
The gaps in rights protection experienced by migrant domestic workers have received increased attention from scholars and policy makers in recent years, in particular with the adoption of the International Labour Organisation’s Domestic Workers’ Convention in 2011. Among other things, the Convention requires States to take measures to ensure fair and decent working conditions and to ensure equal treatment between domestic workers and other workers as regards compensation and benefits (for example, maternity benefits), with the overarching objective of assisting the ‘transition from an exploitative, socially marginalised status, to what the ILO refers to as a “decent work” core’. While all EU Member States, with the notable exception of the United Kingdom, voted to adopt the Domestic Workers’ Convention, States have been slow to ratify and consequently become legally bound by its provisions. In January 2013, Italy became the first EU Member State to ratify the Convention and, at EU level, the European Commission has presented a proposal for a Council Decision expressly authorising ratification by Member States.

The Domestic Workers Convention is complemented by other standard setting initiatives in the international sphere, most notably the first general comment produced by the UN Committee on Migrant Workers and their Families, specifically dedicated to ‘Migrant Domestic Workers’. As this timely volume edited by Anna Triandafyllidou clearly illustrates, however, there is a vast gap between these international standards and the actual living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in an irregular situation. As the book shows, the source of the particular vulnerability of this group of workers is two-pronged: working in the isolated, difficult-to-regulate arena of the private home and having an irregular migration status, which enhances their susceptibility to exploitation.

The book has its genesis in a project funded by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, as part of its broader research agenda on irregular migrants in the EU, and is based on empirical research conducted in seven countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain), largely consisting of semi-structured interviews with migrant domestic workers. Seven out of the eight country chapters

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3) This proposal has been presented ‘because the Member States cannot autonomously ratify ILO Conventions without prior authorisation by the Council in respect of those parts of the Convention which fall under EU competence.’ See European Commission Press Release, ‘Working conditions: Commission urges Member States to implement ILO domestic workers convention’ (IP/13/264, 21 March 2013).
4) Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, General Comment No. 1 on Migrant Domestic Workers (UN Doc CMW/C/GC/1, 23 February 2011).
(with the addition of the Netherlands to the countries listed above) are based on this empirical research. The individual contributions, and the book itself, differ from the EU FRA report published on foot of the study as they offer a ‘sociological and policy analysis of the conditions experienced by migrant domestic workers’ and the ‘interaction of specific policy frames with needs and wants of MDWs’. This book is, thus, a valuable contribution to the state of the research in this area, highlighting the issues faced by this precarious and largely invisible workforce, primarily ‘from the perspectives of the irregular immigrants themselves’. The essential contribution of this research is to ‘give voice to some people who care but are not cared for’, thereby adding the workers’ perspective to what can become paternalistic discussions of standards, monitoring and enforcement.

Chapter 1, written by Anna Triandafyllidou, sets out the aims of the book, explains some key concepts and themes and situates the study in the wider literature on domestic work and migration for domestic work. The gendered nature of domestic work is a key feature of the analysis, as is the related issue of the push and pull factors driving migration for domestic work. The commodification and privatisation of care in Europe, as the book notes, has been driven by increased female participation in the labour force together with changes in the welfare state and ageing populations. Rather than resulting in a more equitable division of the ‘reproductive tasks’ of cooking, cleaning and care-giving for the young and the elderly, the result of these societal changes has been the outsourcing of household and care tasks to a third party, usually a woman and often a migrant woman. The institution of domestic work is oft-criticised by feminist commentators as reproducing inequalities based on gender, class and race and Lutz has commented elsewhere that whether paid domestic work is good or bad for women is ‘unfinished business’ from a feminist perspective. The chapter acknowledges these debates without delving into them in too much detail, rightly pointing out that ‘whether commodification of care is good or bad and for whom is a complicated research and policy question’.

Notwithstanding these philosophical and theoretical problems, the demand for domestic workers in wealthy regions of the world has been met by migration of women from poorer regions – often with the result that they leave their own families behind. The factors driving the particular demand for migrant domestic

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7) Ibid.
9) Irregular Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe, at p. xvi.
11) Irregular Migrant Domestic Workers in Europe, at p. 5.