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Between regularity and informality: migrant women employed in the personal and household services in Italy

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Short abstract (250 words)

This paper investigates the incidence and determinants of informal employment among migrant women employed in the Personal and Household Services (PHS) in Italy. The analysis draws on new and original data from the FOLCSI survey on “Training, Employment, Care Work and Health of Immigrants and People with Migration Background in Italy”, which was conducted in 2024 and includes 12,608 adults with a migration background, regardless their citizenship and legal presence status, and interviewed in four Italian regions, namely: Lombardy, Lazio, Campania and Apulia. Focusing on female workers, the study compares the employment characteristics of those engaged in PHS with those employed in other occupational sectors. A variable considering job regularity was constructed to capture the degree of contractual formality, distinguishing between regular, partial-regular and informal employment. Descriptive findings reveal that less than 40% of PHS workers are employed under fully regular contracts, while nearly one-third work in fully informal arrangements. Compared to other female workers, domestic and care workers are significantly more exposed to contractual irregularity and partial-regular. Multivariate logistic regressions, controlling for age and education, confirm that the PHS sector is systematically associated with higher probabilities of part-time employment (52%), unskilled occupations (67%), and informal work (74%), even when compositional effects are considered. Conversely, the likelihood of earning less than €400 per month is slightly lower among domestic workers, potentially reflecting in-kind benefits or the stability of regular contracts. Overall, results highlight that informality is a structural feature of the PHS sector, deeply intertwined with gendered and migratory inequalities.

Extended abstract (2-4 pages)

Introduction

The population aging, affecting European nations, combined with the ever-increasing influx of women into the labor market, has triggered a progressive surge in the demand for personal and household services (since now only PHS, according to the 2012 European Commission definition), particularly for the elderly people (Shutes, 2012). Given native-born workers do not satisfy this growing demand, foreigners play a decisive role. According to the National Social Security Institute (INPS), the Italian regular PHS workers are 817,403 in 2024, among which 60.4% are foreign women. However naturalized people as well as irregular workers are not counted.

A further crucial element concerns the spread of informal work within the sector. In fact, most of the care and assistance activities take place in private and poorly regulated contexts, where working relationships are often based on verbal agreements and high time flexibility. A recent estimate reports that the number of PHS workers is more than double if irregular workers are considered: the sector employs over 1.7 million people according to Italian Agencies (www.agi.it). This “informality” favours the vulnerability of female workers, in Italy the overlap between the domestic sphere and the workspace, the absence of effective institutional control and the difficulty of access to social protection mechanisms contribute to making care work one of the segments most exposed to phenomena of contractual irregularity and occupational invisibility (Triandafyllidou e Bartolini 2020).

However, a notable dearth of specific studies exists concerning these issues, as well as a comparative quantitative approach with other work sectors (Van Hooren, 2012; Kupets, 2016). In Italy, this can be attributed to the need to use sample surveys only (and not register data) and the challenge of obtaining representative sample sizes given the relatively small scale of this workforce which is equal to 4.6% of total employment and 6% of employment. Nonetheless, such analyses are essential due to the increasing significant role the foreign workers assume in ageing European societies in order to identify barriers preventing full integration and to define suitable actions to promote inclusion (Reyneri, 2017).

Our goals are to partially fill this knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive picture of regular and irregular PHS female workers compared to female workers in other sectors. The contribution provides original and valuable insights to figure out their working conditions in a comparative manner. In particular, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: To what extent are PHS female workers exposed to job-irregularity compared to other female workers?

RQ2: Do irregular PHS workers suffer more unfavourable occupational conditions than the PHS regular ones and than irregular workers employed in other sector?

The outcomes will contribute to describe the inequality and precariousness in this sector, offering useful insights for the design of policies promoting positive work and social inclusion.

Theoretical focus

The PHS sector represents one of the most precarious and segmented work sectors in the contemporary European labor market. These jobs are characterized by low wages, difficult working conditions, poor opportunities for professional development, and high turnover rates (Fullin and Reyneri, 2011). In many cases, such activities are carried out in the informal market, rendering workers unprotected and subject to precarious working conditions (Marchetti, 2022).

The regulatory fragmentation favours the structural vulnerability of female workers in PHS, exacerbating dynamics of social isolation, poor union representation and difficulty in accessing formal labor protection mechanisms. These conditions are the result of a distorted balance between restrictive migration regimes and structural demand for cheap labour, in which foreign women workers occupy secondary segments of the labour market, characterised by low qualifications, extreme flexibility and weak contractual guarantees (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020). In particular, domestic and care work emerges as an area in which the privatization of care needs and the lack of public services have shifted the responsibility for social reproduction to families – and therefore to individualized employment relationships (Bettio, Simonazzi and Villa, 2006; From Roit and Weicht, 2013).

Within these contexts, the line between regular and informal work is blurred. Ruhs and Anderson (2006) introduced the concept of semi-compliance, i.e. the condition of those who, despite having a legal residence

permit, work in partial violation of the conditions provided for by their legal status. This intermediate category between regularity and irregularity effectively describes the condition of many migrant workers in PHS, who often alternate formal contracts with periods of informal or partially declared work. This regime of "conditional legality" produces a structural legal and occupational vulnerability, in which female workers, although "legally" present, remain exposed to practices of exploitation and dequalification.

From a theoretical point of view, the structural-segmented approach (Piore, 1979; Reyneri and Fullin, 2011) allows us to understand how the European labour market is organised in a double circuit: a regulated, stable and protected primary sector, and a secondary sector characterised by instability, poor protection and low wages, in which migrant workers and, in particular, women employed in care work are concentrated. This segmentation, far from being a temporary distortion, responds to structural logics of flexibilization of work and outsourcing of care by family welfare systems (Van Hooren, 2012).

The work in PHS constitutes a paradigmatic terrain for observing the intersection between irregularity, gender and migration, and for understanding how labour and immigration policies contribute to reproducing – rather than correcting – forms of segregation and structural vulnerability. Addressing irregular migrant labour cannot be limited to border control or the repression of contractual violations: employment and welfare systems need to be reformed, opening regular channels of access and ensuring decent working conditions in those sectors, such as PHS, where the demand for migrant labour is now structural (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020).

Data and methods

We used new and original data coming from the FOLCSI survey conducted in 2024 on "Training, Employment, Care Work and Health of Immigrants and People with Migration Background in Italy" on a sample of 12,608 adult men and women with foreign origin (born-abroad adults and their immediate descendants, regardless of citizenship and legal status) interviewed in four Italian regions, namely: Lombardy (in the North of Italy), Lazio (in the Centre), Campania and Puglia (in the South).

The definition of PHS in the framework of the employment package (European Commission, 2012) cover jobs and services carried out to support care and non-care activities. In the used dataset, we identified the target population of women employed in PHS by selecting the following categories of professions: companion staff and qualified family service personnel, child care and related professions, personal care workers, domestic workers and related professions. The other employed women are classified as workers in other sectors.

The final sample concerns 2,629 female workers (1,708 other workers and 921 PHS workers), unweighted values, to which the percentages reported in the weighted data column correspond.

A variable on contract regularity was constructed to distinguish between regular and informal forms of employment. Regular job is defined as employment with a written contract and fully declared hours, and as informal job all other forms, i.e. partially declared contracts or verbal agreements. In a first phase, a three-mode version was generated that is useful for describing the distribution of the phenomenon within our subpopulation and for distinguishing between different degrees of contractual formality. In this variable, workers with a written contract and fully declared hours were classified as regular, those with a written contract but hours only partially declared as regular-partial, while workers who declared that they had a purely verbal agreement were considered informal. In a second phase, for the estimation of the models, the variable was simplified into a binary version, in which employee work with a written contract and fully declared hours was defined as Regular, and all other forms as Informal. Subsequently, we conduct four different multivariate logistic analyses to assess the unfavourable/favourable working conditions of workers by occupational sectors (domestic and other), considering as control variables socio-demographic characteristics (age and education) to edge against compositional effects. In particular, we examine, through the predicted probabilities, the following employment-related dependent variables: skilled work (1 if the job is elementary job, 0 otherwise), part-time job (1 if the respondent works part-time and 0 otherwise), informal work (1 if the work is classified informal, 0 otherwise), low income (1 if the respondent is low 400 euros income worker and 0 if she is over 400 euros per month).

First preliminary results and discussions

Table 1 shows the distribution of the variable regularity of work for women employed in PHS and for those employed in other sectors. Overall, the data show a marked heterogeneity between the two occupational groups. Among the workers employed in the PHS, less than four out of ten (38.8%) are holders of a fully regular contract (with hours fully declared). The share of regular-partial employment – i.e. written contracts but with only partially declared hours – is 32.2%, while almost a third (29.0%) of PHS workers work in

conditions of full informality, based on a verbal agreement. Among female workers employed in other sectors, the situation appears significantly more stable and regulated: 68.3% have a written and declared contract, 23.2% fall into the regular-partial category, and only 8.5% work informally.

Table 1 - *Contractual condition of female workers with migration background by occupational sector. Percentage and absolute values. Italy.*

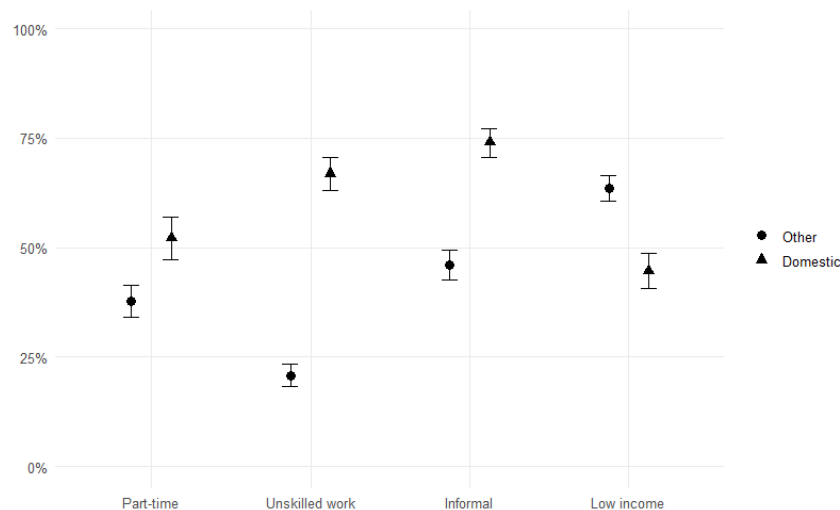
Contractual condition	Unweighted abs. value		Column weighted %	
	Other worker	PHS workers	Other worker	PHS workers
Regular	1,062	331	68.3%	38.8%
Regular-partial	412	300	23.2%	32.2%
Informal	234	290	8.5%	29.0%
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,708</i>	<i>921</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Source: our elaboration on FOLCSI data, 2024.

This evidence confirms what has been observed in the literature (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020; Ambrosini, 2013; Ruhs and Anderson, 2006), according to which domestic and care work constitutes a hybrid employment space, where the barriers between regularity and informality are porous and semi-compliance conditions become an integral part of the structure of the migrant female labour market (RQ1).

Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities deriving from multivariate logistic regression. The results clearly show that the domestic and care sector stands out for a higher incidence of disadvantageous working conditions than the other sectors. The estimated probability of doing an unskilled job is 66.9% among domestic workers, compared to 20.6% of the others. Even if age and education are kept constant, the gap remains wide and statistically significant, confirming the strong occupational segregation that characterizes the PHS sector, where low-skilled jobs and reduced prospects for professional mobility prevail. Women employed in PHS have a predicted probability of part-time employment of 52.1%, compared to 37.7% among other workers. This reflects the inherently fragmented nature of care and domestic work, often organised in discontinuous or multiple hours, with short contracts and little stability. The probability of being employed informally reaches 74.0% among domestic workers, compared to 46.0% among others. This result highlights how contractual precariousness and semi-formality represent structural features of the PHS sector, in line with what has been documented in the literature (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020; Ruhs and Anderson, 2006). Contrary to expectations, the probability of receiving a monthly income of less than 400 euros is lower for domestic workers (44.6%) than for others (63.6%). This evidence could reflect the presence of non-monetary compensation (food, accommodation) in care work or relatively more stable wages in cases of regular, full-time employment. However, the figure should not be interpreted as an indicator of economic advantage, as average incomes remain low overall and associated with poor social protection. Overall, the models confirm that care and domestic work constitutes a highly segregated and vulnerable segment of the female labour market, where the chances of unskilled, informal and part-time employment are significantly higher even with the same age and education. These results suggest that contractual precariousness and low qualification do not depend solely on the individual characteristics of female workers, but represent structural outcomes of a sector characterized by poor regulation, weak institutional protection and persistent informality.

Figure 1 – *Predicted probabilities of Part-Time, Unskilled, Informal, and Low-Income Employment for Women Employed in Personal and Household Services (PHS) and Other Industries, Controlling for Age and Education Level.*



Control variables: age, educational level

Source: our elaboration on FOLCSI data, 2024

Among the different dimensions considered, work informality emerges as the most relevant and structural characteristic of work, significantly affecting the vulnerable conditions of female workers, particularly in the PHS sector. In the light of this evidence, the next developments of the research will be oriented towards deepening the phenomenon of informal work and understand if irregular PHS workers suffer more unfavourable occupational conditions than the PHS regular ones and than irregular workers employed in other sector. For this purpose, job characteristics inserted in figure 1 will be interrelated to the contractual condition by employment sector.

Furthermore we will consider which factors are mostly associated to irregular (PHS and other) works in comparison with regular ones. In particular family (such as household type), migratory (such as length of stay), and socio-cultural inclusion (such as naturalization) factors will be considered, with the aim of providing useful indications for the definition of more effective protection and inclusion policies.

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