

**Refugee Women Doing Paid Domestic Work:  
Disempowering structures of refugee settlement and the question of agency**  
by  
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Literature on migration, globalisation and domestic work reveals that women migrants take on paid domestic work as their main survival strategy in the receiving society (Anderson, 2000, 2001; Cole *et al.*, 2006; Lutz, 2008a). Moreover, in the context of forced migration, as my research and other studies demonstrate, women working in domestic services are often main providers for their families (e.g. Lutz, 2008a; Harzig, 2006; Korac 2009).

Inequalities between rich and poor regions, as many authors argue, exploit the vulnerabilities of people migrating from poor(er) countries, placing them in low status jobs, such as paid domestic work. Migrant domestic workers as well as women who become domestic workers as part of their migration strategy, leave their places of origin and migrate to countries and economies of the world where they can earn more and sustain their families left behind. In this sense, as Morokvasic points out, these women leave home because they want their homes to be sustained and not because they wish to start and establish a new home somewhere else (Morokvasic, 1994 cited in Lutz, 2008a:3). This type of orientation to place is underpinned by transnational households and family lives, characterised by limited integration into the host society, often leading to the construction of the notion of ‘perpetual foreigner’ among migrant women doing paid domestic work (Parreñas 2008). Although they play a vital role in the economy of the developed world, they are often subjected to exploitation, ill-treatment and deprived of basic rights (Anderson, 2001; Parreñas 2001). The perilous situation of migrant women doing paid domestic work is structurally determined by the legal, economic, social and political conditions of their settlement.

Unlike migrant women, many of whom leave their homes in order to sustain them, refugee women who flee armed violence and socio-political turmoil leave their places of origin in search of safety and of a place to establish a new home.<sup>1</sup> Their options, choices and opportunities are severely constrained by the disempowering and imposing structures underpinning forcible displacement. Like the overwhelming majority of migrant women, women refugees find work in the domestic service sector of receiving societies, adding one more layer of oppression to their already precarious situations.

Yet, if we examine specific refugee populations and their contexts of settlement, if we look more closely at the actual women (and men) who flee violence and socio-political turmoil, their aims, short and longer-term goals, we may be able to look beyond macro, meso and micro structures of exploitation embedded in and linked to paid domestic work as well as forcible displacement. This can enable us to understand not only how macro-scale structures shape settlement experiences and affect the construction of agency, but also how women's agency powering specific contexts can transcend exploitative conditions and relationships to fulfil their individual aims, goals and needs.

In this sense, in this article I examine two disempowering contexts, underpinned by imposing repressive and exploitative structures. Instead of analysing how refugee women are being pushed around within these structures and how they are victimised by exploitation and/or violence, I shall explore their agency by examining the micro-level structures of their day-to-day lives. I want to emphasise how exile and

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that the line between migrant and refugee women is often blurred. Indeed, many women in so-called 'peace time' are opting for migration in order to escape domestic violence. In this article, however, I focus on millions of women who are confronted with armed, militarized violence and radical political turmoil forcing them to flee their places of origin in search of safety and a place to rebuild their homes.

settlement experiences, intersecting with women's socially constructed roles and identities, may become processes through which they 'resist' as they gradually 'recuperate' power (Butler 1997) over their lives by creating or opening themselves up to new opportunities.

More specifically, I want to explore the role and meaning of paid domestic work in the lives of women refugees by examining multiple and intersecting factors that shape their settlement goals, aims, survival strategies and experiences in exile. I shall focus on gendered experiences of settlement of women who fled war-torn Yugoslavia and found refuge in Rome.<sup>2</sup> I argue that their orientation to place, their aim to gain control over and reconstruct their lives in the receiving society is central to the perceived and actual role of paid domestic work in their settlement. Their place-making efforts to establish a new home in Italy intersect with their class, as well as ethnic/racial background; they are also underpinned by their legal status in the receiving society. These intersections are central to their experiences of settlement and they importantly shape their notions of loss and gain, disempowerment and empowerment in exile.

### ***Doing Paid Domestic Work in Exile: Disempowering structures and the question of agency***

Women's agency is central to developing strategies of survival and betterment. It is embedded in their willingness to renegotiate their gender and other intersecting identities in order to adapt to the new circumstances in exile by creating opportunities for themselves. Often these 'opportunities', initially at least, mean underemployment and loss of social status. Despite these setbacks, they actively resist exploitation,

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<sup>2</sup> This article reflects upon some aspects of my research on settlement of refugees in Italy, and the Netherlands (Korac 2009).

marginalisation and stigmatisation. Their resistance is not only about surviving the exploitation and victimisation associated with displacement and paid domestic work. It is also often about transforming these experiences into an opportunity, into a future more meaningful life in exile.

Refugees create opportunities within the limitations of their predicament. This process is influenced by the intersection of micro and macro factors. Individual and group social positioning and local dynamics intersect with structural and global dynamics in different ways in specific contexts. This process is critically shaped by refugees themselves through their own actions. These are negotiated at different levels and scale of organization through networks of relations with various actors, including governmental and other institutions. Agency is hence ‘embodied in social relations’ (Long 2001: 15).

Settlement and the process of incorporation in the new society is a ‘goal oriented’ process entailing major obstacles that have to be negotiated before newcomers can attain a level of societal participation that is in harmony with their integration goals (Valtonen 1998:57). However, the prime determinant of subjective wellbeing of refugees during this process, as Valtonen’s research reveals, is not the degree of discrepancy between goals and actual conditions of settlement (Valtonen 1998). Rather, their subjective wellbeing is determined by ‘the extent to which agency can be exercised in the resettlement situation’ (Valtonen, 1998:57).

Researchers are increasingly emphasising the importance of agency for studying the experiences of people fleeing their places of origin and their forced dislocation (e.g., Essed et al. 2004; Korac 2003, 2005, 2009; Turton 2003). The notion of refugees and other migrants as social actors who have the ‘capacity to process social experience and devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion’

(Long 1992: 22) has been introduced into the field of (forced) migration with the application of Giddens' concept of structuration to migration (e.g., Richmond 1993). Giddens (1984: 173) pointed out that social structures not only constrain behaviour and peoples' social lives, but also enable their actions. While he argued that the constitution of social structures cannot be understood without allowing for human agency, he viewed agency as embedded within institutional structures and processes (Giddens 1984: 11). This should not imply however that an actor 'follows a pre-given ideological script' (Dissanayake 1996: 8, cited in Long 2001: 15). Social actors and their agency are guided by both reflexivity and motivation. Turner (1988), among others, argued that a theoretical interpretation of social action must go beyond cognition and consciousness to include perceptions of security, trust, group inclusion, intersubjective understanding, and symbolic as well as material gratification, as important factors shaping agency.

The main challenge here, as Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 1002) contend, is to analyse the variable interplay between structure and agency. This requires moving away from the understanding that the two are either in insurmountable opposition or mutually constitutive in a direct and stable way (Ibid.: 1002). If agency is understood as 'the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments', then, 'the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms these structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations' (Ibid.: 970).

As social actors, refugees are continuously creating 'room for manoeuvre' (Long 2001) in the context of the severely limited options and choices associated with forcible dislocation. They are actively engaged in confronting liminality characterised by uncertainty and improvised existence based upon ad hoc short-term strategies at

best, or day-to-day survival at worst. The liminal character of refugee existence is a consequence of the separation that is inherent in forced movements and therefore is part and parcel of the very nature of the experiences of forced migrants. It is also produced and reinforced by a variety of policy ‘solutions’ to the refugee ‘problem’, which keep people fleeing their countries of origin in situations of prolonged insecurity concerning their legal status and social rights.

While liminal existence is indeed a disempowering experience, it is also a condition that refugees actively confront in a variety of ways, although their strategies and actions are not always based on rational decisions and/or options. As Long (2001) points out, choices, strategies, and behaviours of social actors, as individuals or groups, are shaped by ‘larger frames of meaning and action’ (Ibid.: 14) formed through the links between the ‘small’ worlds of actors, and larger-scale ‘global’ phenomena and structures (Ibid.). He argues it is crucial to contextualise actors’ strategies through a systematic ethnographic understanding of the lived experiences (Long 2001:14–15). Without contextualisation, the notion of refugee agency is as abstract as the notion of victimhood.

Understanding agency and contextualizing actors also imply analytical interest in the past, present and future of ‘agentic processes’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Agency has creative and reconstructive dimensions, which can be fully captured if our analytic attention is focused upon ‘agentic processes’ oriented towards future possibilities (ibid.: 984). Actors, as they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, are capable of distancing themselves ‘from the schemas, habits and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions.’ (Ibid.: 984).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is useful in explaining how different formative experiences (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, race) shape ‘the set of dispositions, reflexes

and forms of behaviour' (2000: 19) through which actors come to know how to act in particular social worlds. He stresses that habitus cannot be reduced to structures because it develops through internalization of the objective structures of the environment in the form of practices (Bourdieu 1977). According to Bourdieu, habitus is not the fate of certain actors/people, but '*an open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures.' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996, 133).

The development of social capital is a very important element in providing refugees with opportunities and possibilities for reshaping this open system of dispositions. Links and communication with the local populations in the places of settlement can help them develop social and cultural competence in these new socio-cultural environments, as well as enhance the use of their human capital. In this sense, I argue that in specific circumstances paid domestic work can provide refugee women with opportunities for enhancing development their social capital as well as their cultural competence, effectively empowering them to respond more effectively to the challenges of disempowering situations of settlement.

### ***The Context: Paid domestic work in Italy and the women in my study***

Paid domestic work in Italy is increasingly becoming the occupation of migrants, and migrant women in particular (Cole *et al.*, 2006). They started arriving in the 1960s, from Cape Verde, Somalia and Ethiopia, to be followed by women from Philippines who have dominated the sector until the 2000, when the number of migrant women from East Europe increased sharply (Colombo 2007). In Rome, however, Filipinos are still one of the largest migrant groups in the city (Parreñas, 2008). Despite this



significant increase in the number of (women) migrants doing paid domestic work, it is important to point out that migrant women (and men) in Italy are overwhelmingly employed as live-in housekeepers, childminders or those caring for elderly, while Italian domestic workers still dominate part-time work in the sector (Colombo 2007; Scrinzi 2008).

Unlike local, Italian women, immigrant women do not necessarily come from the poorest strata of society and they usually have above average education (Harzig, 2006). Indeed, these are the characteristics of the European situation in general, as Lutz (2008a) documents. In fact, some are middle-class, migrating after they obtained higher education and sometimes after years of professional experience (2008:3). Consequently, some of these women have equal and at times even higher levels of education than their employers, as Colombo (2007: 217) documents. She further points out that status of their jobs in their countries of origin, although not the income also often equals and at times even exceeds the professional status of people they work for in the destination countries (*Ibid.*). These women move alone, often leaving behind partners and children.

Many of the women I met in Rome fit this class and educational profile. The majority fled their places of origin alone and did not have any family networks in Italy. They were, however, overwhelmingly single and without children. Very importantly, as I emphasised earlier, they fled their homes primarily in search of safety and a place to establish a new home. Consequently, their settlement goals importantly shape their orientation to place, the development of coping strategies and ideas of connecting and belonging.

Upon their arrival in Italy and Rome people fleeing conflict(s) in Yugoslavia were granted temporary permits to stay renewable annually, based on a special

government decree. Because their stay was classified as temporary they did not qualify for permanent resident status, initially at least. This type of status is indeed problematic, because it implies a continuous threat of expulsion and hence creates insecurity and causes anxiety among people who hold such permits. Moreover, those granted temporary, humanitarian status do not have the right to family reunification, a fact that adds to their precarious situation. In this sense, there is no doubt that not allowing people fleeing war-torn Yugoslavia to claim asylum under the Geneva Convention caused serious problems for them (Vincenzi 2000; Sigona 2005).

Nonetheless, in considering the situation of people granted humanitarian status in Italy based on special government decrees it is also important to acknowledge that although temporary (i.e. renewable on yearly bases) this status was usually granted without the lengthy determination procedure associated with Convention asylum claims. Very importantly, it included the immediate right to work and study. These rights were critically important for the people fleeing the Yugoslav conflict(s), regardless of the fact that having the right to work was not a straightforward way to their empowerment (Korac, 2009).

Indeed, for many, becoming self-sufficient came at a high cost. They were forced to enter a niche of the labour market from which it is very hard to advance up the economic and social ladder. Rada's words echo the accounts of a number of people I met in Rome. Thirty-two years old when I met her, she was working as a sales person in a retail shop:

'It was a struggle in the beginning [in 1993, when she arrived] and it is the same struggle now – to have a place to sleep, to have something to eat. There's no security here, I work an awful lot and it's a vicious circle from which there's no way out. I'm okay for them [the receiving society] and that holds while I am relatively young,

while I'm free [single], while I am able to give. God forbid that I should fall ill or that I should have some serious problem. I can't even imagine what would happen then ... I don't see that any of us has settled down so that she/he can say that she/he's satisfied.'

For those with an interrupted education, the immediate need to find any kind of work meant delaying or abandoning the idea of continuing one's education. Cica, who came to Italy in 1992, was a student in Rome when I met her. She recalled how she struggled to continue her education, interrupted by the war and the subsequent flight:

'I couldn't bear my life here anymore. It boiled down to 10–12 hours of hard and senseless work that could only secure basic living. We [she and her partner, also a refugee] couldn't even dream of continuing our studies and planning for the future ... All they [the Italian government] did was to give us permission to stay and work, but we had to do everything else ourselves ... But when my partner and I could finally afford to continue our studies everything changed. I'd regained my hope for the future.'

The opportunity to study, for those who were able to afford it, was perceived as a way forward, a further step towards a common goal: to bring normality and meaning into their lives. Although it marked the beginning of a new stage in their lives, combining university education and working to earn a living was a challenging experience. Many women continued to work in the domestic sector, as part-time, hourly paid housekeepers and cleaners while studying.

Despite these difficulties working reportedly made these people 'feel better', as one of them put it, 'regardless of what kind of jobs' they had. That is what helped them 'keep their wits' about them and what kept them 'sane' since their arrival in

Italy (Korac, 2003: 408). Organised programmes of reception and integration associated with Convention status in the Scandinavian countries or in the Netherlands or Germany, for example, were often also seen as disabling individual initiative, therefore, undermining self-esteem, or as limiting basic rights, such as the right to free movement or the right to work. Hence, these conditions were considered as often being detrimental to the wellbeing of people 'managed' by such programmes, because they become inward looking, preoccupied by their past and socially isolated (Korac, 2009).

The gravity of this type of permit to stay also meant that the vast majority has received no assistance to settle in the country. As a result, the overwhelming majority encountered profound problems in achieving minimal financial security, because very few actually received any support in finding first shelter and work. Consequently, employment became a matter of extreme urgency because it literally meant physical survival. Still, the advantage of their situation was that they could work, formally at least, in almost any sector of the job market; also they were not undocumented, unlike many other migrant women and men.

### ***Creation of Livelihoods: Patterns of Employment and Access to Paid Domestic Work***

In their initial struggle for physical survival some faced more difficulties than others, elderly or those with (small) children, for example, were particularly affected by the lack of any initial support upon their arrival (Korac 2009). Also, finding jobs and accommodation on arrival was a gendered process, often favouring women. On arrival, a general pattern of finding jobs emerged. Most of the younger, unmarried women would find work within a matter of days as live-in housekeepers or nannies.

Older, married women were employed as ‘live-out’ or ‘part-time’ domestics and lived with their own families, often becoming the sole providers for their families. Despite the hardship this caused for many, for a prolonged period of time, the accounts of women (and men) I met in Rome were interwoven with feelings of self-respect for being active in finding solutions and for being self-sufficient. The fact that they did not rely on aid had potential benefits for their day-to-day interactions with Italians, and the way they were perceived.

Milka’s account echoes the experiences and views of many people that I met. She was forty-five years old when I met her and her family in Rome, where she was employed as a live-out housekeeper. The family had financial difficulties for years, as her husband was not able to find any steady work for a very long time. Even so, Milka said:

‘There was nothing here, no assistance or any kind of support for us, and I’m glad about that. Everywhere they look at foreigners as people on whom the taxpayers’ money is being spent. I think that’s one of the major issues in most EU countries today, and it’s less so in Italy. We’ve earned [she and her husband] whatever we have here. If I’d gone to Caritas<sup>3</sup> to ask for something, I’m sure my [Italian] neighbours would be looking at me in a different way. This way, they respect me.’

The importance of maintaining self-respect was paramount among the people I met. So much so that even when some form of assistance was available, in the form of provision of free meals at Caritas, for example, the refugees tended to avoid relying on it. Although the people I met in Rome confessed to being on poor diets for months and some even for years after their arrival, they emphasised the importance of dignity as the critical factor that kept them going. As they were allowed to work and,

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<sup>3</sup> Caritas is a prominent church organisation operating in Italy and worldwide. Caritas, as other church organisations in Italy, provides support for destitute, including refugees and other immigrants.

therefore, were permitted some level of choice as to whether or not to rely on aid, almost all of them opted for independence, often regardless of the hardships involved.

In terms of finding jobs, thus, women were much better off than their male compatriots. This was due to opportunities in domestic services in Rome,<sup>4</sup> and the women's networks in the city.

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of young women, predominantly from Dalmatia, Croatia, and Herzegovina, the south-eastern part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, would come to Rome for six months or a year to work as live-in housekeepers. They would earn a little, learn the language, and return home. Before their flight, many of the women I met in Rome had direct or indirect contacts with women from the region who did this kind of work. Vesna explained one of the many ways in which these initial contacts and networks were established:

‘During the war [in Croatia], my parents used to go to a nearby shelter regularly, at the time when our neighbourhood was heavily shelled. In the shelter, they met a middle-aged woman who happened to know a woman, Helena, who was a live-in domestic in Rome in the late 1980s. That is how I got to know of her and later got in contact with her. She helped me find my first job here. I was among the first to arrive here, I helped many other women who came later.’

Contacts like this were instrumental in providing vital information about how to search for work in domestic services. The first refugee women who found work served as sources of information and contacts for those who arrived later.

The Croatian Catholic Church in Rome was also helpful in assisting women who arrived with the influx of refugees in the 90s, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion. The role of the Catholic Church in Italy in supporting immigrant women in

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the character of the labour-market in Italy in the 1990s, and the opportunities immigrants have in domestic services see Reyneri (1998).

finding jobs in domestic services is well documented (e.g. Reyneri 1998; Scrinzi, 2008). In explaining the central position of the Church in the organisation of the domestic sector, Scrinzi points to the role of a 'Catholic Network' of missions, parishes and religious organisations based on voluntary work that underpins the Church's role in this sector (2008: 37). In her analysis, she emphasised the importance of this support being historically provided to women migrating from Catholic countries in the 1960s (*Ibid.*: 36). Among other motives, the presence of these women was seen as a way of developing and reinforcing the moral and religious values of families of their employers (Scrinzi, 2008: 37). Because of this role in the domestic sector, Italian families in need of domestic help, childcare and/or elderly care, would usually contact the Church and its organisations in search of reliable help.

***Exploitation, Isolation and Beyond: The Experience and Meaning of Paid Domestic Work in Rome***

A live-in housekeeper's job would not only secure a modest salary for women, but also accommodation, food and an environment to learn Italian. In some cases, women were actively encouraged by their employers to take Italian language courses and organisational arrangements were made enabling them to do so. In a context of settlement with no government provision these were extremely important aspects of employment, regardless of how undervalued and difficult the actual work was. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why live-in domestic work is predominantly done by immigrants (e.g. Colombo, 2007).

The women in my research described their work as live-in housekeepers as a 'difficult period'. Not because the families they worked for 'behaved badly', as Emira put it, when recalling the experience of her first six months in Rome, working as a

live-in housekeeper. Doing paid domestic work was difficult for Emira, and other women, primarily because she was doing a job she 'never did before' and also because she was 'always protected in her family', as she said referring to her middle class background.

Live-in domestic work was also referred to as an 'exhausting job'. Living with one's employers, usually implies being 'on duty' all day, except for one day a week. They reported being so tired at the end of a working day that they did not have energy to watch television in the evening, which most of them had in their rooms, or to read newspapers, let alone a book. Also, as they did not know much 'concerning money matters' immediately upon arrival, as one of them put it, they soon realised that what they were paid 'was actually very little'. Wages in the domestic work sector are low, indeed, and even more so for live-in work in Italian families (Scrinzi 2008). The wage system is also unequal and racialised, favouring women of a particular national/ethnic/racial background, for example Filipino women who are among the highest earners in the sector (Pojmann 2006).

Their narratives and a reference to the live-in housekeeping job as exhausting, difficult or low paid did not indicate, however, that the women perceived their situation, at the time or in retrospect, as more exploitative than other jobs available to the refugees from war-torn Yugoslavia at the time. Compared to the situation of their male compatriots, for example, whose first jobs were also manual and low-paying positions in construction and gardening, women's jobs although difficult and low paid, were paid regularly, while men, reportedly, often had to work long hours for a fraction or no pay at all. Men's first months, even years in some cases, depended on sheer luck in finding 'a trustworthy boss', as many of them emphasised. This situation made the lives of many miserable, as they reported, because the vast majority had no



means to sustain themselves. The fact that men had not only to find jobs immediately, but also affordable accommodation, compounded the problem. In this sense, the context of their early years in exile importantly shaped the experience of doing paid domestic work in Rome and its meaning for refugee women who did it.

The ‘prison-like’ experience of life as a live-in domestic worker linked to the lack of control over their time and a feeling of isolation from the outside world was compounded by the fact that most of the women knew very few people in the city and could not afford time to search for contacts. The Church played an important role in helping people establish first social contacts, because it was a focal point for many women in my study and indeed for many people who fled Yugoslav conflict(s) and arrived in Rome. These initial contacts were the basis of networks in the city and beyond.

Emira explained, for example, how ‘with the help of a nun of the Croatian Catholic Church’ with whom she had ‘initial contact through a family friend’ from her hometown, she found out ‘about the places where the folks from our country [Yugoslavia] gathered’. That was the church of Santo Geronimo [St Hieronymus] in front of which people of all ethnic origins [from the Yugoslav successor states] would get together’, she explained, ‘there, I met many people I’d known before but wasn’t even aware that they had got here as well.’

The role of public urban spaces in social encounters with peers, as well as that of the Church in institutionalising gathering space for migrant women doing domestic work, for example in Latin America, has already been documented (Harzig, 2006). Women in my study were refugees whose arrival in Rome was spontaneous, rather than facilitated by chain migration, thus, they had hardly any social contacts in the city or the country. For them, the existence of these public spaces and gathering

places was paramount for ending their initially felt isolation. Over time, however, as their networks developed and closer ties were formed with compatriots, other immigrants in Rome, and locals (Korac 2009) their gathering places became integrated into the public social space of the dominant society. This has not been the experience of other immigrant and refugee groups in Rome or Italy who experience both occupational and spatial segregation in Italian society due to racism (Parreñas 2008, 2001).

As employers often have a sense of entitlement over employee's time and labour, especially in the context of live-in work, it is not surprising that the literature sometimes refers to this type of work as 'modern day slavery' or 'contracted slavery' (e.g. Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). Although there is no doubt that this type of work entails structural inequality as well as very often a lived, day-to-day, experience of exploitation, subordination, and victimisation, my research demonstrates that women mostly approached their work in domestic service as an important stepping stone for a future, more meaningful life in exile. In pursuit of their longer and long-term goals, they made the system work for them. From this perspective, the live-in phase of their life in Rome, may be viewed as a 'refuge' or 'shelter job', to borrow the terms from Cole *et al.* (2006) and Colombo (2007), which was helpful in their initial adjustment and functional settlement in the country.

To clarify this point, I refer to Vesna's experience; in her narrative she detailed the pattern of work and life of most of the women during their first year in Rome:

'The way for us women was first to get a job as a live-in housekeeper. You stay in a family until you've saved enough money which enables you to look for a new job. It

took me ten months and when I'd set enough money aside I left the family. When you leave the family you worked for as a live-in housekeeper you find a flat and your jobs are either in a café or cleaning people's houses.'

Change of employment would usually happen after six months or a year, when they would save enough money to make their own accommodation arrangements and look for another job, usually in cafés or retail shops. Research reveals that a majority of foreign workers in Italy share this employment pattern (Colombo, 2007). Studies demonstrate that the share of female live-in domestic workers declines sharply as their time in the country increases, making this type of work a stage in woman's migration history, rather than her destiny (*ibid.*: 221).

The change in employment was an important step forward for the women I met in Rome, even when they stayed in domestic service, because it gave them more control over their time and lives. After several years in the city, most of the young, single women were able, determined and resourceful enough to create opportunities to continue their education or to retrain and find work in their new professions. Vesna, for example, whose experience I mentioned earlier, fled Croatia and arrived in Rome in 1992. She was thirty-three at the time I first met her in 1999, working as an IT specialist in a small firm.

These women described the initial loss of their social status as a difficult but invaluable learning experience. They saw it as a crucial period for learning the language and for gaining firsthand experience about the 'Italian way of life' and culture. They described it also as a critical period for learning about themselves, about their strengths, abilities and potential as women. Thus, their exile experience, although difficult, enabled the women to gain self-respect and see themselves as *survivors* rather than victims.

***I Do My Work Highly Professionally: Negotiating underemployment and low social status***

A percentage of immigrant women do not succeed to move out of live-in arrangements or the domestic service sector (Colombo, 2007: 221). Studies show how migrant women experience occupational segregation due to problems with diploma/skill recognition as well as other types of racialised practices in destination countries (Lutz, 2008b; Parreñas 2008, 2001). Likewise, there were women in my study who were not able to alter their situation. Older (over 40-years-of-age), married women, were not able to move out of the domestic service sector, although well-educated and often with considerable experience in their professions. For them, the loss of social-status was negotiated at two intersecting levels. At one level, they drew boundaries between their work and personal identity by defining what they do as a profession. At another level, they negotiated the low status and stigmatisation associated with doing domestic work within the realm of their care-taking and care-giving roles as mothers and wives, which remained the core of their identity, regardless of their education and profession. Lepa, who fled Croatia and arrived in Rome with her family, was one of these women. Her words illustrate this type of negotiation:

‘I do my work here [as a housekeeper] highly professionally. I respect it because it enables my family and me to live. That is paramount. Since we fled, I was ready to do almost any kind of work to support my family.’

Lutz (2008b: 51-57) has also found that professionalization of domestic work is often a strategy of normalisation among immigrant women doing this type of work. She argues that this profession-like construction is, however, precarious. Balancing distance and closeness with one’s employer is one of the central problems of paid

domestic work, which makes it difficult for women to maintain professionalization (Lutz, 2008b). Because of its personalised character unintended friendships can emerge between the parties involved in domestic service, but such relationships are vulnerable and can be destroyed through conflicts.

Elements of closeness and friendship established in the context of paid domestic work are indeed vulnerable, as they are underpinned by unequal relationships of power. Anderson (2001) observed that power can be practiced through manipulation of kindness, switching from considering a relationship familial and friendly to work relationship, according to the convenience of the employer. Not surprisingly, not all women in my study had or indeed wanted friendly or closer relationships with their employers, because their priority was to maintain a profession-like attitude to the work. However, at the same time contacts and support received from their Italian employers and their networks of friends and relatives was critical for the quality of women's integration.

***The Importance of Contacts with Italian Families for 'Getting by', 'On' and 'Ahead' with Life in Rome***

The lack of organised assistance and provision, mentioned earlier, prompted women (and men) I met in Rome to engaged in intensive networking within and between groups of compatriots and to form an alternative *self-reception system* dealing with their most basic needs (Korac 2009). In addition to these co-ethnic and cross-ethnic networks, intensive, informal and for the most part spontaneous networking between the people I met and Italians/residents of Rome also emerged soon after their arrival. Instrumental to connections were women, employed as live-in domestic workers.

Their contacts with Italian families, their employers' networks of friends, were central to facilitating their *functional* adjustment through language training, diploma recognition, additional skill or knowledge training. Women's bridging contacts with Italians helped many men to *get by* too, by helping them find first jobs or accommodation.

As these links with majority groups were established early on, the contacts helped refugees to *get by* and *ahead* with their lives by providing vital information, contacts, and by enhancing the use of the considerable human capital they brought to the receiving society. Working for 'a family of a former Italian ambassador', for example, meant that the family had 'all the right contacts', as Spomenka who worked for them put it. Consequently, she and her husband who were both medical doctors were able to obtain information about diploma recognition, and gradually return to their professions.

Although not all the women I met developed supportive or friendly relationships with their employers, this type of work provided many of them with valuable initial contacts with Italians. In many cases these hierarchical, non-supportive ties gradually developed into supportive ones. Wellman (1981: 181) suggests that non-egalitarian and non-reciprocal social ties can be significant, because non-supportive ties often provide access to other, potentially supportive relationships. For many women in this study, therefore, contacts with Italian families at work developed into closer relationships not only with their employer, but also with their employer's relatives and friends. Contacts with Italian employers were also central to the process of *getting inside* and feeling 'of place'. The social links and networks not only channeled information and provided access to resources, but they helped the women *interpret* information. The links served as a *dictionary* to local urban settings

as well as the wider Italian society and culture. For women who were in Rome to establish a new home these contacts were invaluable sources of information and support.

Two-way communication between the women in my study and citizens of Rome occurred because of the women's efforts and strategies to achieve such communication. This type of communication was also possible because there were many locals (Italians) who were willing to engage with individual people and to approach them as 'a stranger in need'. The openness and engagement characterising these contacts go beyond the stereotypes, biases and labels constructed about specific groups defined by their ethnicity, culture or type of migration. The establishment of these contacts was facilitated by demographic and other characteristics of the women in my study making them a 'tolerable' if not a 'desirable' Other.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Concluding Remarks***

In this article I set out to explore the role of paid domestic work in the lives of refugee women who came to settle in Rome. I was particularly interested in how paid domestic work affects the women's processes of adjustment and settlement. Not only because it offers a modest wage and other material advantages (e.g. food and shelter), but also because it very often provides more subtle but no less important forms of support in settlement. The personalised character of contacts between employers and employees is indeed one of the main sources of tension for those doing paid domestic work. Nevertheless, the very same contacts are often central to how these women re-activate their human capital and move on with their lives because they provide access

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that most of these women were relatively young, educated, not married, white of middle class background and European culture positioned them as a more acceptable Other (for more on the social construction and meaning of 'whiteness' and its status as a marker of privilege in the context of migration see McDowell, 2009)

to information, enhance the development of contacts and links with local people and the dominant society, and offer tailor-made forms of support. These latter forms of support that are paramount for tackling the problems of (in)equality and inclusion in receiving societies are often missing from organised forms of assistance and provision for refugees and other newcomers.

It is important to examine and challenge how social structures underpin displacement and domestic work. Such endeavours provide important information about their scope, character and wider social consequences, as well as contribute to improving legal and other conditions of refugee women in receiving societies. It is equally important, however, to explore refugee women's agency in specific contexts. Such analysis can provide an understanding of how refugee women navigate social structures, how they experience them, what meaning they attach to these experiences, and how they negotiate the elements of loss and gain associated with processes of displacement and emplacement.



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