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# The business of care: Private placement agencies and female migrant workers in London

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This article presents the results of a qualitative research project on private domestic and care placement agencies in London. Although there is a paucity of empirical studies on these private actors, they have become increasingly important in the domestic and care sector in the UK. In a context of growing commodification and marketization, the article shows how domestic and care services constitute an extremely profitable 'industry' in which large companies are increasingly investing. Drawing on content analysis of agencies' websites and in-depth interviews with agencies' managers/owners, migrant workers and key informants, the article sheds light on these intermediary figures' marketing and business strategies as well as on the ways they contribute to establish the language and practice of domestic and care work as a business. Furthermore, it highlights the employment conditions and selection criteria established by these private agencies for female migrant workers, particularly in a context in which commodification/marketization is expected to foster more professionalization. The article thus fills a significant gap in the literature on domestic and care work, gender and migration by analysing the ways in which for-profit recruitment agencies have become important players in the care industry.

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commodification of care, female migrant workers, marketization of care, private care and domestic placement agencies, professionalization of care, working conditions

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 1938, in a note in her diary, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'Here's the unusual stir and bother: Nessa back tomorrow, Flossie ill: am I to go Hunting?' Nessa and Flossie were not fox-hunting companions, but Woolf's servants who she had to replace in their absence by asking for help from Mrs Ellen Hunt, the owner of the leading 'maids and servants' placement agency in London at that time. Mrs Hunt's Agency was founded in London in 1896 and is still operating today as one of the leading care recruitment agencies in the city.<sup>1</sup> Just as at the time of Virginia Woolf, the agency provides housekeepers, cooks and nannies to middle- and upper-class families on a 'no placement, no fee' policy. Though the survival of historical recruiting agencies like Mrs Hunt's bears witness to a certain continuity in the need for house-helpers from the Victorian era to the present, the context in which current care and domestic recruitment agencies operate and, indeed, multiply, is very different today. Though no exact data are available on the number of recruitment agencies in the capital – given the high turnover in the sector with small agencies opening and closing on a daily basis and given the variety of services offered by these companies – a conservative estimate speaks of at least five hundred registered agencies (Recruitment and Employment Confederation [REC] Report on Jobs, 2015). Most of them are small businesses that specialize in a few services (cleaning and gardening), but at least 25 per cent of them are represented by medium-size to big agencies that offer a variety of services (childcare, elderly care, housekeeping and cleaning, cooks, gardeners, etc.), for affluent households in particular.

However, despite the growing number and importance of these agencies in the care and domestic sector, particularly in the UK, and despite their significance in setting the terms of employment conditions and/or selection criteria of many migrant workers, their role has been underexplored in the literature on migration, gender and care/domestic work. As some scholars have put it, they remain the 'black box of migration research' (Lindquist, Xiang, & Yeoh, 2012). On the one hand, studies that have paid attention to these market intermediaries in the sector have focused upon migration brokers in a transnational perspective and particularly on their illegal or abusive practices towards migrant care workers (Lindquist et al., 2012; McKeown, 2012). On the other hand, the few studies that have explored private recruitment agencies that operate as legal middlemen at national levels have pointed out their various marketing and survival strategies, or the role they play as important networks for both care-seekers and caregivers (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Camargo, 2015; Elrick & Lewandowska, 2008; Lendaro & Imdorf, 2012; Schwiter, Berndt, & Truong, 2015). The ways in which the multiplication and growing importance of private recruitment agencies are symptomatic of broader developments in the care industry and processes of care commodification and marketization have instead remained largely under-scrutinized, as have the modalities through which these agencies are shaping the labour market of care and domestic work for a growing number of migrant women.

This article aims to contribute to fill this gap in the literature, especially in Britain on which very few studies exist to date on private care and domestic placement agencies specifically (Anderson, 2007; Busch, 2013).<sup>2</sup> In particular, I aim to analyse some of the main features of care and cleaning recruitment agencies in the context of London. As my research took place in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–2011, I also document how care and domestic recruitment agencies have been impacted by the crisis.

As I outline in the first section, my article is framed mostly by, and contributes to, two strands of literature: on commodification and marketization of care and on gender, migration and care/domestic labour. These literatures have been increasingly intertwined in recent years in highlighting how the outsourcing of care and domestic tasks to

private economic actors is contributing to shape a culture in which care is understood more and more as a marketable service. In such a market migrant women constitute the lion's share of supply.

In subsequent sections I explain how, using the results of an exploratory qualitative research project involving content analysis of agencies' websites, interviews with representatives of recruitment agencies and of migrant workers' organizations, private care recruitment agencies' managers/owners and migrant workers, my research sheds light on the following: first, as they operate in a context of growing commodification and marketization, which both drive and are driven by the rising demand for care and domestic services, these agencies do not appear to have suffered from the latest major global financial crisis of 2007–2011 like other economic sectors. Second, depending on their size and on the social milieu they target, private agencies seem to offer very different working conditions and to operate under different marketing and business logics. Finally, instead of fostering professionalization, agencies appear to leave unchallenged some of the stereotypes linked to care and domestic work as fundamentally unskilled, feminized and racialized labour.

## 2 | THE CARE INDUSTRY IN TIMES OF COMMODIFICATION AND MARKETIZATION

The rise and multiplication of care recruitment agencies over the last 15 years has been possible thanks to two strictly intertwined phenomena that have invested the world of care since the mid-1990s: the commodification and marketization of care.

First, the concept of commodification of care was introduced at the end of the 1990s (Ungerson, 1997) to describe the growing monetization of the care relationship, particularly with the introduction of so-called 'cash-for-care' schemes, which provide care-seekers with monetary benefits, or quasi-cash payments such as vouchers or tax credits, to allow them to purchase care services on the market. The concept of commodification of care, as it was developed by Clare Ungerson in particular, was meant above all to grasp the epochal shift that was investing the world of care in so far as those tasks that used to be undertaken by the female members of households in unpaid form were increasingly being outsourced to others in paid form. Second, the concept of marketization of care began to be used at the beginning of the 2010s, when the effects of care commodification were consolidated by the expansion of private care actors competing on the market (Brennan, Cass, Himmelweit, & Szebehely, 2012). Accordingly, scholars see marketization as taking a variety of forms, from the outsourcing of care and domestic services to private providers such as recruitment agencies, to the funding of individual users to purchase services on the market (Clarke, 2006; Farris & Marchetti, 2017; Glendinning, 2008; Needham, 2011; Shutes & Walsh, 2012).

Since the late 1990s, the processes of care commodification and marketization have grown at a rapid pace and now extend to all dimensions of care and domestic work, from childminding, to the care of the elderly and the disabled, to cleaning and meal-cooking (Anderson, 2000; Folbre, 2012; Twigg, Wolkowitz, Cohen, & Nettleton, 2011; Wolkowitz, 2006; Zelizer, 2009). There have been several forces at play that have progressively led to the commodification and marketization of care: from the affirmation of New Public Management as the chief theory underlying the reforms promoting the privatization of the public sector, to changes in individual preferences for care following new family structures, and so forth (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). However, two phenomena in particular are regarded by scholars as the main ones responsible for the progressive turning of care into a marketable commodity: the rapid ageing of the population and the increased rates of activity and employment of native-born women in the last 20 years (Anderson, 2012; Estévez-Abe, 2015). The combination of these two societal and demographic changes has led to a dramatic growth in the demand for caregivers and cleaners and thus opened up the space for the outsourcing of care to the market, particularly in a context of welfare state retrenchment and chronic inadequacy of public provisions, which affect especially elderly care and childcare (Pavolini & Ranci, 2008; Penn, 2014).

### 3 | FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF COMMODIFIED/MARKETIZED CARE

The general move towards the commodification and marketization of care and domestic work briefly outlined above has created the conditions for a flourishing industry of private provisions, placement agencies but also babysitters, nannies and au pairs who often come from comparatively poorer countries (Anderson, 2000; Cox & Busch, 2018; Parreñas, 2001). The supply of caregivers and cleaners indeed in the European context has increasingly been provided by migrant women from the Global South and Eastern Europe, to the extent that it now represents the main occupational sector for the majority of these women (Farris, 2015; Lutz, 2011; Schwiter, Berndt, & Schilling, 2014).

Migrant women are in high demand because they tend to work for longer hours and significantly lower wages as compared to non-migrant women in the sector (Anderson, 2007; Cangiano & Shutes, 2010; Farris, 2015; Ruhs & Anderson, 2010). As scholars have argued, the demand for female migrant carers specifically is due to the fact that their 'gender' preserves the idea of care and domestic tasks as vocationally feminine, while the fact that they are racialized women and migrants maintains the stereotype of care and cleaning as servile activities to be undertaken by poorer and racialized minorities (Anderson, 2000; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Lutz, 2008; Parreñas, 2001). Though a significant part of commodified care arrangements across Europe still takes place through informal channels (Schwenken & Heimeshoff, 2011; Triandafyllidou, 2013) where word of mouth in hiring a private migrant carer or family member plays a pivotal role, various types of cash-for-care and other commodification schemes are pushing families – in some countries in particular – to resort to more formalized and certifiable arrangements (Camargo, 2015; Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2015).

The shift towards a conception of care as a marketable commodity and the significant (when not predominant) presence of migrant women as the main suppliers of commodified/marketized care and domestic services, are also traversed by important contradictions. On the one hand, the monetization of a large part of care and domestic tasks – which used to be carried out by (usually female) family members for free, particularly among middle- and working-class households – has changed the language and imageries associated with care: from a conception of care as a public good and an intimate activity, towards an idea of care and domestic work as a business (Farris & Marchetti, 2017). Since outsourcing care and domestic work to non-family members entails the building of relationships of trust and forms of benchmarking concerning the quality of the labour provided, the growth of marketized care and domestic services has also created certain expectations regarding the levels of professionalization of the workforce (Marchetti & Scrinzi, 2014; Schwiter et al., 2014). On the other hand, precisely the intimate context in which commodified domestic and care services are offered (usually private homes) and the emotional nature of some of the tasks involved in assisting children, elderly and sick people, are considered as obstacles to an exact quantification of the 'costs' and 'tasks' of this type of labour, as well as to the full professionalization of the job profile (Folbre, 2012, p. 3). This ambivalence of care and domestic labour is what scholars have tried to grasp by developing concepts such as 'intimate labour' and 'emotional labour' (Boris & Parreñas, 2010; Hochschild, 2012) to highlight the peculiarity of care work as 'not just another work' – in Helma Lutz's (2008) terms – but as a 'core activity of doing gender' (pp. 1–48), which is imbued in 'affect' (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Similarly, feminist economists draw attention to the specific implications of the commodification/marketization of care tasks by speaking of a 'care economy' (Folbre, 2012; Zelizer, 2009) and by emphasizing how this is characterized by the over-representation of a workforce with strong gender, race and class-based connotations (Cangiano & Shutes, 2010; Cox, 2006; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Lan, 2006; Ruhs & Anderson, 2010; Sassen, 2002). As a type of human service that is labour-intensive and low in productivity, the care economy is said to suffer from the 'Baumol's costs disease' (Baumol, 1967), which means that wages are independent of productivity and that profit margins are low (Simonazzi, 2011; Yeates, 2004). These distinctive features of care work also explain why its commodification and marketization have been carried out both through the reconfiguration of the welfare state increasingly as a provider of monetary transfers rather than services, and through the outsourcing of care and domestic services to private (for-profit and not-for-profit) care providers such as recruitment agencies for instance, which tend to confront the

low profit margins of the sector by cutting labour costs – made possible also through the resort to racialized and feminized workers who tend to accept lower salaries and conditions – and by adopting business management models (Schwenken & Heimeshoff, 2011).

Against this background, the theoretical framework offered by concepts such as commodification and marketization of care and the literature on gender, migration and care allow us to make sense of the flourishing of private care recruitment agencies as important players in the care industry, as well as of their strong reliance on female migrant workers. But while they respond to the rising demand for private care and domestic services brought about by the increasing transformation of care into a profitable sector, private recruitment agencies also inevitably find themselves at the crossroads of the contradictions I have briefly described above. As the next sections will show, in the context of London these agencies are in fact operating not only as suppliers of much needed care and domestic workers, predominantly migrants, but also as actors shaping and fostering the creation of the care culture as a business in ways that appear to sustain, rather than challenge, the stereotypes associated with care as un-skilled, feminized and racialized labour. Nevertheless, despite their growing importance, private care and domestic placement agencies have received very little attention by scholars, particularly in the British context.

#### 4 | THE LITERATURE ON CARE RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

The small number of studies that have paid specific attention to private recruitment agencies operating in national care sectors have focused upon three main lines of inquiry. First, scholars have analysed the agencies' recruitment practices and the ways they produce, reproduce and exacerbate certain racializing and gendered stereotypes that are attached to the figure of the non-western/non-white care worker (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Lendaro & Imdorf, 2012). One of the most referenced studies in this respect is by Bakan and Stasiulis, who published the results of their empirical research in the mid-1990s (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995). In this article, the authors analyse the role of domestic placement agencies in Canada as an example of a key gatekeeping industry, which played a pivotal role 'in negotiating citizenship rights for migrant domestic workers and their employers' (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995, p. 304).

Through intensive qualitative interviews with leading domestic placement agencies in the Toronto area, the authors reveal these agencies' role in reproducing stigmatizing representations, as well as in adopting racializing and sexist practices and criteria in the recruitment of a largely female migrant workforce within middle-class private households. Albeit not being solely responsible for the construction of the racist profiling attached to the images of the domestic worker and nanny prevalent in Canadian society, Bakan and Stasiulis describe how these agencies need to be familiar with, and resort to, such images in order to survive and thrive in the industry.

Second, some scholars have underscored the marketing narratives developed by private agencies, particularly the ways in which they play into the neoliberal reframing of commodified care as a progressive development (Schwiter et al., 2014, 2015). The work of Schwiter et al. (2015) in this respect is particularly significant. The authors of this article conducted a market analysis of private recruitment agencies providing live-in caregivers for elderly care in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Following a Foucauldian approach, the authors focused on the discursive framing the agencies used to establish themselves in the thriving market of commercial care. The Swiss agencies scrutinized by Schwiter et al., on the one hand, portrayed themselves as social services providers that work for the betterment of society and the quality of life of the elderly. On the other hand, agencies target women in particular as those who can benefit the most from the agencies' ability to provide them with a professional carer who can free them from the expectation to be those in charge of care duties and, thus, as those who can allow them to work. As the authors notice, private recruitment agencies can speak the language of solidarity and even women's emancipation in a context of rampant neoliberal marketization of elderly care.

Finally, scholars have focused upon the role agencies play in creating networks of support, self-help and professionalization particularly in the case of migrant labourers (Camargo, 2015; Elrick & Lewandowska, 2008).

Elrick and Lewandowska (2008), for instance, explored the world of informal agents placing Polish live-in female carers for the elderly in German and Italian families. The authors of this study focus upon their survival practices, which depend upon fees charged to both workers and care-users. They also emphasize their role as bridges between different working cultures and life experiences. In light of this 'bridging' role, Elrick and Lewandowska put forward a theory of 'agents' mediation' according to which the importance of informal gatekeepers tends to be particularly significant during the initial stages of migration in a definite community, while it leaves room for family-like networks once the migration chain between two locations is more established.

While this literature has been extremely important in beginning a discussion about the functions and significance of recruitment agencies in the reconfiguration of the care and domestic sector in a context of growing commodification and marketization (Brennan et al., 2012), arguably little attention has been paid to these agencies' concrete business operations, to their variety, as well as to the conditions of employment and selection they establish.

## 5 | PRIVATE RECRUITMENT AGENCIES IN LONDON

In order to gain insights into the logics and operations of care and domestic recruitment agencies, between January 2013 and December 2017 I carried out an explorative research project based in the city of London.<sup>3</sup> Given the concentration of wealth in the capital and its nature of 'global city' at the forefront of care and domestic services demands (Anderson, 2007; Sassen, 2002), London proved to be a particularly apt research site for the inquiry of private domestic and care placement agencies. Due to the paucity of studies on these specific intermediaries in the British context and to the exploratory nature of my project, I concentrated on agencies providing various types of care and domestic services. My analysis is largely grounded in the content analysis of 50 agencies' websites, in-depth interviews with ten managers of private care and domestic agencies of various sizes and ten migrant workers of different nationalities (Philippines, Brazil, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria) who have had work experience through private care agencies. Furthermore, I interviewed key actors in the sector such as three recruitment confederations' representatives (all representing REC in different roles) and four migrant workers' organizations (two from Kalayaan and two from Migrants Rights Network) in order to gain a broader perspective on the role of these agencies in the London context specifically. The agencies' managers/owners I interviewed were selected on the basis of meeting the criteria of representing different sizes of business, from medium/big (employing at least eight permanent members) to small (employing up to five permanent staff). The migrant workers interviewed were selected through personal networks and then through snowball sampling on the basis of meeting the criteria of having been recruited through private placement agencies for various care and domestic tasks.<sup>4</sup>

The number of recruitment agencies providing care and domestic services in London is difficult to estimate both because a unified registry does not exist given the variety of services they offer, and because many of these agencies follow different regulatory frameworks.<sup>5</sup> According to the REC, both permanent and temporary placements grew significantly between 2012 and 2014 in what they call the nursing/medical/care sector. Furthermore, in the same period of time the number of agencies in the childcare sector that joined REC (which also includes agencies providing housekeeping services) tripled.

As scholars have argued (Farris, 2015; Reyneri, 2009), the years immediately following the global economic crisis of 2007–2011 registered a substantial growth of the care sector, which in big cities such as London seem to have benefited also private actors such as care recruitment agencies. The growth of this sector in spite of the crisis was due above all to the continuous rising demand for care brought about by the ageing of the population, the availability of cash-for-care, voucher and tax-benefit schemes, and the higher rates of employment of women even in times of crisis (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013). Furthermore, unlike sectors that are highly influenced by economic cycles (manufacture and construction, for instance), cleaning and care belong to those non-cyclical industries that are less exposed to the fluctuations of the economy (OECD, 2012; Reyneri, 2009). Though the data provided by the REC

refer only to those agencies that are members of the confederation, they bear witness to the dynamism of private agencies in the domestic and care economy in the aftermaths of the crisis. And as we shall see, interviews with agencies' owners and managers confirm that, to a large extent, their businesses have not suffered from the crisis in significant ways, due predominantly to the steady growth in the demand for cleaners, housekeepers and babysitters in the capital.

## 6 | TWO MAIN TYPES OF AGENCIES

Content analysis of their websites shows that care and domestic recruitment agencies tend to offer different types of services depending particularly on the specific social milieu that they target. The sample of 50 agencies I analysed, showed a quite stark contrast. On the one hand, there are those offering a variety of domestic and care services and targeting the wealthiest segments of society, and on the other hand, there are agencies concentrating on cleaning (and to a lesser extent, babysitting) services, which seem to be aimed at a wider market. The agencies that target particularly wealthy and upper-middle-class clients are usually medium to big companies that cover different parts of the city (or country) and employ at least 8–15 permanent members of staff in various coordinating roles and departments. They tend to place especially workers as live-in carers and household staffing. Conversely, the agencies targeting middle-class families tend to include medium to small agencies covering only one or two London boroughs. They are usually run by up to five employees and place temporary staff mostly for cleaning jobs, but also babysitting. The social distinctions that these two types of agencies express translate into websites with very different content and settings. In terms of contents, the agencies targeting wealthier clients address in particular these clients' needs for live-in, or permanent staff (as housekeepers, domestic couples, chauffeurs, cooks, nannies, etc.). Thus, on their website, these agencies emphasize the importance of finding the perfect match and present themselves as the most experienced and able at providing a bespoke service by screening the right candidates' references and credentials. While they do not provide training, these agencies purport to select only candidates with at least three years of relevant experience, excellent references and certifiable qualifications (particularly for the nanny positions, for which, some agencies offer candidates from well-known nanny schools such as Norland and Chiltern Colleges). These agencies tend to stress the professionalism of their services and of their candidates, often indicating their foreign nationality (Eastern European candidates in these lists tend to prevail).

The smaller agencies targeting middle-class families and concentrating on cleaning services and babysitting tend instead to have more interactive websites, with booking features and client hubs. Unlike the larger and upper-class-focused agencies, the smaller cleaning-focused agencies purport to provide their workers with training, and stress in particular the efficiency of their services in general, rather than the professionalism of their cleaning staff in particular. This is in sharp contrast with the first type of agencies, which place great emphasis on the qualities of the workers they are able to place.

This aspect also distinguishes the two types of agencies when looking at their competition strategies. The agencies targeting the wealthy and the upper classes of the capital city seem to compete among themselves mostly in terms of quality of staff provision. They thus give great prominence on their websites on the experience of their candidates and on their 'adaptability'. The fact that the majority of richer clients resort to these agencies to seek permanent (often live-in) staffing well explains why agents want to stress their rigorous screening procedures and very experienced labourers. On the other hand, the agencies that target the middle classes and that provide mostly hourly cleaning and, to a lesser extent, babysitting, compete on prices. Nearly all of those I analysed offer various sales and entry prices to their potential clients. Their competing strategies thus are focused on low costs and the professionalism of their services. Given that the clients they serve are mostly middle-class professionals seeking somebody who can keep their houses clean for a few hours a week, these agencies afford greater importance to these clients' budgets.

## 7 | AGENCIES' BUSINESS STRATEGIES

While the content analyses of these agencies' websites provide a great wealth of information on their marketing strategies — in terms of target market, positioning in that market and messaging — it does not tell us about their business strategy. In order to understand particularly this second dimension of agencies' operations, that is, their vision and missions, employment plans and company structures, I have resorted to in-depth interviews with ten agencies' managers and owners.

According to all ten of them, the big agencies targeting the upper class and the super-rich work both as 'introduction' mediators and, less often, as direct employers. In the first case, their task is to find the right match between a candidate (as live-in or live-out) and a family or household, which will become the direct employer of the domestic and care worker. In the second case, the agency functions itself as the direct employer of prevalently short-term employees, particularly for services like housekeeping or 'emergency babysitting'. In both cases, these type of agencies charge care-seekers with fees, which usually are a percentage between 12 and 18 per cent of the annual gross salary of the worker they place (which in London amounts to c.32,000 GBP for live-in and 25,000 GBP for live-out workers) and between 50 and 100 GBP on a weekly basis for a short-term placement (usually of one week or more). This fee system is not used by the smaller agencies placing hourly paid cleaners, which tend to operate with one-off payments, or regular payments for those subscribing for regular service delivery.

Whereas the medium and small companies of my sample had all been established by migrant women who had themselves worked as carers for elderly people or as domestic workers, the bigger agencies had been initiated mostly by female members of very wealthy families or by corporations with shares in other types of businesses that choose people with CEO experience to run their new care business. In the first case, as one of my interviewees explains, previous 'experience' in the sector is key. As she put it:

*As I had already experience with cleaning and as I was starting to have my own clients working through agencies, I thought, ok why don't I set myself up as a self-employed person and with potential of growing a cleaning agency. It was a profitable experience. (Edita, ex-owner of a small cleaning agency, originally from Poland)*

Edita's experience was quite usual for many Eastern European migrants in the UK before the EU enlargement, as they were required to have a work permit or to be self-employed in order to remain in the country legally (Longhi & Rokicka, 2012). In the case of the big agencies whose owners are corporations or wealthy families, it is instead 'business' experience rather than experience in the business of care and domestic work that seems to be the most sought-after quality. As the managing director of a big recruitment agency supplying especially the billionaires and millionaires of the British capital, Elizabeth reflects with irony on her lack of experience in and knowledge of the care and domestic industry:

*I got a phone call for this job for managing director and I went to five interviews for this job, and in my mind I am thinking 'Domestic staffing? I know nothing about domestic staffing! But I know a lot about managing people' ... when I came in I made lots of changing because it needed modernizing, it needed better candidate management, it needed technology with the way we contact people, just the way we match people we've got a fantastic system now, it all took quite a lot of investment, the investors, they changed, the CEO changed, they said: this is the way we want to go. And their model is that you're MD, if you think they are any good, takes part in the ownership as well, I've got what they call equity, which gives me also like this is my business.... We had 20 people we now have 40. We've got 25,000 [candidates] on our database. (Elizabeth, MD of big recruitment company in London)*



As Elizabeth so well explains, care and domestic services are a very profitable business in a context of rampant commodification and marketization in which care and domestic workers are in high demand particularly by upper-middle-class families in big cities.

Depending particularly upon their size, however, agencies appear to adopt different business strategies. Whereas the three small agencies' managers I interviewed report how they try to increase profitability by keeping fixed costs low (for instance, by cutting the number of fixed staff working for the agency) and by cultivating their networks, the bigger companies instead report how they try to open new branches of the agency in order to increase their scale and to diversify and penetrate new markets. Private recruitment agencies are in fact responding to the rising demand for care and domestic work particularly in urban and metropolitan areas from white collar and affluent families (May et al., 2007; Ruhs & Anderson, 2010).

By screening candidates, providing advice, credentials and certificates, as well as by organizing taxation and contracts for white collar and affluent families, agencies are regarded by both professional couples and wealthy households as the best solution for their caring needs, in the presence of very busy work schedules and their overwhelmed metropolitan lifestyles (Lindio-McGovern, 2012; Williams, 2012). According to Melissa, managing director of one of the biggest private recruitment agencies in London providing wealthy families with all sorts of care work and housekeeping services:

*Business has never been so good. We are growing again. You know last year our clients, you know 80% came from recommendations, and I do a lot of statistics like that.... Our clients are ultra-high-net-worth, high-net-worth and mass affluent. Ultra-high-net-worth is the billionaires, high-net-worth are millionaires, and the mass affluent are professional couples and they would have less staff. The ultra-high-net-worth will possibly have a house-manager, possibly PA, two housekeepers, a nanny, maybe 2 nannies, a governess tutor comes in, a chauffeur, and security, some of them have maybe 10, 15 security, now we are talking about royal families, oligarchs, billionaires etc.... I train my people to understand each level, because it is no longer a business that you've got a housekeeper and now I try to place her, this is a real business! (Melissa, managing director of big London agency)*

While all managers and owners I interviewed, regardless of the size and targeting milieu of their agencies, emphasize the general good health of the care and domestic industry, those running the smaller size agencies admit having had to make changes following the crisis. As they target mostly middle-class, professional families who suffered from the 2007–2011 financial meltdown, the smaller agencies have themselves been impacted, albeit not dramatically according to their accounts. Natalie, for instance, manages a medium-size agency providing cleaning but also babysitting services to professionals living in North London. Even though she registers the changes brought about by the economic crisis in her company, which led her to cut two positions, she considers her business as very profitable, particularly after the transformations she introduced to cope with the decreased demand for domestic helpers that followed 2007:

*I think the main change is that people are looking for one person to cover a number of roles. So whereas when I started, maybe someone wanted just to have a nanny and be prepared to pay for a nanny, now they want a nanny who also does housekeeping who also picks up the kids from school and do other jobs as well. With the recession and everything people cut out ... Yes! There is still a massive demand and I think part of the reason why so many people are going to daily help if they can't have a live-in is because they'd rather have some help and change what they are looking for rather than have no help ... our profitability is way up. (Natalie, manager of a medium-size agency in London)*

Regardless of the dimension of the agency and the types of services it provides, all interviewees thus expressed the idea that even in the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2007–2011 and in times of austerity the care

and domestic sector keeps thriving. The secret to the flourishing state of the care economy in spite of the crisis, in all managers' words, is precisely to treat it 'like a business'. Costs reduction, development of economies of scale and the good management of workers' supply are invoked as the most important ingredients to keep the private care industry growing.

## 8 | PRIVATE AGENCIES' RELIANCE ON MIGRANT WOMEN

Yet, if the global financial crisis did not affect negatively the sector in the UK overall, as studies have shown (Farris, 2015; OECD, 2012) and as my interviewees have confirmed, transformations in the state management of overseas domestic workers impacted upon it more profoundly. With the changes introduced in April 2012 to the Overseas Domestic Worker (ODW) Visa, domestic workers from outside the EEA (European Economic Area) could enter the UK only with a six-month-long non-renewable visa and could not change their employer.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the many criticisms received, particularly in terms of the greater vulnerability to abuse to which the new law exposed migrant domestic workers, the government justified the changes to the new ODW Visa by claiming that the care sector of domestic workers was not experiencing a shortage in national supply, particularly in a context of crisis (Kalayaan, 2014).

From the point of view of the managers of the care recruitment agencies I interviewed, particularly of the big and medium-size ones, the introduction of the new ODW Visa had important repercussions on their placement strategies. While the majority of care workers they were able to place before 2012 were mostly from outside the EU, they stated that the new Visa turned these figures upside down. As Natalie puts it:

*Two, three years ago, before the Visa change, we were probably placing 95% domestic workers, overseas domestic workers visas now is probably less than 10%. (Natalie, manager of a medium-size agency in London)*

Furthermore, bigger size agencies who place live-in carers and domestic workers in affluent families report how the new Visa scheme made it more difficult for them to find workers who are willing to live with their employers.

*What we have seen is a decline in live-in, because lots of second generation Filipinas who now live here they now realize I can afford to live on my own, I don't need to live in, I've got a child, I am married, they don't want to live in 5 and ½ days a week, that is a trend that is growing. People want more live-in, that is why we are so busy at the moment, we have so many jobs, not enough candidates. The live-in are more expensive because there is less of them. (Eleonore, managing director of a big recruitment agency in London)*

Eleonore's ideas were expressed also by other agencies' owners and managers of the wealthy-oriented agencies I interviewed, who thought that restrictions on domestic and care workers' visas only benefit EU care workers who might have more negotiating power over live-in/live-out positions. As I described in a previous section, the literature on gender, care and migration has demonstrated that migrant women are in high demand for care and domestic services because they tend to work for longer hours and lower wages as compared to non-migrant women in the sector. Furthermore, my research confirms the centrality of gender and 'race' in the selection of domestic staffing and nannies. When I asked Elizabeth, the manager of one of the bigger agencies of my sample, if she thought her clients preferred women to men for certain jobs and whether the nationality of the employee made a difference, she replied as follows:

*Yes, absolutely! They [her clients] ask for women for things like cook, cleaner, nanny of course, men too, but that's for gardening or chauffeur. We try to educate our clients on other things, like, you know, racism.*

*I mean, they should not ask about the colour of a candidate, or where she is from, but to be very honest with you, they still do and some demand tall, blonde and beautiful women. I tell them they need a domestic helper not a supermodel, but it comes out, I am being honest with you. (Elizabeth, MD of big recruitment company in London)*

Similar comments were made by the other owners/managers of the larger agencies who claim that their clients pay lots of attention to the gender, but also nationality (and sometimes appearance) of the worker. The smaller agencies, on the other hand, did not express the idea that their clients as such were the ones necessarily seeking foreign women for cleaning and babysitting tasks. As Natalie put it, 'It's that there are more of them [migrant women] on this market.' These agencies' reliance on migrant women from different nationalities is thus presented as something given, rather than a calculated choice on their part.

## 9 | BIGGER IS BETTER ... OR NOT? PRIVATE AGENCIES THROUGH THE WORKERS' LENSES

Of the ten migrant workers I interviewed, four of them had been placed as live-in nannies and housekeepers within very wealthy families by larger sized agencies, while the remaining six had all worked for small companies specializing in domestic and commercial cleaning (though they were required to do also other tasks, as we shall see below). While their experiences as housekeepers and nannies seem to have many points in common regardless of the milieu of the family for which they were recruited, their working conditions depended in large part upon their position as either live-in/out, the agency's size and recruiting culture, as well as the social milieu of the families/household in which they were placed.

The four workers who had been introduced to their families—employers by larger agencies all had full-time regular contracts as either live-in nannies or live-in housekeepers within very wealthy households. In these cases, the families acted as their employers and made sure they were paid according to the average salary of their respective category in London. The contractual security and reliance upon a monthly wage they had experienced as care workers within these families were regarded by the four interviewees — three from the Philippines and one from Poland — as the most important and positive aspects of their jobs. In the words of Dolores, a 34-year-old nanny from Manila:

*I have a full time contract as a nanny. The agency put me through the lady, she has three children, they made my contract. My salary is good, I can save some money to send to my parents [in Manila] and also something for me. The lady is very kind, but I don't like the dad. Very cold gentleman ... The work is very hard, Monday to Saturday. I have only Sunday off and sometimes they call me to work on Sunday. (Dolores, full-time live-in nanny from the Philippines)*

The four interviewees considered themselves very lucky and praised the agencies for their professionalism and capacity to bargain a good contract for them. 'Without Maria [i.e., the manager of a big agency in central London] I am not sure I would have the good contract I have' — says Camilla, a 36-year-old live-in housekeeper from the Philippines who works in a diplomat's house in central London. As I discussed above, the shortage of women available for live-in jobs after the changes to the ODW Visa in 2012 increased their desirability and also their bargaining possibilities for better wages. Furthermore, their job's relative security allowed them to apply for permanent residency, which becomes particularly salient in a context of tighter and more selective immigration policies (Anderson, 2014; Cangiano & Shutes, 2010; Ruhs & Anderson, 2010).

However, even though legal and financial security are regarded as extremely important, all four live-in migrant women I interviewed also stressed the negative aspects of their jobs: fatigue, long hours and demands for tasks and

working time that are not in their contracts, all constitute the recurring complaints. Melania, a Polish young woman with a university degree in psychology who worked for three years as a full-time housekeeper in a rich family in North London recounts how she decided to quit her job due to the frustrations brought about by the lack of clear boundaries:

*I was very happy when the agent called me to say the family chose me, they were very nice and their house is beautiful. It was my first contract, very good money, I was very excited ... The work you have to do is different from the contract, I didn't know that. I thought I was a cleaning lady, you know, ironing, cleaning, it was a big house. But they also asked me to cook meals, and to pick up the child from nursery when the babysitter was ill, or to mind the child. I was exhausted, too much work ... In the end, you know, I was like, sad, I was crying all the time, I quitted. (Melania, 29 years old from Poland)*

Alongside noting how women employed as live-in are overworked, these interviews also highlight the extent to which the good contractual conditions (relative to their previous employment experiences) that they enjoy in these jobs was somehow a matter of luck. While agencies can attempt to negotiate better agreements for their workers, the job of the agencies ends once the family hires the workers. This means that it is the family/employer who becomes responsible for implementing the contractual conditions, without any monitoring by the agencies. The quality of the working conditions thus ultimately depends upon the goodwill of the private employer.

The workers I interviewed who were employed as hourly cleaners or babysitters by medium and small-size agencies reported very similar stories in relation to overwork and demands that went beyond what they had signed for. This was particularly the case for those who had been working as babysitters and who were asked also to clean and do the shopping. As hourly paid staff recruited through small agencies, however, their contractual conditions were very different. Either they did not have a contract, or were hired on a zero-hours contract, which put them in a situation of extreme precariousness, but also extreme fatigue. While some of them had to find job opportunities through different sources beyond those offered by the agency, those who worked prevalently through the agency were often asked to travel across the city several hours a week. Furthermore, they all lamented the low wages, made worse by the agencies' commission fees policies, which meant that only between 70 and 80 per cent of the job's costs went into their pockets. Natasha, a Romanian cleaner who worked for an agency for three years, explains this situation in very emphatic terms:

*I was fed up with it, it was unfair, what they [the agency] do is unfair. They do all these sales, and leaflets with big offers for the clients, like '18 pounds for two hours cleaning if you book by tonight!' or something like that. But that means that I end up with 6 pounds in my pocket, because no one wants to pay cleaners more than 10 pounds one hour, everybody wants to pay very little, but agencies take a big percentage off and we don't have anything. (Natasha, 31 years old from Romania)*

Unlike those employed by families through agencies, the migrant women employed directly by agencies seem to experience worse working and wage conditions. Smaller, cleaning-focused agencies thus appear to be increasingly participating in the so-called gig-economy by using short-term contracts and imposing extremely precarious wage and work conditions for their staff in order to make profits (De Stefano, 2016)

## 10 | ON COMMODIFICATION/MARKETIZATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

One of the questions at the heart of scholarly work concerning the contemporary processes of commodification and marketization of the care and domestic sector is whether they lead to more professionalization (Marchetti & Scrinzi, 2014). Neoliberal advocates of care privatization in fact claim that marketized care entails the

de-informalization of domestic and care work, which would mean more training for staff and more accountability for care providers (Marchetti & Scrinzi, 2014).

However, the interviews I conducted with the workers employed through and by the agencies, particularly those working for small recruitment companies focusing on cleaning jobs, point to a different direction. The bigger agencies targeting the upper classes and performing mostly an intermediary service between the care-seeker and the caregiver do not provide any training as the worker is supposed to have already extensive experience. The only instance in which my interviewees who had been employed as live-in workers within wealthy families mentioned any form of training was when they recalled the detailed instructions they were given, usually by the female head of the household, explaining to them how to navigate the house and what to watch for in terms of family habits and needs. 'She showed me around, where to find the iron, or the Hoover. Every day she told me what to do, but after a while I knew it all', says Dolores, recalling her female employer's directions when she began the job. In these cases, however, the work experience these migrant care and domestic workers possess does not seem to be regarded as the equivalent of 'high-care-skills', but rather as a set of competences that they have *qua* women and that they 'refined' at work. On the other hand, the smaller agencies all purport to provide their staff with substantial and extended training in order to deliver a highly professional service. But how does training concretely work? The Employment Agencies Act 1973 and the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations 2003 explicitly forbid agencies from asking for money from the candidate worker in exchange for a placement. And yet, all my interviewees working for small agencies stated that the companies get around the regulations by charging new workers with 'training fees'. When candidates are selected by the agencies to work for them, they receive a one-day training (usually lasting two to four hours) led by either the manager or one of the most experienced workers. The costs of the training are the equivalent of four or five hours' work, depending on the agency, which then are deducted from the workers' salary when they begin their placement.

In the workers' accounts, the training usually consisted of demonstrations showing how to use the cleaning tools, how to respond to the client's demands concerning different types of care tasks and how to be accurate and especially fast. In this respect, another very common experience reported by all six workers who had worked with small agencies was the demand that they learned very quickly the art of speedy and precise cleaning and caring. In the interviewees' recollections, this combination of cleaning and caring virtues could be achieved if the workers subjected themselves to very rigid schedules in which their tasks were quantified down to the minute. In Melania's eloquent words:

*The agency told me how much time I should spend on each task. For example, for normal domestic cleaning you should not spend more than fifteen minutes cleaning the toilet. Yes, because you need to be accurate but fast; they even count how many minutes you need to use the toilet brush!* (Melania, 29 years old from Poland)

Small agencies in particular seem to regard accuracy and rapidity as the most important qualities of a good worker. As customers resorting to the services of small agencies particularly for domestic or commercial cleaning usually demand that the whole job is completed in a few hours, agencies put enormous pressure on workers to break down their chores into a clear number of tasks, each requiring no more than a certain, reproducible amount of time. However, some workers experience the segmentation and quantification of their work not as a step towards more professionalization, but rather as a form of pressure and disregard for the actual time, complexity and efforts that their labour entails.

Most workers thus lament how contracts are not respected, how they are overworked and their spaces and skills diminished or disregarded. In spite of the more formalized modes of recruitment that private agencies apply to care labour, migrant care and domestic workers continue to be treated as a disposable, low-skilled labour force even in a context of rising demand and claims of more professionalization.

## 11 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has shed light on a neglected area of research in the fields of care work, gender and migration in particular: that is, the specific features and operations of private care and domestic recruitment agencies. Even though existing studies mention the growing number and importance of these private actors in the care sector across Europe, there is very little research to date that foregrounds them. The multiplication and rising importance of private agencies providing care and domestic services, I have argued, need to be placed in the context of processes of commodification and marketization of care and domestic labour, which have greatly re-shaped the care sector since the end of the 1990s. The development and consolidation of various commodification and marketization schemes in different countries – whether through ‘cash for care’, state outsourcing to, or tax relief for, profit and not-for-profit actors – has in fact contributed to the proliferation of private services that care-seekers are encouraged to purchase on the market.

Against this background, this article has made a novel contribution by exploring the British, and particularly the London context, and by shedding light on care and domestic agencies’ workings through the lenses of the main actors involved: agencies’ managers/owners and migrant care and domestic workers.

There are three main findings that emerge from both content analysis of the agencies’ websites and interviews with key informants. First, the world of private recruitment agencies in the city of London seems to be divided into two main categories: (i) the larger agencies employing eight or more members of staff and offering a variety of care and domestic services (often as live-in) to the wealthier households in the city; and (ii) the smaller agencies employing around five members of staff and concentrating on cleaning and babysitting hourly services for the middle classes and professionals. This distinction translates into very different marketing and business strategies. While the larger agencies oriented to high net-worth clients emphasize, and compete on, the quality of their candidates and on their capacity to offer the best bespoke service, the smaller middle-class-oriented agencies stress their professionalism and competitive prices. Furthermore, while the agencies geared towards the upper classes adopt business strategies focused on economies of scale, human resources management and market expansion, the agencies targeting the middle classes seem to work mostly on cultivating their existing networks and cutting labour costs. These differences find specular expression in the experiences of the workers I interviewed, all of whom were migrants. On the one hand, the workers employed through the larger agencies as live-in housekeepers find themselves in a better contractual and wage position as compared to those employed by the smaller agencies mainly as hourly cleaners: while the former can count on a long-term contract and a decent wage, the latter lament the informal, or poor contractual conditions and low pay.

The second main theme emerging from the research is that all agencies seem to be in good health even in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–2011, regardless of whether they operate through a corporate-like business model that privileges market expansion, or through a model that is geared towards fixed-costs cutting. The continuing rise in demand for care and domestic services has enabled them to survive and even thrive in a context of economic uncertainty and austerity.

This brings me to the third finding of this exploratory project: all migrant workers I interviewed, regardless of the type of agency with which they dealt, lament the unprofessional way in which their work is regarded. Out-of-contract hours and tasks, and the assumption that their job is a vocation rather than a set of acquired skills, are reported by all workers as typical experiences in the sector. This finding seems to contradict expectations that more marketization in the care sector will lead to more professionalization for workers. What transpires from the accounts of the migrant women I interviewed instead is the idea that employers (whether agencies or families/individuals) continue to regard care and domestic labour as fundamentally unskilled labour that can be utilized as they please in order to meet their needs (Anderson, 2000; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). The gender and nationality (or ‘race’) of these workers are strongly implicated in the disrespect and un-professionalism of their treatment. In so far as women are regarded as ‘natural’ bearers of care and domestic skills and in so far as their racialization *qua* migrants also operates through their segregation into the least desirable jobs in society, the reliance

of agencies on migrant women for care and domestic services is also what enables them to keep labour costs low and profits high.

Finally, this article has shown how in a context of growing commodification and marketization of care and domestic work, this work continues to be treated as unqualified, low status and low pay. The poor wages and lowly social status experienced by care and domestic workers is precisely what enables private care and domestic recruitment entrepreneurs to prosper and grow, while migrant labourers overall do not appear to be benefitting from the increasing reliance of families and individuals on their services.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I use the expression 'care and domestic work' to refer to the variety of services that include caring and cleaning. However, I sometimes use only the expression care, or care work more generally, to refer to both. In so doing, I am relying on the literature on gender, migration and care work which employs the term 'care' to encompass the whole of socially reproductive activities, including cleaning (Anderson, 2000; Boris & Parreñas, 2010; Parreñas, 2001).
- <sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that these two studies do not focus on private care recruitment agencies specifically and/or exclusively.
- <sup>3</sup> Note deleted for the sake of anonymization.
- <sup>4</sup> The agencies' websites were selected according to the following criteria: (i) their size – which can be deduced primarily from the number of branches – in order to represent a variety of agencies from the largest to the smallest; (ii) their position in the ranking of the top 25 agencies that are widely recognized as the leading recruitment companies in the sector according to multiple relevant sources (e.g., domestic workers' organizations, recruitment organizations). Once I chose the agencies, their online content was coded according to variables such as type of fees scheme (when available), city geographical coverage, type of care services offered, ownership and website interactive features. As for the interviews I designed and followed a basic protocol of questions allowing me to explore the key themes that were the object of inquiry. All interviews were conducted in public spaces and lasted approximately one hour. They were all subsequently transcribed. All textual material – agencies' websites' content and transcriptions of interviews – were all organized with Dedoose and then analysed through a matrix analysis (Thorpe & Holt, 2008) in order to allow for the comparison across cases of recurring as well as one-off themes.
- <sup>5</sup> While only agencies providing childcarers must have a licence and comply with specific childcare regulations, all of them must comply with the Agency Worker Regulations 2011 and the Conduct Regulations 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> See information here: <https://www.gov.uk/domestic-workers-in-a-private-household-visa>. In April 2016, the Government made some further changes to the ODW Visa, which allow workers to change employer but not to renew the visa.

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