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Characteristics, working and living conditions of migrant female domestic and care workers in Europe: a cross-country comparative approach

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Short abstract (200 words)

Many ageing European societies are experiencing a growing demand for personal and household services (PHS). Given native-born workers do not satisfy this growing demand, foreigners play a decisive role: formal care migrant workers are overrepresented in most European countries. Among them, single aged breadwinner women became the perfect candidates for occupying this occupational position which, however, observes significant shortages as it is characterized often by low salaries, poor working conditions, limited professional development opportunities, and high staff turnover rates. In many European countries, employment in the PHS is poorly regulated, depriving workers of labour and social protections. This lack of regulatory framework further contributes to the vulnerability and isolation of domestic and care workers. Using the *ad-hoc* module of the EU Labour Force Survey (2021) which oversampling of the foreign population, we aim to analyse migrants' working and living conditions in different European contexts by using a cross-country comparative approach. Descriptive results highlight that, according to the literature, migrant women workers employed in the PHS have different socio-demographic profile respect to the other average working foreign-born and native-born groups. Moreover, multivariate analyses show that they often find themselves in more unfavourable working and living conditions which make them more vulnerable.

Extended abstract (2-4 pages)

Introduction

The population aging, affecting European nations, combined with the ever-increasing influx of women into the labor market, has triggered a progressive surge in the demand for personal and household services (since now only PHS), particularly for the elderly people (Shutes, 2012). The sector represents 9.5 million jobs, or 4% of total employment (EU-27 average). Given native-born domestic and care workers do not satisfy this growing demand, foreigners play a decisive role. Most European countries highlight that women and migrants dominate the PHS sector, including Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, and Italy among the others. Thus, their working and living conditions are under debate. However, a notable dearth of specific studies exists concerning these issues, as well as comparative quantitative analyses of their characteristics (Van Hooren, 2012; Kupets, 2016). This can be attributed to the challenge of obtaining representative sample sizes given the relatively small scale of this workforce. Nonetheless, such analyses are essential due to the significant role these workers play in European societies in order to identify barriers preventing full integration and to define suitable actions to promote inclusion (Reyneri, 2017).

Our goal is to partially fill this knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive understanding of labour market dynamics and valuable insights into figure out the working and living conditions of foreign workers in the PHS within different European contexts. In particular, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: In Europe, do domestic and care workers have specific socio-demographic characteristics?

RQ2: In Europe, do domestic and care workers suffer more unfavourable occupational conditions than the other workers?

Focusing on women and by using a cross-country comparative approach, the contribute aims to provide a comprehensive description of the specific individual characteristics of PHS female workers comparing foreigners with their native counterparts enrolled in personal and household services, and with other foreign female workers employed in other sectors. Performing logistic regression models, it aims to delve into their employment-related characteristics (part-time job, overeducation, underemployment, and job satisfaction), and into their living conditions (isolation) determining the extent to which they face heightened risks in these domains more than the other workers, net to selected confounding characteristics.

Theoretical focus

The PHS are precarious works, characterized often by low salaries, poor working conditions, limited professional development opportunities, and high staff turnover rates (Fullin and Reyneri, 2011). Moreover, and care domestic work is often carried out in the informal market, rendering workers powerless against their employers who fail to acknowledge the rights, neglect accident insurance coverage and social security (Marchetti, 2022). In many European countries, employment in the PHS is poorly regulated, depriving workers of labour and social protections. This lack of regulatory framework further contributes to the vulnerability and isolation of domestic and care workers, exacerbating the challenges they face in this sector.

In the context of migrant domestic and care work studies, it is crucial to consider the disparities among migrant domestic and care workers arising from differences in migratory background, age, education, and other factors, which impact their work experiences in varying ways. (Marchetti, 2022).

The main challenge lies with foreign women employed in the PHS, as they face a triple penalization due to their foreign status, occupation as domestic and/or care workers, and gender (Fernández and Masague, 2008). The feminist approach that considers the intersection of differences has gained significance in social sciences in recent decades. In terms of employment characteristics, migrant women in the PHS often find themselves in unfavorable work conditions compared to other categories of workers (Shutes, 2012; Van Hooren, 2012). This approach calls for avoiding homogeneous views of people's experiences and seeking a deeper understanding of commonalities or real differences among them.

The existing literature underscores the challenges faced by foreign workers, including those employed in the PHS, who confront penalized occupational conditions, with overeducation being a prominent issue (Lindley, 2009; Buonomo, Gabrielli and Strozza, 2020). Ensuring the full utilization of individuals' capacities is not only important for their personal well-being but also crucial for addressing the macroeconomic challenge of underutilized labor force. However, despite the increasing reliance on migrant labor in European economies, achieving comprehensive labor market integration and effectively leveraging

the skills of this group, particularly migrant women, who demonstrate significant underqualification compared to native-born women, remains an ongoing and pressing challenge (Akgüç and Parasnis, 2019).

An additional aspect of particular interest revolves around the perceived underemployment among women workers employed in the PHS, particularly those who are foreign nationals (Fullin and Reyneri, 2011). The question arises as to whether these women aspire to work more hours than they currently do and, consequently, whether they are more inclined to accept part-time employment. This raises the hypothesis that they may be exposed to higher risks of underemployment, as they could find themselves in a situation where they are unable to fulfil their career aspirations due to the constraints associated with part-time work. This notion underscores the complex dynamics at play, highlighting the potential discrepancy between their desired employment conditions and the prevailing circumstances that may limit their ability to fully utilize their skills and qualifications.

An aspect of significant relevance is represented by ethnic penalty, a phenomenon that affects foreign workers. This form of ethnic discrimination, as showed by Avola (2014), increases in particular the vulnerability of migrant domestic and care female workers compared to their native-born counterparts. Ethnic discrimination creates additional obstacles and difficulties for these categories of workers, exposing them to greater risks of exploitation and precarious working conditions (Paterno et al., 2016; Salaris and Tedesco, 2020).

Data and methods

We used data coming from the EU labour force survey 2021 (EU-LFS 2021) which includes ad-hoc module on the "Labor market situation of immigrants and their immediate descendants" which oversampling of the foreign population. The main target group includes women aged 20-64 years at interview. These data provide extensive information on the occupational status of the interviewees, considering various socio-economic, demographic, and territorial characteristics. A key advantage of these data is their representative nature, achieved through oversampling the foreign population, enabling accurate comparisons between individuals with and without a migratory background.

The definition of PHS in the framework of the employment package (European Commission, 2012) cover jobs and services carried out to support care and non-care activities: childcare, assistance to the elderly, dependent or disabled, excluding healthcare, cleaning, laundry, meal preparation, gardening, small house repairs and private lessons[1].

However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. Firstly, the data are cross-sectional and do not allow for a longitudinal or panel data analysis. Additionally, they pertain exclusively to legally resident foreign citizens. As a result, the survey "observes" a specific segment of the labour market that is characterized by greater stability in terms of residence and employment. It is crucial to consider this aspect when interpreting the obtained results.

Considering different European countries (according to the available data) and through a descriptive comparative perspective based on place of birth and employment sector, we will examine some socio-demographic characteristics of female workers. These include the age-class at interview (20-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64) the self-declared level of education (lower secondary or less, upper secondary, tertiary), and the urban area of residence (city, town or sub-urban area, rural area). Focusing on foreigners, we also consider the area of birth, years of residence in the European destination country.

Subsequently, we conduct five different multivariate logistic analyses to assess the unfavourable/favourable working and living conditions of workers by occupational sectors (PHS and other) and by birthplace (native-born and born abroad), considering as control variables the cited socio-demographic characteristics to edge against compositional effects. In particular, we examine, through the predicted probabilities, the following employment-related dependent variables: part-time job (1 if the respondent works part-time and 0 otherwise), overeducation (it measures the difference between the profession -ISCO-08- and the educational level of workers -ISCED-97-), isolation (1 if the respondent is single adult in the household and 0 if she is in couple with or without children, or cohabiting with other people), perceived underemployment (1 if the respondent desires to work more hours than the current ones

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[1] According to the 3-digit codes of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) available in EU-LFS 2021, we considered the PHS workers: housekeepers (code 515), personal care workers (531 and 532), domestic, cleaners and helpers (911).

and 0 otherwise), and job unsatisfaction (considering the nominal variable on self-perceived satisfaction from 1 to 4, it assumes value 0 if respondent is satisfied to large extent, and 1 otherwise).

First preliminary results

The first preliminary results here presented focus on Italy and Spain, two Southern-European countries characterized by similar migrants' labor market characteristics: high employment outcomes counterbalanced by very difficult labour market insertion in terms of irregular working conditions, unfavorable occupational contracts, limited upward mobility, over-education dynamics (Ribas-Mateos, 2004; King and DeBono, 2013). Similar analyses will be conducted for other West European countries in a cross-country comparative approach.

The sample size of EU-LFS 2021 includes 35,482 and 27,919 women aged 20-64 years at interview respectively in Italy and Spain. Among them, the PHS workers in Italy are respectively 5.6% among native-born and 23.2% among foreign-born. The same percentages are respectively 10.2% and 19.2% in Spain.

Considering female workers only and regardless of their place of birth, women in the PHS tend to be, on average, older than those working in other sectors both in Italy and in Spain (Table 1). In Italy, the PHS foreign workers have higher percentages of upper secondary (49,6%) and of tertiary (12.0%) school degree, compared to native-born. The same path is observed in Spain but only in the percentage of upper secondary school degree (41.3%). Interestingly, the largest percentages of PHS foreign workers reside in cities (42.1% and 63.5% respectively in Italy and Spain). Conversely, the lowest percentages of PHS foreign workers reside in rural areas (16.9% and 10.0% respectively in Italy and Spain). A different distribution is observed when considering the other worker groups.

Table 1 – *Selected characteristics of female workers by place of birth and occupational sector. Italy and Spain. Percentage values.*

Characteristics	Italy				Spain			
	Native-born		Born abroad		Native-born		Born abroad	
	PHS	Other	PHS	Other	PHS	Other	PHS	Other
Age at interview								
20-34	11,7	19,3	10,2	24,9	10,6	18,2	15,4	24,7
35-44	15,4	24,2	23,9	31,8	17,7	28,3	27,5	32,6
45-54	35,5	33,4	37,6	29,0	33,4	32,5	35,9	30,8
55-64	37,5	23,2	28,3	14,2	38,4	21,0	21,2	12,0
Educational Level								
Lower secondary or less	49,3	13,6	38,4	27,0	48,5	17,4	42,3	21,2
Upper secondary	44,8	47,9	49,6	46,1	33,3	19,4	41,3	30,2
Tertiary	5,9	38,5	12,0	26,9	18,2	63,2	16,4	48,6
Urban area of residence								
Cities	23,3	32,1	42,1	30,8	49,3	53,7	63,5	57,3
Towns_or suburb-areas	48,1	46,7	41,1	47,3	33,1	31,8	26,5	30,6
Rural_areas	28,5	21,2	16,9	21,9	17,6	14,6	10,0	12,1
Total abs. val	*1.637*	*14.527*	*1.398*	*1.568*	*2.518*	*12.767*	*641*	*1.275*

Note: PHS: workers in for personal and household services; Other: workers in all the other occupational sectors.
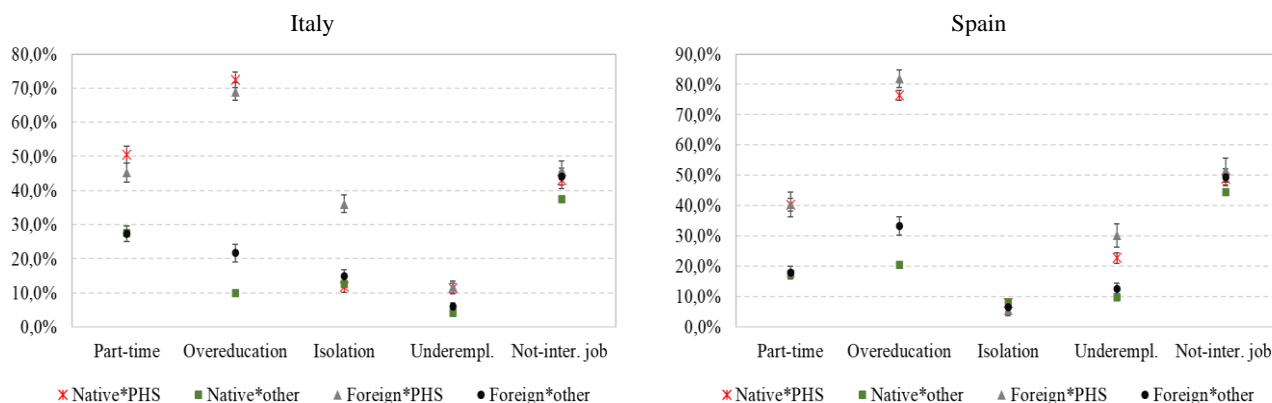*Source: our elaboration on EU-LFS data, 2021*

Focusing on migrant workers only some other significant characteristics emerge. Not surprisingly because of foreign presence by birthplace in the two destination countries, the most of the Italian foreign workers (regardless of the work sector) were born in East Europe, while the most of the Spanish foreign workers (regardless of the work sector) were born in Latin America. The years of residence in the host country are on average lower among PHS workers than among the other workers in Italy: 43.7% of PHS workers reside in Italy from less than 15 years, while the same percentage is 33.8% of other workers. The opposite picture is observed in Spain: 34.1% of PHS workers against 42.9% of other workers

Performing logistic regressions, the predicted probabilities of the 5 dichotomous dependent variables and their relative confidence intervals are presented in Figure 1 by the interrelation of occupational sectors (PHS and other) and birthplace (native-born and born abroad), controlling for individual characteristics. Results synthetically highlight that PHS workers (and in particular foreign ones) are more exposed to unfavourable working conditions both in Italy and Spain. The workers in the PHS are more positively associated of being

part-time and overeducated than the workers employed in other sectors, although no statistically significant difference emerges between native-born and foreign-born PHS workers due to the overlap of confidence intervals. In Italy, the PHS foreign workers are single adults in the household more frequently than the other three group of workers. This is not the same in Spain where no significant differences emerge. In Spain, the PHS foreign workers feel more underemployed than the other three groups of workers. In Italy it is the same for all PHS workers but to less extent. Last, there is no significant difference in being unsatisfied of their job among the compared working groups both in Italy and in Spain.

Figure 1 – *Predicted probabilities of being a part time worker, of feeling overeducated, of being isolated, of feeling underemployment and of perceiving job as uninteresting of female workers by place of birth and occupational sector. Italy and Spain. Percentage values and confidence interval.*

Note: PHS: workers in for personal and household services; Other: workers in all the other occupational sectors.
Control variables: age at interview, educational level, area of residence
Source: our elaboration on IT-LFS data, 2021

In sum, preliminary results observed the existence of vulnerabilities and the "ethnic penalty" when considering female workers enrolled in personal and household services.

RQ1: In Europe, do domestic and care workers have specific socio-demographic characteristics?
Results show that there is a specific socio-demographic profile that characterizes foreign PHS foreign female in Italy and in Spain. Some of these (like the older age) may negatively affect the insertion and mobility in the labour market in the host country and increase the vulnerability of foreigners.

RQ2: In Europe, do domestic and care workers suffer more unfavourable occupational conditions than the other workers?
The analysis has highlighted that PHS female workers (and in particular foreign ones) continue to live unfavourable working conditions in Italy and in Spain. Furthermore, we observed the existence of an "ethnic penalty" effect when comparing native-born and foreign-born workers employed in PHS. According to previous research, foreign workers are more vulnerable compared to their Italian counterparts. These differences can hinder the integration process of these workers and, conversely, promote segregation that exacerbates these inequalities.

These results confirm the existence of a paradox when considering migrants' working and living conditions in care and domestic sectors. Despite their substantial importance and the notable increase in their numbers, these workers, predominantly women, are not sufficiently protected under Italian and international labour laws and social systems. These findings underscore the need to address these inequalities.

These findings underline the need to promote policies and active interventions that improve working conditions. Investments should focus on setting social and legal standards to ensure appropriate treatment of workers by employers. However, not only the economic integration of migrant workers should be pursued but also all the other (cultural, social and political) dimensions of integration that together contribute to higher levels of well-being and social cohesion.

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