living legally in Italy do have access to certain benefits. For instance, one of the measures I introduced is a monthly child allowance for families with children – *assegno unico universale*.

It's a monthly allowance provided by the state to families with children. It's a universal benefit, available to all families legally residing in Italy. To be eligible, you must have lived in Italy for at least two years—not necessarily consecutively. For example, you could live here for one year, leave, and then return for another year.

Alternatively, if a family has a job contract in Italy that lasts at least six months, they are also eligible. This applies to both Italian and migrant families. In fact, for migrant families with lower incomes, the benefit is even more substantial.

We have data showing that this measure has had a significant economic impact on such families.

Emmanuel Comte: So, it's a progressive allowance that decreases as the family's income increases. Do you recall the maximum amount for the lowest-income families?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, I do. For families with one child, the amount is about €200 per month. For two children, it's approximately €400.

Emmanuel Comte: That's per month?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, monthly.

Emmanuel Comte: That's quite significant.

Elena Bonetti: Indeed. For a family with three children, the benefit amounts to roughly €700–800 per month. The exact figure may vary slightly due to inflation adjustments. But for the lowest-income brackets, that's the approximate range.

Migrant Women and Irregular Domestic Work

Emmanuel Comte: Let's turn to the topic of employment—specifically, migrant women. My understanding is that many low-income migrant women work in domestic care. Can you confirm this?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, that's correct. While I can't say it's the majority, a large number of women work in domestic care. In fact, domestic work was a major reason many women migrated to Italy in previous years, particularly to care for elderly people.

Emmanuel Comte: So, although we don't have exact statistics, it's clear this sector employs many migrant women. They often provide elder care and also perform household duties like cleaning. It's also my understanding that many of these jobs are held irregularly, meaning they are not officially registered. Do you confirm that?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, unfortunately that's true. We do have reports on this. It's estimated that in the coming years, there will be a need for about one million workers to provide elder care for Italian families.

This is a critical issue. But let me emphasize that the problem isn't just about the migrant women and their status. It's more about the employment framework. In these cases, the family essentially acts as the employer, like a small business.

The real challenge lies in the high cost of employing someone legally. If we want to support regular employment and protect these workers, we need to find ways to reduce the cost burden on families so they can hire caregivers legally and sustainably.

Emmanuel Comte: Are you referring to the cost? Do you mean the overall cost for families?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, because families not only have to pay the salary but also the contributions and numerous taxes. There is a significant fiscal gap between the salary an employee receives and what the family pays.

We need to reduce this burden. For example, if you hire someone—whether a woman or a man—to care for your elderly parents living with you, or to look after your children at home as a babysitter, we should consider excluding this part of your household income from taxation. This would be a fiscal incentive to lower the cost of hiring domestic workers.

So, the core issue is not primarily immigration; it's the high cost of labor for families due to the current tax system.

Emmanuel Comte: I understand. So many families prefer to hire workers informally to avoid paying social security contributions, taxes, and so on.

Elena Bonetti: Exactly. Migrant workers are often preferred because, in some cases, employing a woman formally may reduce the family's eligibility for certain social benefits. In Italy, to increase employment—especially among women—we should ensure that having a job doesn't lead to a reduction in social benefits. In fact, it should either maintain or increase them.

For instance, when I was in government, we introduced a policy that provided higher child benefits to families where both parents work. The idea was to recognize the extra costs, such as paying for after-school services, that arise when both parents are employed.

Emmanuel Comte: So, this also encourages workers to formally declare their employment to access these benefits.

Elena Bonetti: Yes, exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: So the issue of irregular domestic work is closely tied to the financial burden placed on employers.

Elena Bonetti: Yes, I believe that is the main issue.

Why Regularization Fails

Emmanuel Comte: Italy is known for having one of the largest informal labor markets in Europe. Domestic work is a significant part of this so-called "black market." You mentioned earlier the idea of post-hoc regularization for migrants—where people arrive, begin working informally, and later seek to regularize their status once their relationship with an employer is more stable. What is your opinion on how these regularization programs have worked in Italy?

Some critics argue that they create an incentive for migrants to come irregularly, knowing they might eventually be regularized. What's your take on that?

Elena Bonetti: I don't think these programs have been effective. For example, in 2020, while I was in government, we passed a law to regularize foreign nationals residing in Italy. This initiative was later extended in subsequent years.

However, the outcome was that only a small portion of irregular workers were actually regularized. The others continued working without paying taxes, which isn't beneficial for the broader economic system.

These policies are often driven by ideological motives to contain irregular migration, but in practice, they produce the opposite effect. They incentivize irregularity without delivering the benefits of formal employment.

We need a complete paradigm shift. The current approach is inefficient—not only in terms of economics but also administratively. For instance, we have only one "click day" when employers can apply to regularize workers. This bureaucratic bottleneck leaves many workers excluded from the process, even though they remain in Italy and continue working irregularly.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that everyone who arrives in Italy should automatically be allowed to stay. However, if a migrant comes to Italy and finds work, I believe not only do they have the right to stay, but it's also in Italy's best interest that they do. We currently have labor shortages across many sectors, and the projections for the future are even more concerning.

The ability to stabilize your legal status in Italy is generally tied to employment. However, there's also the possibility of staying in Italy as a refugee, which is a separate issue and subject to different regulations.

The current mechanism is ineffective. While a small number of people are regularized through official channels, a much larger number remain in the country working in the informal sector—without paying taxes or having access to social protections such as healthcare or labor insurance.

This is the core problem, and from my political standpoint, the mechanism itself must be reformed.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. I'm just trying to clearly understand the issue. So the "Decreto Flussi" only allows a subset of all irregular migrant workers to be regularized?

Elena Bonetti: Exactly. There are a few pathways for regularization. For instance, this year the government announced an opportunity to regularize a limited number of irregular migrants—around 100,000 people.

Then there's the ordinary annual quota system, which sets a fixed number of migrants allowed to enter Italy for work. But in reality, many of these migrants are already in Italy. So in practice, this becomes a form of regularization for those already living here.

Emmanuel Comte: So these two channels serve the same practical purpose?

Elena Bonetti: Yes, essentially.

Emmanuel Comte: Regarding the first channel—the formal regularization route—when the government says, for example, 20,000 people can be regularized in a given year, what are the conditions for that?

Elena Bonetti: That depends on the government's decision, as it's not established through a structural legal framework. For example, in 2020, the majority of people who were regularized were working in domestic labor—not in agriculture, even though many irregular migrant workers are employed in that sector.

Emmanuel Comte: And what's your view on how this system should change? What would you propose?

Elena Bonetti: I believe we shouldn't just fix a rigid number of workers. The labor market is dynamic, and the state cannot accurately predetermine how many workers it will need.

If a company wants to hire someone—after appropriate training and selection—the system should allow that person to regularize their status. In other words, if someone has a stable job in Italy, they should be able to stay legally.

We also need separate, well-designed policies for refugees and for the broader integration of migrants. But the fundamental principle should be: if you work in Italy, you are regular in Italy.

Emmanuel Comte: So this would be an alternative to the current system, where quotas are often allocated somewhat arbitrarily. Your proposal would be more automatic, more responsive to actual conditions.

Elena Bonetti: Exactly—more automatic, less bureaucratic, and more aligned with the needs of companies.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, that's interesting. I think behind many of these difficulties lies an effort by some Italian policymakers to control and slow down immigration. This often leads to unintended consequences and confusion—for both migrants and their employers.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Comte: This has been a very insightful conversation.

Elena Bonetti: If you need any data for your research or additional information, feel free to reach out. I can also send you some reports.

We have a lot of valuable data about migrant presence in Italy, including their contribution to GDP, employment statistics, and other relevant areas. If there's anything I can do to help, it would be a pleasure.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you again, Minister Bonetti. This was a very enriching conversation. Before we conclude, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Elena Bonetti: No, I think we've covered everything. Thank you.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you so much.