

Smart Diaspora 2023

10 - 13 Aprilie 2023,
Timișoara

www.diaspora-stiintifica.ro

Eveniment aflat sub înaltul patronaj
al Președintelui României



“I was lucky.” Migration and deregulated work in the Italian care sector

SEBASTIAN ȚOC

Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy/National University of Political Science and Public Administration

DINU GUȚU

National University of Political Science and Public Administration

SMART DIASPORA 2023

TIMISOARA, 10TH-13TH APRIL 2023

- To provide a classification of the main categories of Romanian care workers in Italy, and the main challenges they face, taking into account the specifics of the work and the type of chosen migration.
- To provide a better understanding of how the work in the Italian care sector takes place, using care worker's experience and interpreting it in relation to the broader historical, institutional and political context.
- To provide an in-depth description of exploitation and power relations, informality in the relationship between employer and employee, and the consequences of the thin line between work and private life.

Qualitative methodology based on twenty semi-structured online interviews with Romanian care workers (informally "Badanti")

- Approximately 3.4 million Romanians emigrated between 2007 and 2017, making up 17% of the population, the second highest global rate of migration after the one caused by the war in Syria. (UN 2017).
- Romanians are the largest minority in Italy. Approximately 1.2 million had official residence in Italy in 2020, 57% of them are women.
- The number of domestic workers registered in Italy in 2018 was of 850.000, approximately 90% of them women (National Institute for Social Security).
- According to the estimates of an employment agency in Italy, approximately 565 000 domestic workers don't have an employment contract and don't benefit from any kind of social protection.
- Romanian women are the largest group working in the care sector in Italy, care work being almost the exclusive domain of migrants (King-Dejardin 2019: 36).

- The migrant-in-the-family care model gradually replaced the woman-in-the-family care model: hired care workers called “badanti” who often live in the same household as the beneficiaries, some studies calling them the “backbone” of the Italian elderly care system (Castagnone et al. 2013).
- The re-commodification of care work was possible through favourable migration regimes in Europe (Lutz 2017), but also as incomes and quality of life were much lower in Eastern European countries.
- Informal character of work: a result of unregulated labour relations, especially for care workers who live in the same space where they work (Lutz 2008, Rugoletto et al. 2017). This can lead to abuses and exploitation generated by the asymmetrical power relations, and lack of protection from the state institutions.
- Previous studies identified two main categories of (Ukrainian) migrant care workers in Italy: settled and „in transit” (Fedyuk 2012, Vianello 2016)

- The first job of a migrant is usually a black market job, very poorly paid

“The girls who come and don’t know the language, the laws, they work a lot and for nothing. In Italy there’s no legal 24-hour work. But our girls say – “I’m going for 24h”. The daily labour in the contract is for 8 hours (...) but our girls wake up at night...” (care worker, Como).

- As they gain experience, basic financial stability and extend their social network, they can choose their workplace more easily:

“That’s what (the employers) told me: we can’t give you less because you know the rules (...). I repeat, you know the language, you have some experience, you have a small CV, be confident, show them that you know what you want and be a little professional and you have a chance to be better paid. This is the first secret. That’s when they dig deep in their pocket, you know [laughs].” (care worker, Cagliari).

- A relative emancipation takes place when the care workers give up their “24h” job (live-in care worker) and are employed “hourly” either for cleaning, for elderly assistance, or as babysitters.

Results: The “Badanti” in transit

- “The badanti in transit” is the most often encountered category of migrant, their main characteristic being that they do not plan to settle in Italy.
- Usually, has a very precise reason for travelling, and there is always a financial motivation (e.g. to support their children finish their studies, to solve the family’s financial woes, including debt). The decision to work in another country is taken when the family is unable to cover their minimum/decent living costs.
- Wanted to go to Italy for a short period of time and to accomplish an economic objective for their family, but they ended up staying for a much longer period of time. As Olena Fedyuk (2012: 297-298) shows „her life is put on hold until she returns to her family and will start a life again.”

“This is how Romanians are, let’s build a house, let’s help the boy finish school. Sacrifices, sacrifices, sacrifices, because we can’t do anything without sacrifices. I said I’d stay a year, but then let’s redo the bathroom, let’s do that, the boy must finish school, buy him a car and... that’s how I ended up staying for 20 years.” (care worker, Torino area).
- According to Vianello (2016: 172), the migrant in transit regards herself as a mother despite the fact that her children are adults, and she uses this role to legitimise her absence.

Results: The “Badanti” settled in Italy

- The first category who settle in Italy are most often young, childless women who stop being live-in care worker, and rent an apartment, usually working in the care and cleaning sector and paid by the hour. Usually, they settle for good once they enter a relationship or get married in Italy.
- Sometimes the care worker is starting relationships with Italian partners, which, as Feduk (2012) notices, is part of a process to create networks and safety nets, and ways to manage intimacy in an extremely emotionally draining job:

“My husband died after I was in Italy for five years, I lost my parents too, but with the help of God I found somebody here, I managed to cling to something. But there are girls who don’t have anything, they wait for the month’s end to get paid.” (care worker, Rome).
- Another subcategory of settled migrants is that of women who bring their family to Italy after several years of care work. However, not all families are successful, in many cases the husband or the children do not adapt and decide to return to Romania.

Results: Seasonal/occasional “badanti”

- A large number of women work for shorter periods of times, for a few months, seasonally (during the summer holidays) or occasionally to replace other women.
- In many cases, this mutual help started through family networks. In order to go on holidays or to solve problems at home without losing their labour contract (which sometimes means losing the job), they bring a replacement from Romania for a jointly agreed period of time.
- The person who is replaced or who recommends the replacement is usually making an unique offer, which does not allow for salary negotiation or registering an employment contract.
- Sometimes they work in shifts of one or more months with another care worker, in order to spend more time with the family in Romania or Moldova.
- Usually, these women choose to work for shorter periods of time because they prioritize a closer relation with their family in Romania:

“I: The fact that you had family in Romania determined you to not stay permanently in Italy?”

R: That’s right, well said. It would have tied me down for too much time. The contract was made for one year minimum, and I would have had to stay. Many women preferred to stay for longer to have more job security there. I only supported my child but at the same time I’m happy that I kept my family together. We didn’t break up. And my husband took care of the kid. Being apart wasn’t easy, but for 3-4, maximum 5 months... (care worker, Torino).

We described three categories which are specific to the Romanian care workers in Italy, using Vianello (2016) classification.

- The “badanti in transit”, the largest category, is represented by the women who do not plan to settle in the country where they work, despite staying for long periods of time in Italy, as they are welfare providers for the family back home.
- The settled migrants are usually young women who renounce their live-in care worker status and who after a period of “transit” decide to stay for good in Italy, a process which is usually facilitated by the rest of their family joining them there or by finding a partner.
- The seasonal/occasional “badanti” are women who practice temporary care work in Italy, usually replacing or taking shifts with another person in order to be closer to their family.

Funding details

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-BSH-2-2016-0005, within PNCDI III

Acknowledgement

We want to thank all care workers who shared their migration and labour experiences with us and to all who supported us with recommendations for interviewees.