



I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Irregularised migrant domestic workers in Naples, Italy.

Sector report

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the intersection of irregular migration, gender, and labour exploitation among women from the so-called former Eastern Bloc employed in Italy's domestic and care sector. Drawing on in-depth interviews with women from countries such as Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan, the research explores how irregular status affects their working and living conditions, their ability to maintain family life, and their health and well-being. The decision to focus on this group of women is motivated by their significant presence in Italy's care economy and the specific, yet often overlooked, vulnerabilities they face. Despite being perceived as "white" migrants, they occupy a marginalised position within Italy's racialised and gendered labour hierarchies, often seen as inferior, replaceable, and compliant. Many arrived with tourist visas, under visa-free regimes, or through informal channels, finding themselves trapped in cycles of irregular work and dependency.

The report analyses how legal and policy changes - including Poland's EU accession, the visa-free regime for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens, and the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) - have shaped, but often failed to resolve, their precarious situation. While these measures have facilitated legal stay for some, they rarely translate into stable, formal employment, leaving women exposed to exploitation even when technically regularised. The report concludes that legal reforms alone are insufficient without structural changes in Italy's labour market, welfare system, and migration governance. Addressing the persistent gap between formal legal status and lived reality is essential to ensure that Eastern European women working in Italy's domestic and care sector can access rights, protection, and dignity.

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1. Introduction

This research explores the relationship between irregular migration, gender, and labour exploitation in Italy's domestic and care sector, with a specific focus on women from the so-called former Eastern Bloc. It investigates how irregular legal status affects not only working conditions but also household life, family relationships, health, and long-term prospects, while intersecting with gender-specific vulnerabilities and ethnic discrimination. The decision to focus on this specific group of women responds to both demographic trends and structural realities. Over the past three decades, Italy has become a key destination for women from Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, Belarus, and other Eastern European countries, many of whom entered with tourist visas or under visa-free regimes, intending to work in the care economy. Despite being categorised as “white” migrants, these women occupy an ambiguous space within Italy's racial and ethnic hierarchies, seen as essential for elder care and domestic work, yet simultaneously perceived as inferior, replaceable, and often undocumented. This case study approach allows for a deeper understanding of how irregularity operates within this specific group, whose experiences are often overlooked despite their central role in filling the care gaps of an ageing Italian society.

A key objective of the research was also to examine how legal and policy changes over time have affected these women's status and opportunities. For instance, Poland's EU accession in 2004 formally opened access to legal residence and employment, yet many Polish women (especially in Southern Italy) remained informally employed, excluded from rights due to low-paid, unregulated work. Similarly, the introduction of visa-free travel for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens, and more recently the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians displaced by the war, promised improved legal pathways but, as the research shows, often failed to translate into stable employment or protection from exploitation.

Through qualitative interviews with women of different ages and at various stages of their migratory journeys (some undocumented, others partially or fully regularised), the research traces how legal reforms interact with structural barriers, informal labour markets, dependency on the employer, and personal trajectories. First of all, we aimed to analyse how irregular status shapes working and living conditions for these women in Italy's domestic and care sector. We were specifically interested in gendered, ethnic, and health-related consequences of irregularity, including exposure to exploitation, violence, and discrimination.

The findings reveal a gap between formal legal frameworks and lived realities. Despite evolving legal options, many women continue to face exploitation, exclusion, chronic insecurity, dependency on their employers, and their goodwill. This illustrates how irregularity is reproduced not only through law but through everyday practices within the care economy.

2. Context

2.1. Migrant workers and their families, in Italy and Naples

Migrant presence in Italy is a structural phenomenon involving over 5 million people, representing more than 9% of the population. In Campania, as of December 31, 2023, the resident foreign population was 263,680. The province of Naples hosts more than half of these. In Naples city, foreigners make up 6.1% of the population, with the largest communities from Sri Lanka, Ukraine, China, Pakistan, and Romania (ISTAT).

The Ukrainian community is notable for its high proportion of women (around 80%) and strong presence in domestic and care work. It is the second-largest foreign community in Naples, with over 7,700 residents, and 22,600 in the province, including Giugliano (1,134), San Giuseppe Vesuviano (719), Acerra (505), and Marigliano (461).

In Italy, 1,820,147 families consist of more than two people with at least one foreign member. Of these, 505,596 have four or more members. The most represented nationalities are Romanian, Albanian, Moroccan, Chinese, and Ukrainian. In 2021, 31.3% of families in absolute poverty were foreign. About 26% of migrant families live in such conditions (ISTAT).

Legally resident migrants in Italy can access healthcare, education, and some welfare benefits, but real access is often hindered by linguistic, bureaucratic, and cultural barriers. Major difficulties include family reunification and citizenship acquisition. Housing insecurity is common. Research highlights that migrant women often face obstacles accessing educational and care services for their children, due to a lack of documents, limited information, and time constraints from long working hours (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2023).

2.2. The domestic work sector and the impact of irregularity

In 2023, INPS recorded 833,874 registered domestic workers, estimated to be only 54% of the actual workforce (CENSIS, 2024). Among these, 68.9% are foreign-born and 88.3% are women (INPS, 2024). Most are over 45, with nearly a quarter aged 60+ (Eurofound, 2020). The workforce is almost evenly split between *colf* (cleaners) and *badanti* (caregivers). Italian, Filipino, and East Asian women tend to work as *colf*, while *badanti* are mostly from Eastern Europe and the Middle East (INPS, 2024).

Caregivers usually work over 29 hours a week but earn low wages (INPS, 2024). As of January 2025, the national collective agreement sets monthly pay for live-in caregivers from €870.13 to €1,405.58, depending on qualifications. Still, many work full-time for minimum wage while caring for people with severe conditions. Others are formally hired part-time but work full-time off-the-books (Pasquinelli & Pozzoli, 2021).

Informal employment is deeply rooted in Campania, especially Naples. CNEL (2024) reports the highest national rate of irregular work in the region: 43%. Sectors most affected include agriculture, construction, hospitality, and domestic services.

Domestic work in Campania involves about 45,000 registered workers, the majority being from Eastern Europe, particularly Romania, Moldova, and Poland.

2.3. Irregularity in the Italian care regime

Another important component of the context of our research is the Italian care regime, where we witness a phenomenon of “marketisation” of care, namely the spread of market arrangements to provide care services (Farris and Marchetti 2017). The types of care, the intermediaries, and the actors may vary: nursing-homes, transnational employment agencies, not for profit care-providers – just to name a few – are increasingly relevant in the Italian care-scenario.

Yet, especially in Southern Italy, the demand is primarily met through the private employment of migrant women as live-in caregivers (*badanti*). This labor regime aligns with Italy’s *familialistic* welfare model, based

on cash-for-care measures which encourage families to purchase care services privately, with limited state intervention (Da Roit & Sabatinelli, 2013). It also allows for the continuation of ‘ageing in place’ traditional care model, preserves traditional gender arrangements, and contains costs through the low-paid employment (Da Roit, 2010; Van Hooren, 2012).

Recent policy measures (Law 33/2023) have included incentives for formalising the sector through the introduction of voucher payments and tax exemptions for employers. Yet, the high share of unregistered workers is also a consequence of the scarce social security rights given to domestic workers (Borelli, 2021). For example, domestic and care workers have limited social security protections and have no sickness allowance, which is covered by the employer only for a limited time. They can be dismissed even without just cause, and maternity leave is only partially guaranteed.

2.4. Irregularity and migration policies

As anticipated in the I-CLAIM report “The Legal and Policy Infrastructure of Irregularity: Italy” (Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024), since 2005, Italy has used a quota system (*decreto flussi*) to regulate labour migration, including in domestic work. Major regularisations occurred in 2002, 2009, 2012, and again in 2020, during the pandemic, when the government legalised so-called “essential” workers (Law 34/2020). That regularisation received 176,848 applications but was largely criticised for procedural issues and the limitations in addressing workers’ needs (Pasquinelli & Rusmini, 2021; Portoghese et al., 2024)

The new quotas for migrant caregivers (DPCM 7/7/23) foresaw 9,500 new permits per year, totalling 28,500 in three years. However, employers’ organisations estimate a real need of 23,000 new caregivers annually, revealing a major gap between legal entry opportunities and actual labour needs (CENSIS, 2024). This discrepancy contributes to the persistence of informal labour.

A significant recent development has been the activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) following the war in Ukraine. This measure has enabled many Ukrainian women to enter Italy and find employment in the domestic and care sector, as well as to regularise their status if they had previously arrived irregularly. As of April 2025, approximately 4.3 million people across the EU have been granted Temporary Protection, with Italy ranking among the key host countries with over 166,000 persons (Eurostat 2025).

Employers’ organisations are taking a positive stand towards the Government proposals to link foreign recruitment to pre-departure training, but they worry about the power given to transnational agencies and the financial burden on families. Therefore, they call for greater social investment and fiscal incentives to support families with dependent members (Noviello & Parente, 2024).

2.5. Main actors for the rights of domestic workers

Domestic work legislation in Italy began in 1958, followed by health insurance in 1971, bargaining rights in 1969, and the first collective agreement in 1974 (Busi, 2020; Sarti, 2010). Since then, trade unions (Filcams-CGIL, Fisascat-CISL, Uiltucs-UIL, FEDERCOLF) and employer associations (Assindatcolf, Domina, Federcasalinghe, Fidaldo) have negotiated collective agreements. Some are also active at the European level (e.g., EFFE). Filcams-CGIL is part of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), which promoted ILO Convention No. 189, ratified by Italy in 2013.

After the reforms of the 1950s-70s, mobilisation declined in the 1980s, and no major reforms followed (Marchetti, Cherubini & Garofalo Geymonat 2021). As the sector became increasingly migrant-based, new groups emerged, including the Cape Verdean Association and Filipino Women's Council (Andall, 2000; Pojmann, 2006). USB Lavoro Domestico, led by migrant women, is also now active. NGOs like the "Ero Straniero" platform advocate for migrants' rights. Yet the exclusion of all these groups from tripartite negotiations limits institutional influence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

The research process unfolded between September and November 2024 in the city of Napoli and surrounding towns and included, first, a phase of participant observation and informal conversations, followed by a recruitment phase mainly based on snowballing, starting from contacts provided by stakeholders and other informal encounters.

In conclusion, data was gathered using a qualitative ethnographic methodology based on:

- Semi-structured interviews with 20 migrant women in domestic and care work. In addition, we had 5 follow-up interviews, conducted starting from a selection of objects brought by the interviewees. 9 of these interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian
- 5 interviews and several informal conversations with key experts and stakeholders such as union representatives, legal advisors, and employers' representatives.
- Participant observation was carried out such as help desks (CAF, patronati), trade union offices, churches, informal meeting places, and cultural or social gatherings.

In-depth interviews were conducted in places selected by participants, such as bars and other safe spaces, with interviews lasting between 30 minutes and 2 hours. A selection of 5 participants were invited to a follow-up interview based on the creative research method of 'object-oriented conversations'. In fact they were asked to bring to the appointment a selection of (photos of) objects which represented their migratory journey, of their work, of their family and of their plan for the future. Interviews starting from looking together to these objects and discussing about their choice revealed to be very fruitful to unwinding new issues and getting a more profound understanding of the participant's experience and personal views.

The ethics of the research were safeguarded by collecting verbal and/or written informed consent, the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying details, and finally, with attention to emotional well-being and willingness to pause or stop interviews. Important also to notice that 20 Euros voucher for supermarkets were offered to interviewees when fixing our appointment for a meeting. During the analysis, a combination of thematic content analysis and narrative analysis was employed to capture both the structure of experiences and the individual trajectories. To support this process, AI based software has been used for transcriptions and summaries of interviews.

Finally, the involvement of Iuliia Lashchuk, co-author of this report, being a Ukrainian researcher based in Italy, was central to the research process. Her role was particularly important in the participant recruitment and in the making of the interview, ensuring greater trust, linguistic ease, and cultural sensitivity. She

conducted the 9 interviews in Ukrainian or Russian. Her participation contributed to the ethical engagement by helping manage informed consent, privacy, and safety concerns during the interviews. She also made the transcription and translation into English of the interviews in Ukrainian and Russian, and she elaborated their analysis in collaboration with the team.

3.2. Overview of respondents

The selection of participants was made with attention to diversity in terms of age, country of origin, time of arrival and family configurations. The majority of interviewees arrived in Italy between the early 1990s and the late 2010s. Some arrived after 2022 due to the war in Ukraine. Their countries of origin were primarily Ukraine, with some from Georgia, Poland, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan. Their age ranged between 40 and 65 years, with the majority between 40 and 55 years. Family configurations varied, as many women were divorced, widowed, or separated. Half of them had children born or reunified in Italy, and the other half had children abroad or were childfree.

At the time of the interview, the majority had residence permits for domestic work or for temporary protection (for Ukrainians). As entry documents, most had used tourist visas or biometric passports (for short stays). The majority of them regularised their status through regularisation schemes, international protection (for Ukrainians), or by becoming Italian or EU citizens.

Most of the interviewees were currently employed as live-in caregivers (*badanti*), with others working as cleaners or per-hour caregivers. A few were unemployed or between jobs. When working, their monthly salary typically ranged from €700 to €1,000/month. Most had contracts with private employers. Only a few worked without contracts. Some contracts were part-time on paper, even when the actual work was full-time. Virtually none were employed through agencies or platforms or cooperatives.

4. Main Findings from Ethnography

4.1. Main types of irregularity in the sector

Our research showed that irregular migration status and irregular employment are closely intertwined. In most cases, irregularity arises after arrival, as all interviewees entered the country with some form of entry permit; however, these permits were often not intended for employment. Many women arrived in Italy on tourist visas or with biometric passports, intending to work (and in some instances, to settle with their families), yet without any formal work authorisation. This situation creates a legal grey area. Irregularity is particularly common among women under study. These women typically arrive alone, are often middle-aged, and many are mothers. The absence of support networks and the pressing need to send remittances to their families increases their vulnerability to exploitative and irregular working conditions. Out of necessity to support their families back home, but also because of a lack of language and a need for housing, they often accept offers with exploitative conditions and low pay. Women generally find jobs through brokers, who are frequently migrants themselves, having arrived in Italy years earlier and established local connections. Another common route is through personal networks, such as relatives or friends already residing in the country. These services are rarely provided free of charge. As one respondent, Nadiya, who holds TPD in Italy, but still works without a contract, explained: “They sell jobs. You know this, it’s nothing new.” (Nadiya, Ukraine).

In some cases, women attempt to regularise their status over time, often through regularisation schemes, the quota system, or, eventually, humanitarian channels. Even when women succeed in regularising their status (for instance, through amnesties or temporary protection), this does not guarantee stable or formal employment. Contracts, when they exist, often declare only a few working hours, while the actual job is full-time and live-in. Some Ukrainian women, eligible for Temporary Protection and legally residing in Italy, reported being unable to access the labour market through formal channels. Although the Temporary Protection Directive grants immediate access to employment, these women often still end up working without contracts.

Live-in workers are the most vulnerable: irregularity is particularly prevalent in roles requiring 24/7 availability, especially in elder care, where workers are highly dependent on their employers. Informal agreements dominate, wages are paid in cash, and no formal protections are in place.

Access to labour regularisation usually requires proof of a work contract and adequate housing, both of which are frequently under the control of employers. Women often reported that even if they succeed in convincing their employer to give them a contract, it is almost impossible to get the so-called “ospitalità” (hospitality), the document that proves that the worker lives with her employer. As this is a mandatory document to apply for the residence permit, women are forced to look for such a document elsewhere. Normally, brokers offer such services that are rarely free. Some women reported having to pay intermediaries for fraudulent contracts or to rent addresses for residency registration. As Anastasia said: “He only signed the contract, and I had to look for the residence elsewhere.” (Anastasia, Ukraine). In addition to this, women normally pay their taxes by themselves, as this is often a condition from their employer. This makes them earn even less, and some women prefer to remain irregular. Luba shares that she had to agree to this condition as regular status was the only chance for her to travel back to Ukraine and see her daughter: “I agreed, and instead of 440 [euros], I started receiving 340.” (Luba, Ukraine)

4.2. Impact of irregularity on working and living conditions

Irregular migration status profoundly shapes the working and living conditions of women in Italy’s domestic and care sector, creating cycles of vulnerability, dependence, and exploitation. The most severe consequences are found among live-in domestic workers, where irregularity combines with physical isolation and dependency on employers. Elina from Georgia recalled how her employers provided minimal food, restricted access to hot water and electricity, and subjected her to constant surveillance. Despite this, she tolerated these conditions to secure her residence permit through the Coronavirus Regularisation. She says: “That’s the situation I’m working in, because I needed a residency and a contract” (Elina, Georgia). This reflects how legal dependency can force acceptance of exploitative terms. In general, relationships with employers vary, while some offer support (e.g., in regularisation processes), others abuse their power. Co-residence amplifies dependence and often blurs personal boundaries. Some workers are treated as “family” in ways that justify overwork or lack of pay. Others face humiliation or harassment, including sexualised comments and invasions of privacy.

Control extends beyond the workplace. Anastasia, a Ukrainian caregiver, described an employer who dictated not only her work but also her personal life, monitoring calls, commenting on her clothing, and delaying her documents to keep her dependent. Others, like Luba, reported passport confiscations and withheld salaries as tools of control.

Legal precariousness also traps women in cycles of underpaid, insecure work. Wages for irregular caregivers often fall below legal minimums. Elina reported earning €800–900 monthly for live-in elder care, initially agreeing to take care of one person, but in reality, for four. Even when regularised, some women found themselves working long hours for minimal pay, often without rest days, highlighting that formal status does not guarantee improved conditions. Irregularity distorts the employment relationship: duties go beyond agreed terms, salaries are low, rest time is minimal or absent, and accommodations are often inadequate.

Women also report that the type of work is precarious itself as they work with old people and lose their job, and therefore their housing rights after the person passes away or is moved to an elderly house. Ajsha recalls: “You cannot even imagine how I cried” (Ajsha, Kirgizstan).

Health and safety are also compromised. Without documents, access to healthcare and basic protections is severely limited. Several women, including Oleksandra, delayed treatment for serious health conditions, ranging from gynaecological illnesses to cancer, because their irregular status or unstable employment restricted their access to public health services. Even with regularisation, health remains a precarious right. Women return to work shortly after surgery or treatment because they cannot afford to stop working. Irregular status also affects their rights to disability payments. For example, Inna, who developed breast cancer in Italy and underwent treatment, including surgery and chemotherapy, could not get her payments because of delays in renewing her residency permit. Disability payments were blocked, adding financial strain during her illness. Inna asks: “These are my rights, how can you do this?” (Inna, Ukraine). She had to go to work immediately after leaving the hospital to be able to financially support herself and her mother, who was also undergoing cancer treatment in Italy.

Emotional and psychological stress is constant. Irregular workers live with the fear of denunciation, exploitation, and eviction. This leads to anxiety, isolation, and sometimes silence in the face of abuse. The risk of being stopped on the street for a document check negatively affects their well-being. Luba, who arrived in Italy at the beginning of the 2000s, remembers that she was very scared being undocumented: “Well, we got to Naples, and everything was fine. Of course, without documents, of course, I was afraid”. (Luba, Ukraine).

4.3. Effects on household life

Irregularity prevents travel, creating prolonged and often indefinite separation from children, partners, and parents. As Anna, who migrated from Ukraine in 1997, explained, it took over a decade before she could bring her children to Italy. Family reunification remains rare, particularly for live-in workers who lack private housing. Many, like Lyudmyla, spent years living under exploitative conditions, unable to stabilise their status or bring loved ones. Kasia, who arrived from Poland in the 1990s, described how many Eastern European women became invisible, denied not only healthcare but even custody rights, with some being trapped in abusive relationships with Italian men or men from other migrant groups, powerless, because the children held only the father’s surname.

When family members are present in Italy, they often share the same irregular status or live precariously. Elżbieta, a Polish woman, raised her son as a single mother in Naples without consistent legal status. She reflected that, despite her fluent Italian and long residence, her employer used her difficult situation: “He was saying: you will never leave this job, you need it”. (Elżbieta, Poland). As working mothers, many women carry full emotional and financial responsibility for their children, both in Italy and transnationally. This often

forces them to accept exploitative jobs to meet urgent needs. Women like Liliya, raising her children alone after her husband's death, or Ajsha, caring for her disabled daughter, faced immense pressure to balance caregiving and income, often at the expense of their rights and well-being.

Housing insecurity is also common. Olha, who returned to Italy due to her daughter's illness, relied on church networks for shelter but still faces unstable living conditions. Her ability to formalise work remains limited, as caregiving responsibilities and irregular status hinder both employment and residence registration. Liliya's experience reflects similar struggles: frequent relocations, overcrowded housing, and difficulties integrating her children into schools disrupted their lives and deepened their sense of exclusion.

Irregularity also fragments family roles. Many women, like Marta, support families transnationally, sending remittances to children or spouses in Ukraine. Marta's decades of stable work, following early regularisation, are the exception. Others, like Inna, face impossible choices between health, work, and family stability, as irregularity and illness reduce their ability to contribute economically or return home.

In some cases, employers provided limited support, offering an address for registration or temporary assistance in emergencies, but most withheld help, and some even opposed family reunification to maintain control. As Anastasia's case shows, employers sometimes deliberately delay documentation to preserve dependency.

The effects ripple across generations. Children of irregular migrants face interrupted schooling, limited healthcare, and uncertain futures. Emotional strain is high, and household life remains marked by instability, fear, and exclusion. Irregularity undermines any possibility of stable family life, locally or across borders, and deepens isolation and emotional fragility.

4.4. Gendered implications of irregularity

Irregular status exposes women to deeply gendered vulnerabilities in the domestic and care sector, where private households are both the workplace and living space, blurring boundaries and increasing risks of abuse. Several women from our study reported gender-specific violence, including unwanted touching, verbal harassment, and control over their behaviour and appearance. Anastasia described how her employer dictated not only her tasks but also personal choices: "This skirt is too short" (Anastasia, Ukraine). Inna shared a similar experience, facing sexual harassment in her caregiving job, but remaining silent for fear of losing both her home and income. Co-residence eliminates the separation between personal and professional life, leaving women exposed to male employers or elderly care-receivers. Ivanna recounted inappropriate behaviour from a male employer, which forced her to leave her job abruptly. Many others, especially in elder care, reported constant surveillance, restricted movement, and fear of being alone with men in the household. When asked about their preferences to work with men or women, all the women said that they would prefer women.

Health is a critical gendered dimension of irregularity. Many women reported limited access to reproductive healthcare, including services for menopause, pregnancy, or contraception. For those with serious health conditions, irregular status significantly restricted their ability to access consistent treatment. Cancer emerged as a particularly prevalent issue among interviewees. Inna, who battled osteosarcoma, underwent life-saving treatment in Italy but faced exploitation and poor working conditions after recovery, despite health restrictions. Others, like Inna and Oleksandra, dealt with breast or gynaecological cancers, navigating

medical treatment alongside precarious work and bureaucratic obstacles. For many, irregularity, delayed diagnosis, interrupted care, or blocked disability payments.

In this context, irregularity is not only a legal condition but a deeply gendered experience, shaping every aspect of women's work, family life, and bodily integrity.

4.5. Racial and ethnic discrimination

Racialized and ethnic discrimination intersect with irregularity. Although women under study are racialised as "white," they still face ethnic hierarchies that frame them as inferior, replaceable, and inherently compliant.

Kasia, a Polish woman, reflected on this ethnic ranking when no one wanted to make a document for Polish people: "But you, Poles, why do you need documents for?" (Kasia, Poland). Despite her qualifications and fluency in Italian, she was routinely devalued and placed at the bottom of the labour hierarchy, where Filipina women were sometimes regarded as more "prestigious" domestic workers.

Discrimination is particularly severe in the housing market. Women reported being denied rental opportunities after landlords heard their foreign accents or realised they were not native Italians. Zina described repeated refusals: "As soon as they hear an Eastern accent, they don't show you an apartment." (Zina, Ukraine). Even when legal status was not in question, ethnic bias persisted.

Language was a major barrier. Poor Italian proficiency not only blocked access to public services but also served as a marker of foreignness, triggering exclusion and mistreatment. Several women were denied healthcare or faced demeaning comments in hospitals and public offices.

Without documents, women have limited or no recourse when facing abuse, racism, or exclusion. Fear of deportation or job loss often silences victims, sustaining the power imbalance between migrant workers and employers. But even after regularisation, discrimination does not disappear. Zina, despite holding Italian citizenship, still faced difficulties securing work outside the domestic sector, partly due to persistent ethnic profiling and the stigma attached to care work traditionally done by Eastern European women.

Ethnic and racial discrimination, therefore, operates not only through individual prejudice but through systemic structures that restrict access to housing, services, and mobility. Irregularity reinforces these barriers by keeping women isolated, silenced, and economically dependent, leaving little room to contest or escape unfair treatment.

4.6. Activism and solidarity

Despite the isolation and vulnerabilities linked to irregularity, some women have engaged in forms of activism and solidarity, often starting from personal experience. Kasia, who arrived from Poland in the 1990s, became active in informal support networks after witnessing the exploitation and invisibility of other Eastern European women. She helped organise assistance for undocumented mothers, including those fleeing abusive relationships or at risk of losing their children. Others, like Zina, transitioned into formal roles supporting migrants after years of precarious domestic work. She was actively involved in reception and mentoring for people fleeing the war in Ukraine and later worked with integration projects.

Trade unions and migrant associations also played a role, though access to them was uneven. Elina managed to claim back her lost documents with union support, while Luba helped other women to pursue legal action against exploitative employers, relying on her own experience. In this context, solidarity emerges as both a coping strategy and a form of resistance to exploitation and exclusion. However, many women remain excluded from formal activism due to time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, or fear linked to their legal status.

5. Concluding Remarks

All the women interviewed live or have lived in situations of vulnerability due to a combination of factors in their work and/or personal lives, or those of their dependents (e.g., illness, violence, poverty, war, etc.). In this context, irregular legal status and/or working conditions are either determining or aggravating factors. Regularisation, therefore, enables them to pursue greater well-being and access to rights across all areas of life.

A dual dynamic emerges. On one hand, the role of employers can be ambivalent: they may offer valuable support and help, but also be responsible for abuse and exploitation. On the other hand, the situation of the workers' families plays a key role: their well-being can support the worker's stability and integration, or conversely, lead to increased vulnerability.

Key findings demonstrate that irregularity and informal employment are deeply intertwined, with many women working without contracts, often in live-in care roles, where dependency on employers fosters exploitation and control. Despite legal pathways, structural obstacles (such as lack of contracts, inaccessible housing, and bureaucratic complexity) keep many women in long-term precarity and circle of irregularity. Women also face gender-specific vulnerabilities, including sexual harassment, restrictions on personal freedoms, and barriers to reproductive and general healthcare. Irregularity heavily affects family life: it restricts travel, complicates family reunification, and affects emotional wellbeing, especially for mothers separated from their children. Racial and ethnic discrimination, though less visible for Eastern European women, operates through language barriers, housing exclusion, and workplace hierarchies. At the same time, informal networks, solidarity initiatives, and, in some cases, activism, provide essential support, though access to formal protection remains limited.

In conclusion, based on our ethnography and discussion with relevant stakeholder, we would like to draw attention to the following elements which might be relevant in a policy perspective:

- The importance of regularisation is often not fully understood by either workers or employers. Legal status “has a cost” that is only considered worth paying if it brings concrete benefits in return.
- To obtain regularisation, migrant workers often have to accept forms of exchange, either monetary or “in kind”, with both Italians and fellow nationals. These exchanges typically concern legal requirements that are difficult to meet, such as proof of housing or accommodation suitability, or financial guarantees for regularisation processes.
- The women interviewed show strong agency in seeking solutions and improving their own conditions and those of their families.
- In the case of women from the former Soviet bloc, specific forms of discrimination and mistreatment persist, even though they are perceived as “white.”

To address the challenges faced by migrant domestic workers requires action on multiple fronts. First, a broader cultural shift is needed to recognize and value domestic and care work as essential labor, and to combat the social stigmas often attached to migrant women and irregular work. Second, there is an urgent need to simplify bureaucratic procedures and eliminate the current interdependence between different administrative processes—such as those related to residence permits, employment contracts, and welfare access—which often create deadlocks and deepen vulnerability. Third, it is crucial to actively promote solidarity and mutual support within migrant communities, along with access to Italian language education. Language skills not only improve everyday autonomy but also enable fuller participation in social and institutional life, including access to rights and protections.

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