



International
Labour
Office

Promoting integration for migrant domestic workers in Italy

Executive Summary



FIERI – International and
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on Immigration



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THE CASE OF ITALY

The **domestic sector's labour market** has experienced considerable growth in Italy since the 1970s. From 1994 to 2011 a more than four-fold increase in the number of workers – Italians and foreigners – has been registered (from 186,214 to 881,702), with a clear exponential expansion of the sector. While the number of Italians has increased very slightly – from 133,963 workers in 1994 to 173,870 in 2011 (+22.9%) – the number of migrant workers during the same period has increased from 52,251 to 707,832 (+92.6%), which represents 80 per cent of the total number of workers in the sector in 2011¹. Domestic work in particular has become the **main sector of employment for migrant women** in Italy over the past decade, with more than one in two foreign women (51.3%) employed as a domestic worker or family assistant in 2011².

This phenomenon has been driven by the confluence of a **number of processes**: a quickly ageing population (with one the highest rates in the world of people over the age of 65); an increase in female participation in the labour market; the persistence of rigid patterns of gendered labour division in households; and a public welfare budget heavily skewed in favour of monetary transfers (especially old age and survivor pensions) to the detriment of welfare services in support of families.

On the other hand, it has been shown that some **migratory systems** have emerged which are strictly connected to the demand for domestic labour in Italy and which encourage individuals to migrate and look for a job in this sector of the labour market. **Immigration policies**, both through the regular admission system (i.e. annual quotas) and recurrent regularizations, have largely sustained this growth by making the **domestic sector** one of the **major entry points** into the Italian labour market.

However, although these migratory systems are directly linked to the labour demand for domestic work, they are not the only channels of entry into this sector. A significant proportion of workers, mainly women, arrived in Italy through migratory paths that were not intentionally aimed at such an outcome but found limited options to work outside the domestic sector, with an evident **de-skilling and segregation** effect.

Vis-à-vis the crisis of traditional informal care systems and the inadequacy of national welfare services, foreign workers have been progressively and significantly joining this sector. By providing housekeeping and care services to Italian households, they have **become one**

1 INPS. (2011). IV Rapporto sui lavoratori di origine immigrata negli archivi INPS. La regolarità del lavoro come fattore di integrazione. Roma, INPS - IDOS - Dossier Statistico Immigrazione Caritas/Migrantes.

2 CNEL. (2012). Il ruolo degli immigrati nel mercato del lavoro italiano, ONC-CNEL, Roma.

of the major pillars of the Italian welfare system. Despite the economic downturn of recent years which has affected migrant participation in the labour market in Italy, the **domestic sector has remained largely unaffected by the dramatic rise of unemployment** observed elsewhere. The employment of domestic workers has continued to grow, though at a slower pace than before: a slight decrease in the number of migrant domestic workers (-5.2%) has only been observed between 2010 and 2011.

Although migration and labour trajectories of migrants are very diverse due to individual characteristics, strategies and the collective resources that they mobilize in the given social, economic and political “opportunity structure”, **some common patterns of labour market integration in the personal and household services sector** can be highlighted.

Biographies of interviewed migrants highlight that, **as a first step, most newcomers** who are already the most socially, economically and legally vulnerable of all migrant groups **enter the domestic labour market into** the most labour-intensive and sensitive segment of domestic work with the lowest pay and worst working conditions, namely, **live-in assistance to elderly or disabled people.** Such a paradox highlights a **double vulnerability: of migrant domestic workers**, with regard to their legal status and to their economic and social weakness; and of their **employers**, especially in households and families in the low-middle strata of Italian society for whom the (irregular) employment of migrant domestic workers to care for dependent elderly or disabled people is often the only possible option. Furthermore, employers are often scarcely aware of their duties towards



their employees and tend to consider them more as a substitute for family members than as proper workers. The current economic crisis, and its negative effects on public budgets, is further deteriorating this already discouraging situation. According to reports by key stakeholders at the local level, the drastic cuts imposed on social policy funds are leaving many households without any form of monetary support which is affecting households that are already hit by hard economic problems. As a consequence of these developments new coping strategies are being elaborated: undeclared employment is on the rise, and a reduction of working hours for family assistants is observed.

At a later stage, live-in work continues to be an active choice for some interviewees after the first entry into the labour market, as it is functional to short-term migratory projects and to maximizing incomes with a view to achieving predetermined goals (for example, the education of children, repayment of debts in the origin country, etc.). However, **most migrant workers try to move to live-out domestic work** as soon as it is feasible. As noted above, co-residence in particular imposes unfavorable working and living conditions and the exit from this segment of the domestic industry primarily takes place in relation to the need to avoid isolation and loneliness and to **be released from the dynamics of dependency and isolation** that characterize the regime of co-residency.

In the experience of the respondents, an overall **process of empowerment** can also be observed during their stay in Italy and their experience in the domestic sector. Through the **acquisition of a regular status and a regular job-contract**, the development of **skills and qualifications, participation in training courses, access to diverse and larger social networks** as well as **access to information**, migrant domestic workers in Italy demonstrate that they progressively gain knowledge of the functioning of the sector and of their own rights as domestic workers. They become increasingly able to define their own paths and better **assert their agency, rejecting exploitative working conditions** and **making working and personal life choices according to their own preferences and needs**.

Nevertheless, even if they attain regular status – either through one of the recurrent regularization campaigns or through the official quota system – migrant (domestic) workers still find themselves in a vulnerable position due to the close linkage between migration and employment status. Because the loss of their job may throw them back into irregularity, many migrant workers are more prone to accepting low-paid jobs and to bearing exploitative working conditions.

Furthermore, a **trade-off emerges between the multi-tasking nature of domestic work within households and the professionalization of workers in this sector**. According to the national collective bargaining agreement, trained and specialized domestic workers with a regular contract who assist dependent elderly people – particularly those suffering from serious physical and neurological problems – are not expected to perform basic everyday activities. However, families usually expect domestic employees to perform such activities, as the employment of an additional household assistant for more general

and unskilled tasks, such as cleaning the house, ironing, etc., would be hardly sustainable. More generally, the professionalization of domestic workers implies a rise in their labour costs, which is difficult to bear for most households that employ them.

At the same time migrant domestic workers who become more assertive and claim their rights may jeopardize the relationship between workers and employers. This is particularly so if it is considered that growth in this key economic sector has only been possible at the expense of keeping labour and social security standards at a poor level and that the progressive participation of the foreign workforce (which tends to be cheaper and easier to hire irregularly and to employ with lower working conditions) has been one of the preconditions that has made this possible.

However, some foreign domestic migrants, mainly women, stand out for their increasingly prominent role in the domestic sector as an outcome of such process of empowerment and the acquisition of rights' awareness. On the basis of their own professional path and thanks to their human capital and organizational skills, they decide to create **associations to support their co-nationals** or to **engage in already existing organizations that deal with workers or migrants' rights**, such as civil society organizations, unions, etc. These figures are representative of a process of an **increasing voice and emerging representativeness of migrant workers** in this sector who become a "**rights' mediator**" between workers and employers and public interlocutors.

Among institutions that support domestic workers, the 'traditional' trade unions and associations tend to be less effective in becoming a reference point for workers in relation to the defense of their rights. The main reason seems to be the migrants' lack of 'trust' in the goodwill of labour organizations that are frequently perceived as taking the side of the Italian families. This is also often reinforced by the fact that many associations, cooperatives and agencies – which are often close to the Catholic Church – defend an attitude of service and submission of the worker in the care sector and do not promote a working relationship based on reciprocity and equal dignity, i.e. by advising workers not to complain or take action to claim their rights. Relations with service providers targeted at domestic work seem to be perceived as being closer to the specific needs of migrant domestic workers.

The highlighted process of labour market integration in the domestic sector of migrant workers contributes to drawing attention to the **interconnection between immigration, welfare and labour regimes** in the Italian context. Immigration policies implemented to date have placed migrant domestic workers in a weak position, related to the precariousness of their status, while providing a vast labour supply to fill existing shortages in the sector. Inadequate welfare policies, especially in the field of long-term care, have made the recourse to domestic services provided by migrant workers the only viable solution for a wide number of households in order to cope with the deficiencies of the Italian familialistic welfare regime. The weaker labour and social security standards imposed by labour law in the domestic sector together with the scarce role of labour inspection and the inadequate

recognition and enhancement of professional skills in the domestic sector help to explain the continuing viability of the “domestic worker solution”.

At first sight, such a “**domestic worker solution**” may appear to be a win-win-win solution whereby many migrant workers are able to secure jobs in a high demand sector, Italian households can meet their huge care needs at a relatively low cost, and the Italian State may save a tremendous amount of public resources that would otherwise be needed for the provision of alternative solutions to the reform of the welfare state. However, this “**low-cost**” solution implies very bad working conditions for a large number of migrant women and negatively affects their socio-economic integration. Furthermore, it is barely sustainable in the long run and needs to be thoroughly questioned. The steady process of an ageing population will continue and care needs will increase exponentially. At the same time a considerable number of migrant workers, including domestic workers, will soon become potential welfare users themselves, without meeting the established criteria in terms of social contributions. Furthermore, the expectation of continuing inflows from abroad of a malleable and abundant workforce for the domestic sector is far from being certain.

As many of the stakeholders consulted have stressed, there is an urgent **need for public institutions to return to the management and provision of long-term care services** and, more generally, to design social policies that could help Italian households to cope with their care needs in many realms. Even though a discussion of structural and comprehensive reforms of the immigration, welfare and labour regimes goes beyond the scope of this report, it is possible to identify policy measures that could provide a solution to some of the more problematic issues that have emerged from this research. In particular on the employers’ side, a careful **use of the fiscal leverage** could contribute to reducing the burden of labour costs for a number of households that employ domestic workers while at the same time decreasing the rate of undeclared employment in the sector. **Tutoring and information services for households** that are willing to employ domestic workers could indirectly contribute to the enhancement of working conditions and to the protection of the rights of migrant domestic workers. On the workers’ side, **processes for the self-organization of domestic workers** that allow them to raise awareness and enhance knowledge of labour and social rights **should be supported and accompanied**. The opening up of **new legal avenues for job-seekers’ admission**, carefully counterbalanced by effective monitoring mechanisms, could enhance the effectiveness of job-matching mechanisms in the domestic sector and reduce the space for irregular migration. **Granting the social rights portability and** eliminating norms that impede the recovery of paid social contributions, even in case of the migrant worker’s return before the age of 65, could finally reduce existing incentives to irregular and undeclared employment.

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