

## Interventi e Prospettive

# The work of immigrant women, between caregiving and exploitation: nannies, housekeepers and care workers

### *Il lavoro delle donne immigrate, tra cura e sfruttamento: tate, colf e badanti*

**Rosita Deluigi**

Ricercatrice di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli Studi di Macerata

abstract

Family care has always had the “natural” depositary in the female gender, “inclined” to care the most fragile family members, looking after this context, free of charge “by disposition”. However, there is something not working anymore inside the Italian system. Family transformations need new spaces and time for caregiving, these are often devolved to immigrant women: nannies, housekeepers and care workers. This constantly growing phenomenon carries lights and shadows with it. Opportunities and forced choices, interdependencies and absences, spaces of well-being and inequalities, on which we need to ponder and act, originate in ineffective welfare systems and migrations. Strong questions for a pedagogy that cannot avoid intervention in the present complex systems.

**Keywords:** care work, migratory projects, intercultural directions

*La questione della cura familiare ha da sempre trovato i suoi “naturali” custodi nel genere femminile, “portato” ad accudire i soggetti fragili della famiglia, ad occuparsi in modo gratuito e “per propensione” di questo ambito. Nel sistema italiano, però, qualcosa non funziona più. Le trasformazioni familiari richiedono nuovi spazi e tempi di cura che spesso vengono delegati a donne immigrate: tate, colf e badanti. Un fenomeno in continua crescita che porta con sé luci e ombre. Tra welfare inefficaci e traiettorie migratorie, si generano occasioni e scelte forzate, interdipendenze e lontananze, spazi di benessere e di disuguaglianze su cui occorre interrogarsi e agire. Interrogativi forti per una pedagogia che non può fare a meno di intervenire negli odierni sistemi complessi.*

**Parole chiave:** lavoro di cura, progetti migratori, orientamenti interculturali

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Homes always kept and hid inside them the educational duties and the management of the house, silently devolving it to women. Between duty and necessity, gender inclination and role assignments, women still mostly manage care. If we look at Italy in the last decades, we note that the attentive and caregiving balance, which once were considered “natural” suffered a deep disruption.

Irregular familial geometries in an ineffective welfare system present new challenges for caregiving, especially for learning subjects (children) and the fragile ones (older persons) at home. In addition, working rhythms have to be conciliated between familial and professional peculiarities (Garofalo, Marra, Pelizzari, 2016) that do not allow a coordinated management, unless support is asked to the wider family, which is increasingly affected by territorial diasporas, or to a member outside the family.

In this critical framework, new caregiving necessities come forward, the answer comes mostly from immigrant women and migrant mothers, who sustain informally, often in a submerged manner, a sort of transnational “home-made” welfare or the so-called “*light welfare*” (Ambrosini, Cominelli, 2005). Currently, this seems the only possible way to manage the needs of domestic care-giving. The phenomenon sheds light on how the private world overtook the public, speeding the processes, answering impelling needs. In this manner, there are more personalised and privatised welfares, according to the practicable assumptions, residential contexts, economical resources of the family, family’s supporting modes, importance attached to care-giving and the investments in the sector of social innovation (Deluigi, 2017).

## 1. Questions of welfare

Family organisation and the working schedules of the family members are strictly inter-connected and the present structure tends to take time away from caregiving, extending the time given to economical subsistence. The

new alliances established between women of the Mediterranean and migrant women join forces to compensate caregiving's missing time, upon which assistance creates a need, on fragilities demanding an answer, immediately. The frantic rhythms of family care are made of overlapping joints and schedules and a slow and constant rhythm of domestic care substitutes them.

Thus, we pass from being *caregivers* – those who provide care for free, often for family reasons – to being *care workers* – qualified professionals who cover the role of family assistants and, mostly, take care of children and older persons. These two roles must interact to favour integrated strategies of care (Timonen, 2009).

Family care is strictly linked with well-being of frail people and domestic spaces and we can observe a true “labour market for caregiving”, especially in familial contexts where the adult subjects work and, at the same time, the need for a caregiving of a “different profile” emerges – little children, weak seniors, different territorial locations and more.

Family unbalances intertwine with social criticalities and the absence of a “relational subsidiarity” (Donati, Colozzi, 2005). As consequence, the welfare mostly devolves to family arrangements the responsibility and duty of caregiving. In fact, the alliance of social parts and aware citizenship declined a long time ago, the State became an *off-side* subject intervening only when the family “shows itself incapable to accomplish its (natural) duties” (Sgritta, 2009, p. 17).

Delegation to isolation and exclusion is only a step away. Making hypotheses on services and intervention logics that prefer delegation to alliance discourages interaction and trusting relations among families, public services and third sector. This impedes the development of a *subsidiary welfare* in which the territory promotes supportive ties, to which the civil society and the institutions contribute in parallel (Lazzarini, Gamberini, Palumbo, 2011).

## 2. The Global Care Chain and its “eternal comeback”

To find a balance between absence and presence, western women, attempting to release the “double task” of paid work and housework, resort to the work of other women who come from less wealthy countries (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2002). Migrant female workers become providers of well-being, care, home care, generating new social and familial scenarios at transnational level.

About migrants, foreign citizens residing in Italy as for 2015 are

5,026,153, their incidence of the total population sums 8.3%; furthermore, it is estimated that more than 50% of those who emigrate with the intent to send revenues at home are women. The latest surveys by the Inps (National Insurance Institute) Observatory of Housework recorded 886,125 care workers and housemaid regularly registered, of which 672,194 have foreign citizenship; data show that for each 100 foreign workers in this sector, women are 86.5 (as many as 93.8 among care workers): 60 come from Eastern Europe and 20 from Asia. Working foreign women are, in their families, the “breadwinners”, the only provider in 15.1% of the cases, versus 6.4% of the average of the sector (IDOS, 2017).

The interconnections that stem from the sphere of family and house care lead to the *Global Care Chain* (GCC) (Hochschild, 2000; Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2002). This term describes the strong interdependence among different contexts due to economical mechanisms, labour mobility, migratory phenomena and the increase in quality of life, appreciation of home care and assistance and female work trails.

We often tend to see only what happens on “our” side of the Mediterranean, or in any case, in the receiving countries but, the consequences of this model have a strong impact also in the countries of women’s departure. They, on one hand, provide cohesion to the Italian families and, on the other, start new complex forms of family: the *transnational families* (Wilding, 2006) that exist between new ways of *care substitution* and *care arrangements* (Parreñas, 2005). In GCC clearly emerges the asymmetry of the subjects of the transnational care, especially considering the view of the “*global women*” (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, 2002) who produce “global households” (Baldassar, Merla, 2014) and “care deficits” (Shutte, 2003).

Migrations are based on global contexts and generate new ones. In the Italian case, the shortages in the welfare cause needs to be answered in short time and for long spells; the families operate privately to cover for the “care that is not there”. Instead, in the countries of migration, the economical crisis and the projects for the children become *push factors* for the migrant mothers (Boccagni, Ambrosini, 2012).

*Effects and affections amplify at transnational level* and, doubtlessly, determine very heterogeneous and individualised situations, which are difficult to track and are partially submerged, triggering at the same time inclusion, exclusion factors and inequalities (Deluigi, 2012).

We can talk of “moral harm of migrant carework” (Kittay, 2009) with different interconnected dimensions and ambiguity in the context of migrations. Each home supported by the careworking migrant corresponds, like a counterweight, an “altered” home and a right of care denied some-

where else. Concerning Italy, we know that the trend of aging population will steadily continue and, although the birth rate does not seem growing, the demand for carework linked with the elderly will grow up. Not finding alternative and more sustainable solutions, also on the migratory front, will mean feeding the GCC, based, for the most part, on a “global heart transplant” (Ehrenreich, Hochchild, 2002) and on the transnational motherhood as a new family structure (Herrera-Lima, 2001).

### 3. Lights and shadows of careworking

It is estimated that currently there are more than two million persons (mostly immigrant women) on the black, grey and white labour markets, carrying out jobs like housekeeper, nanny and caregiver (Caselgrandi, Montebugnoli, Rinaldi, 2013). Concerning the migratory fluxes toward Italy, they come mostly from Eastern Europe (Da Roit, Facchini, 2010). “They fit the dimension of mobility as way of life, between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, thanks to cheap transportation (buses, *low cost flights*) erasing distances. All of this creates difficulties within the families left behind at home, where the mother is absent and other workers, coming from Ukraine or Byelorussia, come to relieve them in giving care to the younger and the older” (Wihtol de Wenden, 2015). In such cases the migration chain and the caregiving circle are evident, like the interdependence among migrant women, all linked by the logics of care and assistance.

These logics stand on well-being projects that deny one another. Generation and maintenance of some continuity of care at the top of the chain necessarily denies significant presences to the natural caregiving places that are at the end of the circle. Ties are broken and other ones re-established and, at the same time, spaces with submerged economies and re-adapted relational balances are created, always by virtue of providing care for the most fragile subjects. Women connected by unstable common threads that go across the lives of entire families between denied affection and inequalities, possibilities of well-being and personalised answers.

Female migrant trails fall under a double disadvantage and discrimination, unless they enter the more dangerous circuits of trafficking between exploitation and persecution (Villani, Longo, 2016). In such cases, the female gender is even more stigmatised in the vast field of the trafficking of human beings. Women fall in organised networks of traffickers (not bereft of women inside them) who keep proposing heterogeneous trails of involvement, placed in a flexible manner along the axle coercion/consensus (Baldoni, 2007).

Being migrating foreign women causes effects “both under the working profile (segregation in certain jobs), and at pay level, because they are hired in the sectors with the lowest wages, and often paid less – without a real reason – than their foreign male peers or the Italian women” (Piazzalunga, 2012). This discriminatory trap snaps also in the professional selection; especially, for the jobs traditionally considered “female”.

Adding the “foreign” variable, we might face a “migrantisation” of labour and society which disqualifies a real integration, effectively feeding a decline of rights for everybody (Demaio, 2015). In Italy, the task of a housekeeper is more protected, at normative level, because there is a defined contract. The same cannot be said for nannies and care workers. These jobs are not well defined; they are placed between the careworker and the caregiver in a domestic community where, not infrequently, the dimension of the hospitality toward the female workers is considered “a favour”. “For many domestic workers who work ‘permanently’ in the house of their employers, Italy is truly the house of the Italians; vice-versa: for many employers the relationship with the migrants who live in Italy do not go behind the domestic service, marked by their reciprocal positions of power” (Scrinzi, 2004, p. 123).

The feminisation of the migrations involves an increased heterogeneity of the “global women”; it is not rare to find migrants possessing well established qualifications and professionalism, also because we must consider that “more than half of the non EU domestic workers in 2015, as in the previous two years, are aged between 30 and 49 (53,3%). [...] Referring to nationality, more than 60% of the domestic workers come from five Countries: Ukraine (22.9%), Philippines (16.0%), Moldavia (10.7%), Peru (6.9%) and Sri Lanka (6.3%)” (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2016, p. 65). In addition, we should not forget the EU citizens coming mostly from Romania.

For most of the migrant women, their different qualifications do not represent an added value because they are “relegated” to the sphere of domestic care. The female entrepreneurship exists; however, this could be considered a subtractive phenomenon and not an additional one, because it would create new more competitive working directions. After all, domestic and caregiving labour are compensative labour, where professional mobility is limited and conditions of strong asymmetry persist. Especially for the care workers, the *full time cohabitation* can cause totalising relationships, situations of high isolation and reduction of contracting power (Anderson 2000).

“The life stories of carers become invisible and irrelevant and they become ‘neutral subjects’, workers who deal with care without any support

for self-care” (Deluigi, 2016, p. 23). Therefore, we can speak about “servants of globalization” (Parreñas, 2001), “under-servile jobs” (Scrinzi, 2004) or “sub-proletarians of care” (Sgritta, 2009). In addition, migrant care workers are in the uncertain social and juridical conditions and they are trapped in the informality and demand for lowly qualified and low cost labour force (Lamura, 2013).

#### 4. Between care and exploitation: a heavy cost

Housekeepers, nannies and care workers carry out multitasking jobs and they grant the future for their families in other families. Is that enough to supply for *the absence of the presence*? Painful and necessary separations. Children who grew up *here* and were thrown in a future *elsewhere*. Elderly assisted here and caretakers elsewhere. Orderly clean homes here and who knows... elsewhere (*Balcanicaucaso.org*).

The comfort, or lack of it, of being clandestine, black labour market, the presence of immigrants vary according to the perceived need of them and according to how much foreigners can be “useful”. For housekeepers, nannies and care workers, different facets apply to the term “*useful*”. They are useful because: they have a use and “cover” the shortcomings of public welfare; they serve families in home care; in unprotected situations they could be assimilated to a “new slavery” (Casalini, 2009).

As it can be perceived, tolerance can have many shades, not exempt from prejudice and stereotypes, and becomes flexible, according to the necessities and the known needs. Italy has still to learn as receiving country, knowing that migratory fluxes will not stop and the presence of foreigners modifies the demographic structure of the country (increasingly older and longevity), the effective economical growth, the transformation of the labour market and the socio-cultural dimension (which may widen, instead of shrinking into particularism). As long as we continue to fear migration considering the migrants sources of economical crises or profitable only as sources of a complementary work-force (Dalla Zuanna, Allievi, 2016); it will be difficult to articulate intercultural processes.

On this subject, women care workers are inside true *niches of care* (Schrover, 2007) but they do not guarantee a real emancipation, even if, for a short period, they provide a solution for both parts, on the long run, they simply block a system that is abundantly lagging behind. “The migrants are essentially called to be the arms that lift, bodies that wear out and sometimes the smiles that ease the suffering of the person assisted; not much more than this. [...] Care workers become part of the family and

strangers at the same time, according to what suits a situation, they play the one or the other role” (Scialdone, 2014, p. 131).

Another important aspect is the corporeality and *the use of the body as medium in caregiving*. There is a constant interaction in the body of the caregiver, the contexts and the care-recipient. A contact that, especially with little children and fragile elderly, becomes constant through supportive gestures. The “*body work*” implies an intimate contact (Wolkowitz, 2006) very tiring and demanding, which answers the basic family needs and creates situations of well-being.

However, *the exploitation of care causes the exhaustion of care itself*. Instead, we should aim at giving care to those who give care, otherwise, we will continue to produce paradigms of use-abuse of care. For those who receive care, well-being will be “temporary”, with the possibility to replace the exhausted caregiving agent; instead, for those working in caregiving the malaise will be a “continued circle”, badly managed, marginalising and wearing their familial life projects in favour of others.

Therefore, it is necessary to work in the social sphere to recognise the weight of careworking and validate a personal-professional conciliation to induce an intercultural dialogue between the parts. “[...] Not only because women continue to be the main conjunction ring, often the only one, between private and public sphere, especially because they must keep together their multiple ‘lives’, the manifest and the subterranean ones, within and without the family, on the job place and in the free-time, in the daily events and so on” (Mazzette, 2009, p. 12).

## 5. Inclusive logics and intercultural strategies

How could we relaunch caregiving logics and practices that, on one side, protect the familial right to receive care, and on the other, the rights of professional caregivers?

At international level there are various referential frames – e.g. United Nations Convention on Migrants’ Rights (2003) and The International Convention on Migrant Workers and its Committee (2005) –; working tables – e.g. The Global Migration Group (GMG), The High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development and The Global Forum on Migration & Development – and many studies (ODI, 2014; United Nations, 2015).

Back at national level, the educational and training processes can play an essential role in promoting inclusive intercultural perspectives. However, they should not be disconnected from the national and transnation-



al political and economic dimensions, which are ingrained in careworking.

The first step needs a cultural change in relation to the division and allocation of work according to the gender. Organisational policies and practices should be re-thought; on one hand, using a greater connection between genders and more effective institutional actions; on the other, questioning the present labour culture that wears out the person and the personal relational network, also proving to be scarcely efficient and productive (Riva, 2009).

The intercultural assumptions should not neglect the interactions between the migrant female workers and the societies they have entered, both on the perspective of labour integration, and with a wider network of personal interactions.

In terms of working contexts, the strategy is develop integrated services, with caregiving contexts and trajectories of training that could define new professions (Deluigi, 2017). Furthermore, social meshes can relaunch new intertwinements and the informal sharing of spaces and time, with aggregation and participation. Not only for women. Not only for foreigners.

The consolidation and development of associative initiatives in favour of women should contemplate places for communication and mediation, the exchange of experiences and practices, promote autonomy and personal development (Fabbri, 2009). We should also remember that “[...] Few domestic workers are affiliated with unions, meaning that they are unable to mobilise themselves in sufficient numbers of coalitions and campaigns. [...] There is a need for a more intersectional-intercultural view, with the provision of spaces where organisations can prevent their views” (Moya, Aston, 2014, p. 40). Associations and unions could play an important role as interchanges of the social networks and as educational contexts of participation (Vadacca, 2014). In this way, we could unhinge the vision of the migrant women as passive and transform their professional choice, dictated by having no alternative choice, in an effective chance of improvement for themselves and for the others.

By integrating the personal and professional dimensions we can contrast relational poverty, increase the quality of life, reduce the phenomena of exclusion and “ethnicisation”.

The intercultural perspective considers the single life stories and aims to create meaningful relationships, based on trust, solidarity and proximity. It does not only apply to the role of migrant worker, but also to the person, paying special attention to the drifts caused by oppression, with the intent to trigger a greater self-awareness, and awareness about the world and the personal projects (Freire, 2002, 2008).

A militant pedagogy must sustain processes of participatory animation and planning (Cadei, Deluigi, Pourtois, 2016), as well as lifelong learning horizon, focused on the presence of the migrant (Cambi, Campani, Ulivieri, 2003; Bonetti, Fiorucci, 2006), helping the synergies among life stories, working processes and spaces of inclusion.

The quality of life of foreign migrant female workers and their families depends from the level of openness of the social policies and the capability to invest in a welfare recalibrated on the contemporary communities. Being promoters of reflection and innovation means being present in local contexts and start educational training and processes. "It is increasingly urgent and emergent to engage the life contexts with citizenship, building connecting and mediating bridges between parts, to attain shared horizons, also at transnational level" (Deluigi, 2017).

Therefore, it is the case of combining innovative social models that should not ignore the complexity of the migratory processes and caregiving. Policies must be pulled by the practices and, at the same time, the experience must be guaranteed by an increasingly community and solidarity based welfare, which should be also subsidiary, re-investing (Fondazione Zancan, 2014), intercultural and transnational (Piperno, Tognetti Bordogna, 2012).

The pedagogical voice to "serve" must become action and develop sustainable projects, listening to the most current demands, knowing the available resources, capable to open meaningful horizons, and trigger cooperative actions.

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