MIGRANTS' CHARACTERISTICS, WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS IN THE HOUSEHOLD SERVICES

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Abstract. The aging of the Italian population, the limited resources assigned to the welfare system, and the increasing entry of women into the labour market have produced growing demand for surveillance and care activities, for supporting elderly and vulnerable populations. Given native-born workers do not satisfy this growing demand, foreign population started to play a central role in the household services in Italy in the last two decades. Among them, single aged breadwinner women became the perfect candidates for occupying these positions. However, migrant women tend to suffer the penalization of being women, migrant background, and segregated. Enlarging the limited research on this topic and using the 2021 ad-hoc module of Istat Labour Force Survey on "Working conditions of immigrants and their immediate descendants" in Italy, we aim to analyse migrants' working and living conditions to identify barriers preventing full integration and to define suitable actions to promote inclusion. Descriptive results highlight that, according to the literature, migrant women workers employed in the household services 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.

1. 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 care and domestic services, particularly for the elderly people (Shutes, 2012). This transformation has had a significant impact on Italy, not only recognized as one of the world's most aged country but also grappling with limited resources on this issue allocated to its welfare system (Reyneri, 2017). To cope with this growing labor demand, the foreign population has emerged as a significant source of support. INPS data on regular care and domestic workers in Italy revealed that, despite a decrease in the number of foreign female workers

employed in the household services, from 761,042 to 621,716 between 2013 and 2022 with a non-linear trend, they continue to constitute the predominant workforce in this sector because the employed Italian women in this sector counted 272,583 units in 2022 (INPS, 2023). Previous studies have shown that workers employed in the household services primarily are women coming from Latin America and Eastern Europe (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi, 2015; Salaris and Tedesco, 2020; Buonomo, Gabrielli and Strozza, 2020). They are more likely to be single or divorced/separated (Simonazzi, 2009), and are often older than 40 years old and concentrated mainly in Northern Italian regions.

However, a notable dearth of specific studies exists regarding the working and living conditions of foreign domestic and care workers, 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 Italian society in order to identify barriers preventing full integration and to define suitable actions to promote inclusion (Reyneri, 2017).

Our goal is to start filling 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 household services. In particular, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: Do domestic and care workers have specific socio-demographic characteristics?

RQ2: Do domestic and care workers suffer more unfavourable occupational conditions than the other workers?

Focusing on women, who represent 58.7% of total (foreign and native) regular workers employed in the household services (84.4% among foreigners) in 2022 and 22.1% of (male and female) migrant workers, regardless of the occupational sector (INPS, 2023), this paper aims to provide a comprehensive description of the specific individual characteristics (including also age, educational attainment, country of origin, and citizenship status) of domestic and care female workers in comparison with their Italian counterparts and with other migrant female workers employed in other sectors. Moreover, it aims to delve into their employment-related characteristics (including also overeducation, underemployment, and part-time job), and into their living conditions (isolation) determining the extent to which they face heightened risks in these domains more than the other workers.

After reviewing in section 2 the exiting literature on these issues and describing in section 3 the used data and methods, we will perform in section 4 a descriptive analysis to identify the main socio-demographic profile of workers by occupational sector and by country of birth. Continuing to use this comparative approach,

logistic analyses follow in section 4 to edge against compositional effects, and to analyse work-related penalizations of foreign domestic and care workers. In section 5, we will discuss the main findings and provide some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical background

The household services 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, domestic and/or care 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 countries, employment in the household services 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 household services, 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 household services 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 household services, 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 household services, 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 Italian 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).

3. Data and Methods

We relied on the data from the ad-hoc module of the LFS, conducted in 2021 on "Working conditions of immigrants and their immediate descendants" in Italy (since now on only IT-LFS). 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.

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 IT-LFS "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.

The main target group includes women aged 20-64 years at interview. The overall unweighted sample consisted of 34,936 women[1]. We focus our attention on female workers, distinguishing between those employed in the household services (since now on also "domestic") and those employed in other sectors (since now on also "other"). In particular, the domestic/care workers are respectively 2.6% among native-born workers and 18.9% among workers born in PFPM of total target group (Table 1).

Table 1 – *Women aged 20-64 in the used sample by occupational characteristics and place of birth. Absolute (abs.) and percentage (%) values.*

Occupational Characteristics	Native-born		Born abroad	
	Abs.	%	Abs.	%
Inactive	11,805	40.0	2,248	41.1
Unemployed	1,491	5.1	549	10.0
Workers in the household services	756	2.6	1,037	18.9
Workers in other sectors	15,408	52.3	1,642	30.0
Total	*29,460*	*100.0*	*5,476*	*100.0*

Source: our elaboration on IT-LFS data, 2021

Through a descriptive comparative perspective based on place of birth and employment sector, we examine in the next section some socio-demographic characteristics of female workers. These include the age at interview, the self-declared level of education (primary or less, middle school, high school or more), civil status (unmarried, married, separated/divorced/widowed), and Italian region of residence (North-East, North-West, Center, South and Islands). Focusing on foreign-born population, we also consider the area/country of birth (we have identified the most frequent countries of birth among immigrants in Italy and grouped the others into sub-continents), year of arrival in Italy (before 2000, 2001-2010, after 2010), and the acquisition of Italian citizenship (yes, no).

Subsequently, we conduct (in section 4) five different multivariate logistic analyses to assess the unfavourable/favourable working and living conditions of workers by occupational sectors (domestic 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), perceived overeducation (1 if the respondent feels of having an

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[1] Among foreigners, we consider only women born in countries with strong migratory pressure (PFPM), and excluding those born in advanced economies (e.g. EU-15, countries of the European Free Trade Association, Japan, North America).

underqualified job and 0 otherwise), isolation (1 if the respondent is single person in the household and 0 if she is in couple with or without children, single parent, or non-cohabiting single parent), perceived underemployment (1 if the respondent desires to work more hours and 0 otherwise), and perceived not-highly interesting job (considering the categorical variable from 0 to 10, respectively the lowest and the highest values, on respondent's interest in their work, the dichotomous variable takes the value 1 if respondent indicates the score 7 or less[2] and 0 if she indicates 8 or more).

In our analyses, we used the weighted system provided by IT-LFS in order to make our results representative of the observed universe[3].

4. Results

Regardless of their country of birth, women in the household services tend to be, on average, older than those working in other sectors (Table 2). This trend is even more pronounced among foreign-born domestic workers. In fact, among them we observe the highest percentages at older ages (respectively 37.4% at 45-54 yrs. old and 27.2% at 55+ yrs. old).

The 54.0% of foreign-born workers employed in the household services have a high school degree or more, compared to 47.0%. of Italian counterpart. However, this percentage is lower than foreign-born workers employed in other sectors (68.5%).

The 34.8% of foreign-born domestic/care workers reside in North-East Italy, while only the 16.8% is resident in the Southern and Island regions. Interestingly, we have a complementary picture when considering native-born domestic workers (respectively 17.0% in the North-East and 31.5% in the South and Islands). From these results, the substitutive (and non-competitive) role of migrants rise.

The highest percentage of foreign-born domestic/care workers is married (45.5%), but a significant percentage is separated/divorced or widowed individuals (31.8%). In the other three groups of workers this is not the same with a significant percentage of unmarried.

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[2] We defined this value according to the distribution for dividing significantly the sample in two groups.
[3] For further information see the methodological document of the survey at the following link: https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/214255

Table 2 – *Selected characteristics of female workers by place of birth and occupational sector. Percentage values.*

Characteristics	Native-born		Born abroad	
	Domestic	Other	Domestic	Other
Age at interview				
20-34	24.4	21.8	13.2	26.4
35-44	20.6	24.6	22.2	34.1
45-54	27.4	32.4	37.4	27.9
55+	27.6	21.2	27.2	11.6
Educational level				
Primary school or less	5.8	0.8	7.4	3.8
Middle School	47.2	16.8	38.6	27.8
High school or more	47.0	82.4	54.0	68.5
Civil status				
Unmarried	36.5	34.1	22.7	30.1
Married	46.9	54.2	45.5	55.4
Separeted/divorced/widowed	16.6	11.7	31.8	14.5
Italian Residence Area				
North-East	17.0	23.0	34.8	32.7
North-West	30.4	31.0	19.5	22.4
Center	21.1	21.8	29.0	23.6
South and Islands	31.5	24.2	16.8	21.3
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*	*100.0*

Source: our elaboration on IT-LFS data, 2021

Focusing on migrant workers only some other significant characteristics emerge (Table 3).

Not surprisingly because of foreign presence in Italy by birthplace, most of the workers (regardless of the work sector) were born in Romania (respectively 24.8% for domestic and 23.6% for other). The Ukrainians (country assuming the 5th position by number of residents in 2022) also have the 2nd highest percentage of foreign-born workers employed in the household services (12.9%). This is not the same when considering the average among workers employed in other sectors. However, the most interesting (albeit known) percentages concern the Philippines (the 8th country by number of residents), the Moldovans (12th country) and the Peruvians (16th country): respectively 10.7%, 8.6%, and 6.0%. Conversely, the Moroccans and the Albanians (respectively the 2nd and the 3rd country by number of residents) have lower percentages of domestic/care workers (respectively 3.4% and 4.2%).

Foreign-born workers employed in the household services have a percentage of Italian citizens (12.3%) which is 1/3 compared to foreign-born workers employed in other sectors (37.9%). This suggests the reduced integration process and the greater vulnerability of domestic/care workers compared to the others.

Table 3 − *Selected characteristics of foreign-born female workers by occupational sector. Percentage values.*

Characteristics	Domestic	Other
Area/Country of birth		
Romania	24.8	23.6
Ukraine	12.9	4.6
Philippines	10.7	2.0
Other Latin America	9.2	13.3
Moldova	8.6	4.1
Other Asia	7.5	4.8
Other Est Europe	6.6	11.4
Perù	6.0	2.9
Albania	4.2	9.1
Morocco	3.4	3.6
Africa Sub Saharian	3.0	5.3
Other North Africa	0.8	1.2
China	0.5	5.3
Other	1.7	8.7
Italian citizenship		
Yes	12.3	37.9
No	87.7	62.1
Year of arrival in Italy		
Before 2001	16.3	28.9
2001-2010	58.7	52.8
After 2010	24.9	18.2
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*

Source: our elaboration on IT-LFS data, 2021
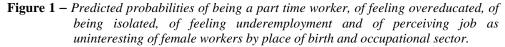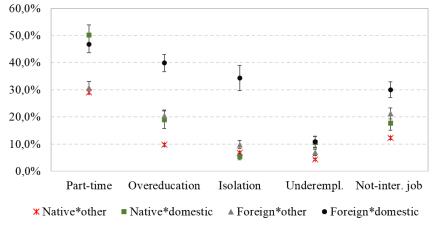
There are no substantial differences in the year of arrival in Italy by employment sector; the majority arrived in Italy in the period 2001-2010 (respectively 58.7% among domestic/care workers and 52.8% among workers in other sectors).

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 (domestic and other) and birthplace (native-born and born abroad), controlling for individual characteristics.

Working in the household services is more positively associated of being part-time than working other sectors. Although no statistically significant difference emerges between native-born and foreign-born domestic/care workers due to the overlap of confidence intervals.

Foreign-born domestic/care workers feel largely more overeducated than the native-born counterpart and foreign-born workers employed in other sectors. In addition, they are single person in the household more frequently than the others.

Supporting these unfavourable working conditions, foreign-born domestic/care workers are more likely than the other working groups of perceiving their job as not-highly interesting. Conversely, there is no significant difference in feeling underemployed among the compared working groups.

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.*

Control variables: age, civil status, educational level, area of residence
Source: our elaboration on IT-LFS data, 2021

5. Discussion and conclusion

The paper aimed to analyse characteristics, working and living conditions of foreign-born female workers employed in Italian household services, reducing the existing knowledge gap on the topic and identifying potential vulnerabilities and issues that hinder full integration.

Along with this paper we tried to answer to two research questions by using IT-LFS survey data of 2021. As concern the first question (RQ1: Do domestic and care workers have specific socio-demographic characteristics?) and according to the literature, there is a specific socio-demographic profile that characterizes foreign-born domestic workers in Italy: these women tend to have an older age than those working in other sectors, to have a higher educational degree than Italian

domestic/care workers, to get largely married but with a significant percentage of separated/divorced or widowed, to reside mainly in the North-East Italian regions, not to have Italian citizens, and to be born in East Europe (Romania, Ukraine, and Moldova) or in Latin America (Peru) or in the Philippines.

As concern the second question (RQ2: Do domestic and care workers suffer more unfavourable occupational conditions than the other workers?), the analysis has highlighted that domestic/care workers (and in particular foreign ones) are more exposed to unfavourable working conditions: they are more likely to have a part-time job, to perceived in having an underqualified job, and to feel their job as not-highly interesting.

Furthermore, we observed the existence of an "ethnic penalty" effect when comparing native-born and foreign-born workers employed in household services. According to previous reseach, foreign workers are more vulnerable compared to their Italian counterparts. It emerges when considering overeducation, isolation, and job satisfaction. These differences can hinder the integration process of these workers and, conversely, promote segregation that exacerbates these inequalities (Barbiano Di Belgiojoso and Ortensi, 2015; Buonomo, Gabrielli and Strozza, 2020). Moreover, the social meaning of work impacts on perceptions in order to pursue social mobility strategies of family status (Pedraza, 1991; Vicarelli, 1994; Ambrosini, 2011).

Future research steps should include in the analyses a greater number of individual and occupational characteristics (such as health, income, social and retirement assistance etc.) to mitigate any further compositional effect and to identify other aspects of vulnerability. Additionally, it may be useful (if possible) to further differentiate workers employed in household services, considering separately housekeepers and caregivers.

Nevertheless, some noteworthy considerations have emerged. The aging population has led to a significant increase in the demand for domestic assistance and caregiving services. However, this demand is not adequately met by the Italian workforce, creating a shortage of available workers.

One potential solution to bridge this gap between demand and supply of domestic workers can be found in the foreign labour force, aligning with the theory of "replacement migration" (Lindsey, 2001). Foreign workers, thus, become essential in Italy for the well-being of the country and its inhabitants.

However, within this perspective, a paradox can be observed. 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 issues make them more vulnerable compared to workers in other sectors. Moreover, ethnic penalty further exacerbates

particularly the vulnerability of foreign domestic workers, impeding their integration and cohesion with the host country.

These findings underscore the need to address these inequalities and promote policies and interventions that improve working conditions and foster the socio-economic integration of migrant workers. Investments should focus on combating discrimination, recognizing and enhancing the human capital of foreigners, allowing them to occupy jobs according to their abilities, and establishing social and legal standards to ensure proper treatment of workers by employers.

Acknowledgements

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