

# Making Decent Wages a Reality for Domestic Workers: The Case of Italy<sup>1</sup>

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## Executive Summary

Italy has one of the highest numbers of domestic workers, mostly women and foreign-born, in Europe. The domestic work sector in Italy constitutes a crucial labour sector against the backdrop of its rapidly ageing population and women's increasing labour market participation, along with limited public provision. Based on official statistics, the wages in the domestic work sector however do not commensurate with its importance, whereas domestic workers consistently remain systematically undervalued and underpaid compared with the national

averages. This policy brief aims to call attention to this current issue and its urgency in a context where Italy is a Member State of the EU and party to key international conventions for the protection of paid workers including domestic workers. The policy alternatives proposed based on the observations offer viable alternative solutions to ensure decent wages a reality for domestic workers in Italy.

## 1. Introduction

Domestic workers perform essential services for millions of households across Europe. This is definitely the scenario in Italy, a Southern European country, where domestic workers<sup>2</sup> assume a central role in the everyday functioning of the society and economy. As **the oldest country in the European Union**, with its older people contributing to almost 25% of the total population (Eurostat, 2025), domestic workers have become an essential part of Italy's care economy. They fulfil a significantly rising need for domestic and care services while enabling Italian people's, especially Italian women's workforce participation, in a context of its **familistic welfare model** that relies heavily on family women to provide care, whilst Italy's **public service provision** remains comparatively limited and underfunded. While Italy's **large immigrant workforce** contributes to a high supply of domestic workers, filling a critical deficit in welfare left by shifting demographics and sociocultural factors, Italy's domestic work sector continues to remain unrecognized and undervalued; thus, often leaving domestic workers **without fair wages** and a crucial safety net that comes along with it. This situation undermines key international conventions that have been put in place to ensure safety and wellbeing of domestic workers, most of whom are

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief has been funded by the European Union (GA number: 101203952). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

<sup>2</sup> The National Collective Labour Agreement (Contratto Collettivo Nazionale de Lavoro Domestico–CCNL) on the regulation of the domestic work relationship (CCNL) of 1 July 2013 defines domestic workers in its section 1(2) as “those who work, including non-Italian or stateless persons, regardless of the manner in which they are paid, in functions relating

to family life, and in family-like living arrangements (military or religious) taking into account certain fundamental aspects of the relationship”. The Government explains that domestic work is performed in the home or the residence of the employer (individual or family grouping). The Government indicates that the definition of domestic worker includes not only persons employed in normal family chores (for example, caregivers or governesses) but also includes those employed to provide various services, as long as these are directed at individual aspects of family life, such as gardeners, household drivers of motor vehicles or private secretaries) (ILO, 2024a).

immigrant women and men from developing regions around the world. For instance, International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021) advocates that establishing a **decent wage<sup>3</sup> is a key step towards ensuring decent work** for domestic workers. Within this context, this policy brief seeks to **stress the urgency** of this long-standing issue in Italy's domestic work sector, which constitutes a crucial labour sector, and the need to adopt the course of action proposed herein. In this way, it will also shed light on the European care sector, which has become a vital and rapidly growing part of the European economy.

## 2. Context and Importance of the Problem

In 2025, Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS)<sup>4</sup> recorded **817,403 registered domestic workers** in Italy. This is estimated to be only around **54.0%** of its total domestic workforce (Osservatorio Lavoro Domestico<sup>5</sup>, 2024), equivalent to around 1.6 million workers. Among registered workers, **68.6% are foreign-born** (Fig.1), with Eastern Europe continuing to be the top source region, contributing to 34.8% of the total workforce<sup>6</sup>. In terms of gender distribution, **88.5% are women** (Fig. 1), where women continue to perform the majority of this work. Italy's domestic work sector is therefore both feminized and foreignized. Most domestic workers are over 45 years of age, with more than a quarter (25.7%) aged 60 and above. Based on the type of employment relationship, for the first time ever, Italy **records a prevalence of 'caregiver' category<sup>7</sup>**, which accounts for **50.4% of all workers**, compared to 49.6% for 'domestic worker<sup>8</sup>' category (Fig. 1). This is in contrast to the situation 10 years ago, where domestic

workers were the majority, accounting for 57.3% of all workers (INPS, 2025).

This increase in demand for the 'caregiver' category should be understood in relation to Italy's rapidly increasing **ageing population** (those aged 65+) (Fig. 2), which is projected to increase from **24.3% in 2024 to 34.6% by 2050** (Istat, 2025) in a context of women's increasing labour market participation. From 2020-2023, **women's employment** rate in Italy has increased from 49% to 52.5% (EUROPEAN Employment Services–EURES, 2025), recording a **7.1% growth rate**, while women's share in the workforce is projected to continue growing (EURES, 2025). At the same time, Italy's growing demand for caregivers should be reflected in terms of its care culture, **the 'Italian model'**, which is still predominantly dependent on familial and informal care networks, coupled with a significant **shortfall in public provision**, especially in non-medical support services. For example, only around 28% of Italy's public expenditure on long-term care (LTC) goes into residential care, whereas the equivalent value in the EU-27 is around 48% (Eurocarers, 2024). Compared with other European countries, the structure of the Italian public system appears primarily cash-based, prioritizing allowances and leave, rather than service provision. This creates greater strain on balancing caregiving needs and work, especially for women as traditional caregivers, leading many households to use the cash allowances to hire (migrant) domestic workers on the private/black market to meet their work-care reconciliation challenges (Eurocarers, 2024). This growing demand is comfortably met with Italy's **large supply of cheap immigrant labour** available for domestic work. Apparently, Italy's ageing problem is starting to take a **toll on its world-**

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<sup>3</sup> A living wage (or adequate wage) that is sufficient for a decent standard of living that provides for workers' and their families' basic needs like food, housing, healthcare and education, taking into account the country circumstances and calculated for the work performed during the normal hours of work (ILO, 2024b).

<sup>4</sup> National Institute for Social Security.

<sup>5</sup> Domestic Work Observatory.

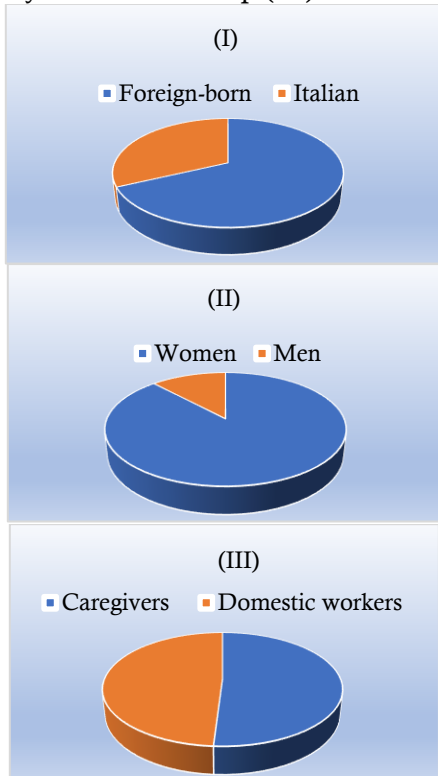
<sup>6</sup> In national statistics, 'South Asia' remains omitted as a distinct source region. As Marchetti and Lashchuk (2025) report, on the contrary, domestic workers from South Asian countries (e.g., Sri Lanka) form an important part of Italy's domestic workforce.

<sup>7</sup> For example, on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023, the Government of Italy, provided by Decreto Legge No. 20 of 2023 (in Article 1), approved changes to entry procedures for foreign workers, which provides for an additional quota of 10,000 workers to be assigned to care for the elderly and disabled in 2025 on an experimental basis, in addition to the 9,500 already planned for the same year under Decreto Flussi. The demand often outstrips the available quotas for legal work permits (CENSIS, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Includes workers for whom the type of employment relationship is not specified (INPS, 2025).

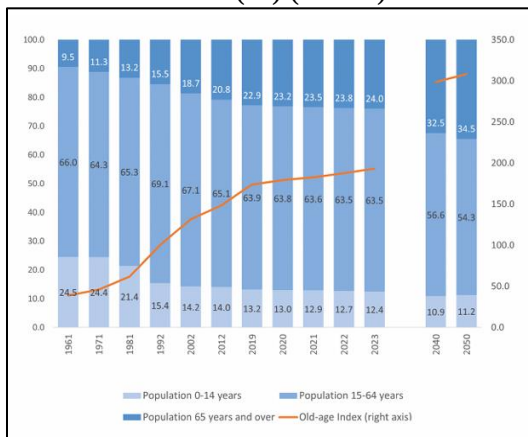
famous ‘dolce vita’ (Giulia Carbonaro, Euronews, 22 February 2024).

**Fig. 1:** Domestic workers’ based on nationality (I), gender (II), and type of employment relationship (III)



Source: Based on INPS data, 2025

**Fig. 2:** Age structure of the population in Italy, from 1961 to 2023 (\*) and projections for 2040 and 2050 (\*\*) (as a %)



(\*) From 1961 to 1981 the data refer to the Census, from 1992 they refer to 1 January of the year  
 (\*\*) Median scenario

Source: Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali (CENSIS)<sup>9</sup> elaboration on Istat data

The domestic work sector is and will therefore continue to be a vital labour sector in Italy as the crux of care and reconciliation. Additionally, the sector contributes to almost **1% of GDP** (worth €15.8 billion euros) in Italy (Osservatorio Lavoro Domestico, 2024), which is an underestimation of the true figure, where much of the domestic work is not subject to accurate accounting and valuation. This is due to high levels of informality of domestic work, where much of the work goes undeclared in the informality and privacy of the household-workplace, coupled with the underestimation of the value of domestic work as ‘unskilled labour’. In 2024, Italian households spent 13.0 billion euro on domestic work, re-invested in the local economy by domestic workers, generating a **total production value of 21.9 billion euro** (Osservatorio Lavoro Domestico, 2024).

**Domestic work is protected by Italian law**, with a national collective bargaining agreement that establishes rights and duties for both employers and workers, including equal pay and social security contributions for all (regular) workers, regardless of nationality. Analysis of wage data for 2024 shows that domestic workers’ earnings range from income bracket (in euro) ‘Up to 999’ to ‘13,000 and above’ per annum. The most **common income bracket** for both male and female workers is ‘**13,000 and above**’, equivalent to only 19.2% of all workers (INPS, 2025). While, in general, female domestic workers earn higher than their male equivalents, almost half of all domestic workers earn **less than 7,000 euro per annum (583.3 euro per month)** (calculated based on INPS data, 2025). This is in relation to Italy’s average gross annual earnings of 37,302 euro (3,108.5 euro per month)<sup>10</sup> per employee recorded in 2022 (Istat, 2025) (Fig. 3), while in Italy there is **no statutory national minimum wage**. In Italy minimum wages are set through national collective bargaining agreements. Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL)<sup>11</sup> points out that domestic workers generally do not enjoy the same entitlement to paid sick leave as other workers (ILO, 2023). The CGIL also

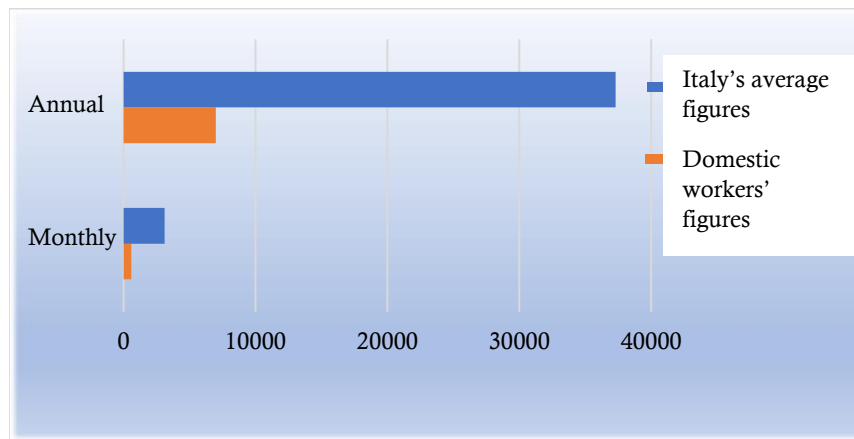
<sup>9</sup> Center for Social Investment Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Reconciled on a full-year and full-time basis.

<sup>11</sup> The Italian General Confederation of Labour.

indicates that the right to paid maternity leave (two months before and three months after the birth), provided for under national legislation, does not apply to domestic workers, as it generally does to other workers.

**Fig. 3:** Domestic workers' earnings in relation to Italy's average gross annual and monthly earnings (in euro)



Source: Based on INPS, 2025; Istat, 2025

With reference to **average working hours**, the largest number of domestic workers belong to **25-29-hour category**, which is 19.8% of the total (INPS, 2025), thus demonstrating an issue of underemployment in comparison to the standard Italian work week of 40 hours. In terms of **declared working hours**, the majority of workers belong to **50-52-hour category**, equivalent to 46.2% of all workers (INPS, 2025). The 2020 CCNL provides for working hours for live-in and live-out domestic workers<sup>12</sup>: the maximum number of hours for live-in domestic workers is set at 54 hours per week (ILO, 2024a), which is not only excessive with the risk of burnout, but also in defiance of the standard Italian work week. The hours applicable to live-out domestic workers is set at a maximum of 40 hours per week (ILO, 2024a), which is consistent with the standard Italian work week, however, signifying a double standard for live-ins vs. live-outs in Italian law. Domestic workers are paid an **average hourly rate of 9.3 euro** (calculated

based on INPS data, 2025) in relation to Italy's average hourly earnings of 16.4 euro as at October 2022 (Istat, 2025). In terms of cost of living, it has been estimated that a person living in Italy with less than 630 euro per month is considered poor<sup>13</sup> (Statista, 2024), thus most domestic workers in Italy apparently living in poverty.

Recent years has seen a decrease in Italy's domestic workforce. For example, from 2022 to 2024, there has been a **9.4% decline, from 894,299 to 817,403 workers** (INPS, 2025). This contraction has been **accompanied by a high rate of irregular workers** in the sector. Based on the latest data available, Italy's

domestic work sector is characterized by an **irregularity rate of 51.8%**, compared with a national average of 11.3% for all sectors (Osservatorio Lavoro Domestico, 2023), thus more than half of all domestic workers making zero contributions to social security systems. The official statistics therefore do not fully capture the extent of domestic work nor the complexities in the sector due to its high prevalence of undeclared labour. The irregularity has been mainly caused by the **unsustainable increase in the costs borne by households** in a context of a lack of robust public services. In recent years, the economic situation in Italy has worsened, leading to a general increase in financial anxiety and uncertainty across many income levels, struggling to afford essential expenses including domestic help (CENSIS, 2024). Middle-class households, the largest demographic segment of the population, are the ones where the increase in difficulties is most pronounced. For example, the share of middle-class households that has **anticipated financial difficulties in affording domestic help** doubled from **27.9% in January 2023 to 55.2% in July 2024**, while almost **eight out**

<sup>12</sup> Live-in domestic workers reside in the home of their employer and perform household duties while live-outs perform household duties for an employer but live in their own residence instead of the employer's home.

<sup>13</sup> For a household with four members, this amount is around 1,700 euro (Statista, 2024).

of 10 consider spending on domestic work to be unsustainable (CENSIS, 2024).

On top of this, the **existing tax and contribution system** in Italy does not sufficiently favour households that employ domestic workers, where only part of the costs is deductible (Tab.1). Since the benefit can only be in the form of a tax relief, low-income pensioners who do not usually pay income tax, cannot benefit from the tax relief. In addition, domestic work is often not recognized as a formal job or ‘real work’ in Italian society due to social and historical perceptions of domestic work as an extension of ‘women’s work’ that requires little or no skills. Traditional values about gender roles continue to remain strong in Italian society (Istat, 2019).

is quantifiable at **2.4 billion euro**, consisting of **lost contributions (1.5 billion euro)** and **personal income tax evasion**, estimated by the Ministry of Finance at **904 million euro** per year (CENSIS, 2024).

**3. Research Overview**

This policy brief is based on secondary research. It involves the analysis and synthesis of data and information on domestic work sourced from a variety of channels, specifically related to Italy and Europe in general. These include statistical data extracted from sources, such as INPS, Istat and CENSIS, and international and national policy documents, such as C189–Domestic Workers’ Convention–2011, European Care Strategy, Framework Convention for the Protection of National

**Tab. 1: The current state of tax benefits for domestic employers**

Subject tax	Category workers	Base	Measure	Income
The taxpayer coincides with the employer	Domestic helpers, carers and baby-sitters	Contributions (employer’s share only)	Up to 1,549.37 euro	For all incomes
The taxpayer coincides with the employer but may also be different (e.g., the son who hires a carer for his father)	Carers	Deduction	19% of max. 2,100 euro (or 399 euro)	Only for incomes up to 40,000 euro per year

Source: CENSIS, 2024

**Irregular domestic work** therefore continues to be a **widespread and persistent** phenomenon in Italian society. This is despite Italy’s **regularization programs**, with the latest major scheme implemented in May 2020, that aim to bring undocumented migrant workers out of the informal sector by granting them legal status, often in response to labour shortages in ‘essential’ labour sectors, including domestic work. Many employers as well as workers are worried about the costs and complexity of the regularization process and **favour undeclared domestic work** under informal and irregular working conditions that often leads to the risk of, inter alia, worker exploitation through **wage-theft and deductions**. Many part-time contracts are used to conceal actual working hours, with actual wages lower than what is declared (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants–PICUM, 2022). The **annual cost of irregularity** is estimated to be high in Italy. It

Minorities, ILO Declaration on Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work, European Pillar of Social Rights, and Italy’s regularization policy.

**4. Observations**

In Italy ensuring decent wages for domestic workers remains a persistent issue, while Italy is one of the countries with the highest number of domestic workers, mostly women and foreign-born, in Europe. The domestic work sector in Italy is considerably underpaid not just in relation to national averages, but also in relation to its impact as a crucial labour sector that is increasingly growing in importance for Italian economy and society. As shown above, for example, domestic workers **earn only around 20% of national average wages**. Many of them are **living on impoverished wages**, earning too little to cover basic needs that can create a cycle of poverty difficult of escape. In terms of working hours, the domestic work sector is simultaneously characterized by **overwork** and exploitation (50-52-hour average declared work week), with the risk of

burnout, and **underwork** (25-29-hour average work week), causing reduced income and increased financial stress. This situation is driven by a combination of overlapping factors, including:

- a large informal domestic workforce coupled with an abundant supply of cheap immigrant labour.
- an overreliance on ‘do it yourself’ based family-centred care with a lack of effective public provision.
- an undervalourization of domestic work in both economic and cultural terms, leading to wage levels that do not correspond to the cost of living.
- a lack of statutory national minimum wages.
- a lack of worker awareness of their rights, given that most domestic workers are immigrant and irregular workers.

The figures of undervalourization in terms of both underpay and underearnings prevalent in Italy’s domestic work sector should be a matter of urgent public attention. It can and should no longer be reduced to the private dynamics of the family life.

The above observations need to be reviewed against the background, whereas Italy is signatory to the **ILO Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189)**, also known as **C189**, concerning decent work for domestic workers. C189 is the first international labour standard to specifically recognize domestic work as ‘real work’ and grant domestic workers fundamental labour rights on par with other workers<sup>14</sup>. Italy ratified C189 in January 2013, becoming the fourth ILO member State and the first EU member State to ratify the Convention (ILO, 2013). While the ratification has produced improvements hoped for in terms of a legal framework that gives domestic workers the same rights and protections as other workers, there are still unresolved issues in the sector that demand speedy attention. Among them, the critical lack of decent wages for domestic workers is a top priority, where decent wages are a cornerstone of the broader concept of decent work. According to the ILO (2024b), decent wages play an essential role in reducing

poverty and inequality, providing a decent standard of living, and fostering socioeconomic development and social justice.

As a country in the EU, Italy is committed to implementing the **European Care Strategy** launched by the European Commission in 2022. The Strategy aims to ensure high-quality and affordable care services, while improving working conditions and work-life balance for carers, both formal and informal, in Member States. The Strategy recognizes the value of carers, just as much as care recipients, as an essential group of workers who sustain the EU; thus, deserving financial protection on par with other workers. Decent wages for domestic workers are therefore not just a crucial element for ensuring improved working conditions for domestic workers, but it is also a policy priority in the EU. Similarly, as a Member State of the ILO, Italy is bound by the **ILO Declaration on Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work**. The Declaration recognizes just and favourable remuneration as both an important right at work and a fundamental human right, pre-established in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (ILO, 2022). Right to fair wages represents one of the 20 rights (Chapter II) acknowledged by the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, which aims to create a fairer and more inclusive ‘Social Europe’, with improved living and working conditions (European Commission, 2017).

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The domestic work sector in Italy largely remains an invisible sector. It takes up a significant share of the ‘non-observed economy’, despite being indispensable to the functioning of Italian daily life, society and the economy. Notably, it has been more than 12 years since Italy has adopted the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189). While progress has been made to protect domestic workers, a great deal still needs to be done to ensure decent wages a reality for domestic workers. Based on the above analysis and observations, this policy brief proposes the following alternative solutions

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<sup>14</sup>Article 11: Each Member shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers enjoy minimum wage coverage, where such coverage exists, and that

remuneration is established without discrimination based on sex.

towards the end of making decent wages a reality for domestic workers in Italy:

- **Formalizing the domestic work sector** through periodic regularization schemes that specifically target the sector. Formal jobs often come with benefits, such as social security and health insurance, which can effectively increase total compensation, while benefiting the Italian economy through increased tax income and social security contributions.
- Providing households with **public subsidies** to supplement the wages of their domestic workers in a context of Italy's family-based care culture and limited public provision.
- Designing continuous **training and education** for domestic workers. This can be achieved through the establishment of a skills partnership under the Pack for Skills, acknowledged in the European Care Strategy, which however currently targets only LTC workers. Training and education strongly and positively correlate with wages.
- Establishing **statutory minimum wages and wage structures** for the domestic work sector in place of its current collective bargaining agreements based on sector-specific rates. Due to the societal undervaluation of domestic work, official rates often fall short of domestic work's real value, resulting in poor wages.
- Conducting **public awareness campaigns** using various media to educate domestic workers who are mostly women and immigrant workers, as well as employers about domestic workers' right to decent living wages and fair employment practices.

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