Migrant domestic workers and family assistants in Italy

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1. Introduction
The increase in life expectancy in Italy has implied specific problems in the elderly population related to chronic diseases and lack of self-sufficiency. Families, who have a responsibility in the care of their elderly members, need more assistance. To face this situation, they recruit foreign family assistants (caregivers) who assist and cohabit with the elderly person. As a result – and in part owing to the limited offer of public home care services - a system of private welfare has been developing. Such system is based on foreign family assistants (caregivers), who represent a fundamental yet fragile resource for families, since these workers operate in a weakly protected sector, characterised by widespread irregularities in work contracts.

The strong demand of assistance arising from elderly people and their families has lead to an increase in the number of domestic workers (maids) and family assistants (caregivers): in 2007, when these jobs/professions were officially recognized with the introduction of a collective national contract, figures exceeded 700,000 people working in this sector, mainly women between 30 and 50 years of age, who migrated to Italy from Eastern Europe, South America and Africa searching for a job.

In addition, 294,744 domestic workers (maids) and family assistants (caregivers) have applied for regularization in September 2009. The total number of regular domestic workers and family assistants thus rises to one million.

However, figures still do not reflect the real situation, characterized by a consistent share of submerged work and even an illegal and criminal jobs market. The phenomenon of female family assistants (caregivers) and its developments – since its beginnings in Italy in the 90’s up to the present time – has made it necessary to understand the world of female workers employed in the home care and assistance to the elderly.

2. Summary
This survey has been carried out as part of Solidassistenza (2006-2008), a project within the framework of the EC Equal Programme. The project's aim was to test innovative solutions in order to face the complex situation of home care and assistance to the elderly, which has become a social issue rather than a private relation between families and assistants to be managed within the household; this situation requires specific social policies to ensure that home care work becomes part of the local welfare system, at sustainable costs for the families and with regular wages and contracts for the workers.

With the help of Prof. Lazzarini, Dr. Santagati and Prof. Bollani of the University of Turin, ANOLF CISL Piemonte operators have carried out a documentary quantitative as well as qualitative survey, in order to acquire a wide range of information on the social and working issues of the life of family assistants (caregivers).

The survey offers an insight in this new phenomenon and presents a sociological analysis which elaborates, in particular, the critical aspects of the work experience in the light of the migration experience, the family situation of family assistants, the role of vocational training and potential prospects to improve their working condition.

The survey highlights the contradictions of a working experience that often requires the full commitment of the family assistant (caregiver), who often has no time left to care for herself, a basic condition to achieve personal fulfillment and a full integration in the new society.

The results of the survey highlight a relation between migration and work discrimination; for family assistants, the legalization of permit and a work contract are the starting points on the way to a real improvement in their quality of life; in this respect vocational training is seen as a tool to avoid exploitation and as a way of social promotion/improvement.

The results of the survey are an integral part of “Tra cura degli altri e cura di sé. Percorsi di inclusione lavorativa e sociale delle assistenti familiari”, Franco Angeli Editore, Collana Politiche Migratorie.

According to the applicable law on immigration and asylum (the so-called “Bossi-Fini” law), a non-EU domestic worker (maid) or family assistant (caregiver) can be recruited if she has regularly been in Italy and has a permit to stay valid to carry out salaried work. In any other cases, it is necessary to wait the publication of the Flows decree (Decreto flussi) - which sets the maximum number of foreign workers who can be accepted in Italy every year (the “quota” of foreigners to be allowed to enter the country) – and apply for an authorisation to work (nulla osta) through the new online procedure. The future employer is then responsible for offering the job to the foreign person, who – on the basis of such offer – applies for a visa at the Italian embassy or consulate in her/his own country. Following the publication of the flows decree, the employer applies for the authorisation to work. If the application is accepted, the employer collects a copy at the Single Desk for immigration and sends it to the foreign person who can then collect her/his visa at the Italian embassy or consulate. In most cases, the foreigner does receive the job offer in her own country – where she “should” be – but “actually” she is already illegally in Italy (where she regularly arrived with a tourist visa, which has expired) and goes back to her country to collect the visa for salaried work. The permit to stay (the document which gives right to the non-EU citizen to stay in Italy) must be required within 8 working days from the arrival in Italy. The permit to stay and work can only be obtained if the employer and the non-EU worker have signed a Residence Agreement. The employer and the non-EU worker must sign a Residence Agreement at the Single Desk for Immigration. The non-EU worker must then apply within 8 days for a first permit to stay at a Post Office desk. The employer must file the recruitment with: the local police headquarter (for non-EU citizens), the register office, the job centers, INPS (the national social security institute) and INAIL (the national institute for insurance against accidents at work) 

New EU nationals do not need a visa and their employment can be communicated to INPS and INAIL, job centers and the register office (in the case of cohabitant workers).

2. THE REGULARISATION (SANATORIA) OF SEPTEMBER 2009
The Sanatoria (or regolarizzazione) is an Italian governmental regulation that allows all the non EU citizens, living in Italy without a permit to stay (or with an expired one, or not renewed, or which the renew has been denied by the immigration office, to be more precise people who have problems with their permit to stay), to submit a request of sanatoria in order to obtain a new indefinite working permit to stay. The sanatoria is the only system, for a clandestine, to regularize his condition directly from Italy. The sanatoria is an exceptional regulation of the State. The last one was made in 2002.

The Italian Government has included in the so-called “anti-crisis package” (art. 1-ter, Law 102, 3 August 2009) an amendment regarding the procedure for the emergence of irregular work and the regularization of domestic workers (maids) and family assistants (caregivers). An online procedure was available from the 1st to the 30th of September 2009, which allowed to legalize the position of those non-EU citizens who did not have a valid permit to stay and work, employed with families as maids or family assistants for people with specific pathologies or handicaps, or non self sufficient elderly people. All employers willing to participate in this procedure were required to pay a lump sum of 500 Euros for each worker, through the so-called form F24. For Italian, EU and non-EU workers with a valid permit for salaried work, the application had to be submitted to INPS. INPS registered the employer-employee relationship (after checking the payment of the lump sum, and proving that what had been declared met the legal requirements regarding domestic work) and reported the registration to the employer, sending, at the same, time the forms that were necessary for the payment of the social security contributions due after the second quarter of 2009.

For non-EU workers without a permit to stay or with a permit to stay not valid to carry out salaried work, the application could only be filed electronically with the Single Desk for Immigration, through the Ministry of Interior’s website. According to the estimates, 700 thousand applications were expected, however the sum...
According to Acli (the Cristian Association of Italian Workers), although this figures show a positive trend, it is just about half of the estimated illegal workers but, as a whole, they made the difference: looked reasonable if considered individually, the requirements for maids who seldom work 20 hours a week within the same family;

- the complexity of the procedure has played an important role;

For the people who illegally reside in the country, the regularization was the chance to obtain the permit to stay they had so much longed for: many of them had already given up the possibility to get it. For families, the only gain was to quit an unlawful situation. But it appears that for many of them this aspect was not so relevant. Families were supposed to shoulder most of the burden. The requirements looked reasonable if considered individually, but, as a whole, they made the difference:

- 500 Euro of lump sum have obviously represented a strong psychological deterrent;

As of today, risks are high for those who did not apply for regularization. According to the new Security Decree (Decreto Sicurezza), employers hiring an irregular worker, can be convicted for favoring illegal immigration and receive administrative sanctions worth tens of thousands of Euros; while maids and family assistants without a permit to stay can be convicted for illegal immigration and stay in Italy (fines from 5 to 10 thousand Euros) and expelled from the country.

3. THE NATIONAL COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT

The work of domestic workers (maids) and family assistants (caregivers) is within the framework of domestic work, ruled by the current National collective agreement on labour regarding domestic work, that came into force on 01/03/2007. (Valid from 1st March 2007 – Expiry date 28th February 2011)

Thanks to the national collective agreement the professional status of domestic workers and family assistants is now recognised.

Signatories were, on the employer side:

- FIDALDO – the Italian Federation of Domestic Employers, part of Confedilizia (The Italian Confederation of Property Owners) which includes: Nuova Collaborazione (National Association of Domestic Employers), Assindatcolf (National Trade Unions’ Association of Domestic Employers), Associazione Datori di Lavoro di Collaboratori Domestici (Association of Housekeepers’ Employers), Associazione Datori Lavoro Domestico (Association of Domestic Employers)

- DOMINA – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DOMESTIC EMPLOYERS

and on the trade union side:

- The ITALIAN FEDERATION OF COMMERCIAL, TOURISM AND
According to their duties, the workers’ profile is classified with one of the eight levels envisaged by the contract, each one having a specific salary. The levels range from A, for domestic workers with no experience to super level D for trained and skilled family assistants who assist non-sufficient persons.

Family assistants’ profiles correspond to the following levels:
- super level B super (assistant to self-sufficient individuals, monthly salary for the year 2009: 776,62 Euros),
- super level C (individual assistance to non self-sufficient individuals, unskilled, ns, monthly salary for the year 2009: 880,17 Euros)
- super level D (individual assistance to non self-sufficient individuals, trained and skilled, monthly salary for the year 2009: 1087,27 Euros).

Cohabitant assistants can work up to a maximum of 54 hours weekly; for extra hours an overtime pay is due, while non cohabitants can work up to 40 hours weekly.

Each working agreement has different economic conditions which should not be in contrast with the collective agreement. In no cases can the parties agree a lower salary than that indicated in the collective agreement. Working hours, vacations, weekly day off and weekly half day off must be indicated.

The collective agreement specifies the paid hours (40) that can be used by assistants to attend vocational training courses, rules job sharing (which allows two workers to be employed in the same job sharing working days and hours) and the severance for dismissal, resignation or expiration of temporary working contract.

The working contract rules many different aspects, including:

- night assistance and attendance, which can be night occasional assistance (person’s care) between 20.00 and 8.00 and night attendance (night presence) between 21.00 and 8.00.

b) board and accommodation, which must be paid for by the employer if the worker cohabits with the assisted person or if she/he works 6 hours or more a day.
c) trial period, which is paid and lasts 30 days for level D Super and 8 days for all other levels. Once finished, the worker’s job is automatically confirmed.
d) daily hours off for cohabiting workers, who have right to 11 consecutive hours a day and 2 unpaid hours off during the day, usually in the afternoon.
e) Overtime pay, with an extra 25% per hour for hours worked between 6.00 and 22.00, 50% for hours worked between 22.00 and 6.00, 40% for hours worked during the weekly 12 hours off duty, 60% for hours worked on Sunday (day off) or public holidays and 10% for hours worked that exceed the maximum 40 weekly hours between 6.00 and 22.00 for non cohabiting workers.
f) weekly time off, which is 36 hours, 24 hours on Sundays and the remaining 12 hours on another day of the week that must be agreed by the parties.
g) Recognized public holidays, when the workers have the right to not work and be paid.
h) Vacation, days off duty which must be enjoyed, paid and amount to 26 working days a year.
i) Year end bonus, an additional salary equal to the agreed monthly salary, to be paid within December, during the Christmas period.
j) Severance pay (TFR, Trattamento di Fine Rapporto)

As far as the social security benefits are concerned, family assistants may benefit of unemployment benefit, household assistance cheque, sick leave, benefits for on-job accidents or job-related illness, maternity leave (2 months before and 3 months after delivery) which equals 80% of the salary, family leave to assist children under the age of eight and which amounts to 30% of the salary. Maternity leave and family leave are paid by the employer who is then paid back by the National social security institute (INPS, Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale) with the tax contribution balance.

Every quarter, on fixed dates, employers pay the contributions for the family assistant they have hired. These funds are used by INPS (the national social security institute) and INAIL (the national institute for insurance against accidents at work) to pay off some indemnities (unemployment benefit, sickness and maternity leave, on-
job accident benefit and household assistance cheques) as well as pensions. At the end of the working contract, the worker is entitled to receive a severance pay. Pension rights accrue for immigrant workers according to the same rules that apply to Italians.

Analysis of workers in the sector analyzed (n. of workers in the selected sector broken down by gender, age, education degrees, functions, type of contracts etc).

It is estimated that 1 million immigrant women take care of our families. Most of them are between the ages of 30-50 years and migrated to Italy from Eastern Europe, South America and Africa looking for a job. INAIL estimates of October 2008 show that, at the national level, in the field of family assistance, 1 out of 4 workers is Rumanian. Within the Piemonte Region, data on countries of origin show most immigrants (69%) are from Eastern Europe (mostly from Rumania, but also from Ukraine, Moldova, Albania, Russia) followed by 15.6% from Latin America (Peru, Ecuador, Brazil), 12.4% from Africa (Morocco, Nigeria), 2.3% from Asia (China, Philippines).
CHARACTERISTICS OF TARGET WORKERS GROUP ANALYSED

MARKED DYNAMICS
Foreign women are currently representing the answer to the transformation of the Italian society, highlighted by economic, demographic, family and social changes, mostly related to the growth of the elderly population, the active participation of women in the labour market, the difficulties of managing family and work issues at the same time, the failure to share duties between men and women, the limited reach of public services in the field of home care. Demand and supply dynamics of the private care sector join the difficulties of the elderly world. Within the current Italian situation, there are several critical factors in the relations between assistants, elderly and families, among which:

- Discrimination suffered by foreign assistants, in the framework of an occupational profile with little protection, low salaries and often carried out on irregularly;
- The problems related to the weakness of the elderly and their dependence on somebody else;
- The complex issue of responsibilities within families as far as care duties are concerned: women are often expected to become caregivers, without any sort of remuneration.

Immigrant family assistants have become a well-established component of the system of personal services; the 2002 regularization (sanatoria) has turned families into employers, in a sector that does not require previous skills or experience. Board and accommodation are usually included in the job offer and sometimes the fact of not having a work contract may appear to be more favorable for all the subjects involved. Family assistants are a flexible and cheap solution, which, however, often offers little professionalism and limited guarantees for the health of the people involved. Even worse are the irregularities of work contracts, especially concerning social contributions.

Jobs in the care sector are part of a concealed, partially submerged, not clearly visible and segmented welfare model. While families represent the demand, the offer is given by a work force made up mainly of female foreign workers, who find this opportunity as a first, insecure and unprotected way to find a job and an accommodation on the Italian territory. Families, on their side, find individual and private solutions within their household, through unskilled, cheap and unprotected work.

The regularization (sanatoria) of September 2009 closed with 294.744 applications for the employment of non-EU workers as domestic workers or family assistants. This process has highlighted, once again, the complementarities between the needs of the Italian population and the availability of the immigrants. Furthermore, with a few more measures, this action would have encouraged more people come out of their condition of concealed work, with undeniable gain for themselves, for the assisted families and also for the State: in fact, the process has brought in 154 million Euro consisting of overdue social contributions and stamps, while between 2010 and 2012 INPS is expecting to receive an additional 1.3 million Euro.

ANALISED WORKERS’ TARGET GROUP
The first phase of the sociological research, carried out within the SolidAssistenza project, was carried out following a qualitative method. On the basis of semi-structured interviews made with a group of 50 women, a structured questionnaire was developed - and administered to a sampling group of 500 assistants – with the objective of investigating on the quality of life of foreign workers, covering the aspects of migration, working experience, family conditions, training and life projects.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS
The sampling group, consisting mainly of women, reflects women’s predominance in care jobs. Out of 50 interviews, only 3 respondents are men.

50% of respondent women come from central-eastern European countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Rumania, Russia and Albania), 16% from Africa, in particular from Maghreb, 20% from Latin America (Peru, Ecuador) 4% from the Philippines and 10% are Italian.

As far as the age is concerned, most women are in the 30-50 age group;

As regards the work contract, 18% declares to work without a contract, 6% have a temporary working contract, 6% have a collaboration contract, and 70% a permanent working contract. 12% haven’t got a permit to stay.

As for the educational level, 24% have a basic school level (they attended school until about 14 years of age), 16% attended vocational education courses (cook, tailor, secretary, health and social care operator), 32% have a high school degree and 28% went to university.

Many women are trained in health and social care fields (nurses, health and social care...
operators, doctors), and among them 12% have obtained a recognition of their qualification after attending specific courses to become health and social care operators (OSS, Operatore Socio Sanitario) or home care service assistant (ADEST, Assistente domiciliare e dei servizi tutelari).

Regarding family and housing conditions nearly half of the family assistants (44%) cohabits with the elderly person, and is available night and day. Some women are in Italy by themselves, because unmarried or because their husband and/or children remained in their home country; others live with the elderly person and one child following a family reunification; others who cohabit with the assisted person, have their husband and children living nearby. The remaining share of women work daily at the assisted person’s house, only one of them works on a night shift. There are also divorced or separated women living with their children, with an Italian partner, with other family members or friends.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS
The quantitative analysis on the life of family assistants was based on a questionnaire consisting of 68 closed-format questions, administered to a sampling group of 503 women of 31 different nationalities. 100 questionnaires were distributed in each province (Alessandria, Asti, Cuneo, Novara, Vercelli) to family assistants with a regular permit. Among them only 0.6% is an Italian citizen, which shows their political recognition in the national context is still weak.

As regards the age of the sample group, women from Ukraine and other European countries are older (more than 40 years of age), while younger women (less than 40 years of age) come from Morocco, Rumania and Latin America.

Women employed in care jobs have a middle-to-high education degree (nearly ¾ have a high school degree, attended university or have a university degree), while less than ¼ have just a basic level of education; in spite of this these degrees are not relevant for the assistance job.

Data on jobs in the countries of origin show that 26.4% of the sample group consists of former blue collar workers, 22.7% white collar workers, 13.9% used to be unemployed, 9.1% were teachers, 8.2% were employed in assistance jobs, 4.4% in housekeeping jobs, while 7.4% used to be executives and freelance workers.

Considering women’s marital status, about half of them (48.3%) are married, 20% are separated or divorced, 16% are single and unmarried, 8% are widows and 5% cohabit with a partner.

From the analysis of the housing condition of family assistants, data confirm that 58.7% of women do not live with their family, while 34.6% of the respondents live with their husband or children or other relatives. The majority of the sample group (58.4%) consists of workers cohabiting with the elderly person they are in charge of, while 31% work in the assisted person’s house only during the day, and just few of them (2.8%) work night shifts. On the other hand, within the group of married women, a much smaller percentage (about 10% less) cohabit with the assisted person, compared to those who don’t.

As regards the kind of migration, most women are head of family or first migrants (3/4 of the sample group) meaning that wives (76%) or mothers (65%) are the first members who migrate. Single women or those who have no children represent just a small minority. Many of them, as managers of the family economy, leave the children in their home countries, relying on family members and relatives who grow them.
Women who chose to migrate to work in the field of elderly care, may have different motivations: for some, those who leave their country alone, migration means to emancipate themselves from man and become independent; for others, who are aware of a higher suitability to fit in the Italian job market, it means being the first migrant in the family and setting the basis for a family reunification later (with their children and husband); finally, for others the departure is merely motivated by making money in view of going back soon to their home countries.

Reasons of the migration
Among the main motivations that influenced the choice to leave the home country, answering the question “what is the main reason why you decided to come to Italy?”, women workers point out expulsion rather than attraction factors. 40% of the sample group outlined economic problems within the family, especially serious for Romanian women, as the main trigger for their decision to migrate. The next factor is represented by objective economic and political crisis conditions in the country of origin (20%): in total, more than 60% of the sample group answered that the importance of these factors is fundamental.

Structural expulsion factors are particularly frequent with women from European countries, Latin America and Ukraine. Economic family problems are more serious for Romanians, Latin Americans and Ukrainians.

The expulsion causes that lead to migration are described in the stories of some of the women who were interviewed:

“Our country is going through hard times and having economic difficulties. We came here to find a job. Age is not at all important. I am 53 already, I’m here. We hope the conditions in our country improve. At the moment there are absolutely no signs of improvement and this is why we must take heart, be strong and keep going with the job we have (41)”

“At the time in my country there was a strong inflation and you could not manage with a family (3)”

“I first entered with a tourist visa. I thought: I’ll find something, make some money and go back soon. But then my father in law died, we needed money and, in line with my husband, I deecided: I stay here (44)”

As regards attraction factors, about 16% of the sample group responded that the decision for their migration to Italy was due to differences in salaries and easiness to find a job, the latter pointed out particularly by Maghrebian women. Maghrebian women are more explicitly attracted by Italy. Family reunification is typical especially of North African and Albanian women.

“I came to Italy because I was hoping to find something better than what I used to have in my country (1)”

“Here my husband and I can both work, and my children too are better off (10)”

“I stopped here because I knew that in Italy there is a demand for assistants for elderly people (41)”

Entering the country. Regular and irregular ways.
As regards the ways of entering the country, a tourist visa (valid for three months and purchased in the country of origin in a tourist agency specialised in this kind of business) seems to be the most common and it applies to 60% of women. It is important to differentiate the so called overstayers, who regularly come to Italy with a tourist visa and then extend their stay over the three months to find a job, from the actual illegal immigrants, who are not so many in Italy. The share of women who declare to have entered the country illegally, with no visa at all, is 17%, those who came following a family reunification is 12.8% and those who arrived with a working visa are 6%, although work is in most cases the only real reason for immigration.

In short the increase of illegal immigration, in addition to the phenomenon of people who enter the country illegally, is due to those who do not leave the country after their visa has expired. This process is made easier by the fact that Italy is a tourist destination, and migrant women sometimes use their tourist visa to alternate on the same job.

Illegal immigration/extension of stay eventually contributes to the increase of illegal work. The most common immigration path (which applies to about 70% of the sample group and mainly to European women) typically evolves from a first irregular stage followed by a regularisation process.

20% of the sample group went through the regularization of 2002, when this process involved a large proportion of assistants and domestic workers.

“I came to Italy in 1999 as a tourist, travelling by plane, the airline fare cost me 1,200 dollars;
"I came alone. I was admitted with a tourist visa, became illegal after the visa’s expiry date and in 2002 I took benefit of the amnesty (3)" 
"I came regularly as a tourist and then became an illegal immigrant. After a few months I found an employer who took benefit of the Flows decree of 2004 and provided the necessary documents and a seasonal 9-month contract in agriculture; in 2005 I got another contract like the previous one and had to pay by myself all social contributions, which were supposed to be paid by the employer. I was also blackmailed, humiliated and threatened, like a beast. Now I pray to God to be lucky, find a permanent job and regularize my position once and for all. (1)"

Women who regularly moved from the visa stage to the permit to stay, have gone through one of three different paths:
- Family visa: the group of women who came on the basis of a family reunification represents 39% of regular immigrants
- Tourist visa: the group of tourists who changed their visa into a permit to stay for tourist reasons is 21% of regular immigrants
- Working visa: the group of women for whom work is the very first reason for immigration, legally recognized and documented in visas and permits to stay is 15% of regular immigrants

"I came legally, on request: my sister was living in Italy and she gave me this chance and told me there were opportunities to work. Now I’ve been living in Italy for six years and I come from Lima, Peru (4)"

Benefits of regularisation
52.6% of the sample group believes that the legalization of their residence offers legal security and protection: if you are regular you have rights, you are recognized as an individual, you can live without being concealed or at the margins of society. Elder women long for this kind of protection more than the others. 19.9% of the sample group responded that this kind of security is an actual defense: being regular helps overcome the fear of removal. A lower rate appreciate the value of citizenship (8.8%). For other women, legitimacy means protection from exploitation, even though the family of the elderly person – i.e. the employer – can sometimes have a promotional role, encouraging to go through the regularisation process. According to the sample group, following the regularization the most significant changes are:
- First, being regular gives the opportunity to go back to the home country more frequently and visit the family without the risk of not being able to go back to Italy (46%)
- A lawful permanence allows to have a contract (23%) and to claim one’s own rights (17.4%)
- The possibility of family reunification offers the chance to keep one’s own family permanently on the Italian territory; lawful immigrants can buy or rent a house, and also request a loan
- On the job, legitimacy gives the right to rest, to aspire for work in other fields rather than assistance to the elderly
- Legality is connected with social rights such as the registration to the National Health Service, the right to claim a pension, etc.
- Finally regular immigrants experience emotional confidence and a feeling of freedom to walk around without fear

Access to the domestic work market
The replies to the question “before the departure, did you have an idea about the kind of job you would have found in Italy?” were as follows: 52% stated they had no knowledge about the work they could have carried out in Italy and no information on the Italian job market. The group of uninformed women, unaware of the working prospects in Italy faces the most significant risk of being exploited and discriminated.
Among those who declare to have had some awareness of the job offer in Italy (46.3%) – mostly women who have been arriving in recent years (since 2001), generally older, ready to accept jobs for foreigners and coming from eastern European countries – a clear data emerges: 81.6% think that an immigrant woman can only work as family assistant or housekeeper.
The most common sources of information are informal: 65% of the sample group relied on word-of-mouth and relatives, acquaintances, conational who worked or are working in Italy. Networks of relatives and conationals in Italy are higher than the average for Ukrainians and Romanians (78% and 76%), lower for Latin Americans (48%) and Maghrebians (51%).

Italian information sources and ways of access to the job market are highly informal as well. Networks based on relations among women are efficient in ethnic-related work niches – such as assistance to the elderly – facilitating the access to the job market, but only within a specific category, which is almost impossible to quit.
These networks of conationals (46%) and autochthonous individuals (22.6%) have had
an increasingly important and strategic part in providing jobs to the immigrants and represent family assistants’ social assets: friends who give hospitality and provide references for Italian families (often for money), catholic-oriented institutions (16%), in particular for catholic communities from Latin America or eastern Europe.

“I found this job through a friend’s acquaintance, who asked me 250 euro just for her good word to the family I currently work for (19)”

“A friend helped me, she found, where my friend worked, my lady’s nephew – she has no daughters – she looked for an assistant, she said ‘listen, I have a friend, she’s good, if you want I can call her’. And he said ‘All right, call her’. And so she called me (37)”

No other public or private bodies are referred to by women of the sample group as having a part in this private and unstructured market of care jobs: women find jobs with Italian families through networks of conationalists, personal acquaintances and local parish churches who act as intermediaries. While public bodies manage this enormous private market with difficulties, the informal subjects try to match demand with supply, relying on direct bargaining, mostly based on arbitrariness and benevolence. Issues become complicated when unfair players come on the scene (opportunistic assistants, dangerous elderly individuals, abusing families).

The work relationship thus becomes a place where people with specific needs meet and clash with each other, each looking for an answer to their needs of work, assistance, replacement in their caregiving role. This situation often end up with improper, uncertain, temporary and informal results, based on do-it-yourself solutions that, in the long term, bring no gain to any of the parties involved.

“Assistance has no professional connotation. There is a person’s need and there is another person’s need that meet. When a family thinks of an assistant they do not consider her professional features, they need somebody to accept a 25-hour contract (Focus Group, Alessandria)”.

The first family assistants came from Africa and Asia, but, following the large-scale immigration from South America and then eastern Europe, African women have been loosing jobs. The reason is that families, given the chance to employ a white person rather than a dark-skinned one, preferred to do so because they felt closer to their culture.

Usually it is the family, rather than the elderly person, to choose the assistant. Families, after an initial approach with the available person, apply to the bodies in charge of doing the necessary paperwork (INPS and INAIL registrations, communication to the Police headquarters) in order to start the work relationship. Sometimes families turn to trade unions’ funds, ACLI, etc. for pay slips, tracking of social contributions until the end of the work relationship and to be safeguarded in case of violations of the contract terms.

Family condition

% of the sample group consists of women who are the head of the family or first migrants, the latter usually being the wives (76%) and the mothers (65%). A tiny minority is represented by single women with no children. Immigrant women, usually responsible for the family’s economic conditions, often need to rely on family members or other relatives who grow their children in the home country.

Women who do not have a family in Italy (58.7%) in most cases choose to cohabit with the assisted person, while the presence of children or a husband or both (34.6%) considerably reduces the willingness to do so. Women who have left the family in their native country are caught between working and making sacrifice for the material comfort of their families and the sufferings of being separated from their loved ones.

“I am married, I have two sons who are getting a university degree. If it was your mum in my place, how would you take that? At the beginning it was awful, it was a disaster. My family used to say “we don’t need anything, come back home”. I would not like my sons to come here”.(12)

For mothers, the relationship with their children at home is a strong bond that makes them more willing to accept migration and heavy working conditions, from the perspective of being able to offer them a better future. Some cases are represented by women who are older than 50 years of age and who draw a pension at home. However they need to improve their income for themselves and for their family and they come to Italy to face unexpected expenses (e.g. an expensive surgery) or necessary ones (e.g. their children’s university fees).

“My family is in my home country, Moldova. I have two grown-up children of 32 and 33, four grandchildren. I am here and my husband at his age cannot come to find a job here, that’s why I did not apply for family reunification. I
work a lot to help many families, to help everybody. (41)"

Married women feel an additional hidden concern: they are afraid that being physically and emotionally separated from their husband can affect their marital relationship. For all of them migration is a difficult test on the strength of their love bonds: old bonds can come to an end and lead to separations and divorces, while new affairs with co nationals or Italians can affect their choices and life projects.

A common practice among immigrant women is sending money home. The amount varies between half and all of the money they earn abroad. 82.5% of the sample group state that they regularly send money to the family at home and among those who cohabit with the elderly person the amount is more than 90%. The money they send home is used as follows: 56% for children and parents maintenance, 16% to buy a house, only 3% to start up a business. Mothers from eastern European countries migrate to help children prepare a better future, giving them the chance to go on with their studies until they reach a high school or university level degree. Family assistants from other countries, such as Africa and Latin America, are committed most of all towards their families who have got into debt to make their trip possible.

Usually, earned money is sent home through informal ways. Money transfers play a central role in the actual and symbolic representation of a family network that extends beyond domestic and territorial boundaries. Money is mostly used to sustain families back home: 30% of the sample group use it to support children’s education, 29% send it to parents and families with economic difficulties, while 16% use it to buy a property (house). (non è una ripetizione rispetto a quello che si afferma sopra, ma con risultati diversi?) The concern of mothers is therefore supporting children’s education and increasing the cultural assets of their family, hoping that this leads to better socioeconomic opportunities. In other cases the money is used to help other family members. Single women, on the other hand, use their money for their families, i.e. their parents, thus posing the paradox of women who migrate to provide economic support to their elderly parents, assisting other elderly people in Italy.

Sending money at home appears to be just one of the ways to keep in touch with the family even though there is a physical distance: women use several ways to keep relationships and communication alive, through telephone, messages, letters, photographs and parcels shipped by coach, and with the use of new technologies, via e-mail and messenger systems.

Along the migration path of family assistants, this situation of hardships, suffering and isolation can only be a temporary condition. At the beginning of the migration experience, the elderly person represents the family back home, and cohabiting with him/her means establishing affective relationships and enjoying some company to avoid feelings of loneliness. At a later stage, though, reunification (with the husband and/or children) is a real turning point that necessarily involves changes in the working experience. For example, changing from a cohabiting situation to a job with daily working hours, represents an improvement as it allows to have more time to spend with the family. On the other hand new problems may arise in the relationship with the re-unified children (who do not know the parent or have been forced to migrate against their will), and immigrants face new economic difficulties in order to guarantee the means of subsistence for themselves and their families, paying for the first time for board and accommodation, previously provided for by the employer.

“I have got six children here in Italy and one in Ecuador. I see them only two hours a day, even though they are close it feels like they are farther than Ecuador. This makes me feel sorry, it hurts me very much, I almost feel like a slave. My children miss me, but there is no alternative: take it or leave it.(3)”

Second generations often live within families with a single parent (usually the mother). On the one hand, a full time job allows the parent to earn money and have the necessary resources to guarantee a certain level of well-being to the children in Italy, but on the other hand, this reduces the time and the chances to look after them. The mother is fully in charge of growing her children. Finding the balance between working hours and time for the children is a problem for any woman who faces the challenge of a job outside the household. However for foreign women it is even more difficult, since they have no support from relatives and their job does not suit family duties in terms of working hours.

**Agreement terms**

Within the sample group, 37.9% declare that only a part of their wage is declared in the payslip, while 17.4% are paid without a regular payslip; only 41.3% receive their wage regularly, that is totally registered in the payslip.
Services in the area of family assistants have been working in coordination in the last few years in order to provide guarantees both to families and to workers, thus overcoming situations in which single individuals pursue their own interest damaging the interest of the weaker player.

As regards the work contract, 74.8% declare to have one, while 18.7% declare not to have one. The practice of employing someone without a contract is particularly frequent when the family assistant has no permit to stay and in particular for women coming from Maghreb and Latin America.

As regards social contributions, 47.5% of assistants state that they are paid for by the employer, while 25.9% pay the amount on their own.

63% of the sample group take their holidays, while 34% have not taken holidays. Given the constant effort and the peculiar difficulties of a foreigner, holidays should be taken at all costs to avoid negative consequences on physical and mental health.

Although working regularly all year round, one third of women taking part in the research, besides not taking any holidays, do not receive any overtime pay for the days that should be taken as holiday.

The care work

Being able to cohabit with the elderly assisted person, for a family assistant means on the one hand not having to pay for board and accommodation and all related expenses, on the other hand it means being involved in a system that entails a series of other problems: in addition to caring for the elderly person, the assistant often manages the whole household, facing the opposite requests of the elderly parent and his/her sons/daughters; she suffers the stress of the worsening conditions (and increasing dependence) of the elderly person, in particular toward the end of his/her life.

A person coming from a different culture can raise several problems that may affect the relationships within a family, due to their different views and values. In other cases, on the contrary, this situation is taken as a chance to start working through interculturally: while the Italian family rediscovers values that were lost in the effort to reach success, competitiveness, overlapping of roles (the foreigner can work through her own behavior and attitude.

The family assistant is often seen as a replacement of sons/daughters, or as an intermediary between them and the parent. Usually the ideal assistant is in her forties or fifties. A much younger woman would not be able to give enough care to the elderly person as she would be bored to spend time keeping him/her company, while an aged person would obviously not be strong enough to perform specific tasks which are essential in the care of a non self-sufficient person. Some families become fond of the assistant and, when the elderly person passes away, commit themselves to find her a new job. Other families, on the contrary, just send her away immediately without worrying about her precarious condition. An assistant is usually employed in consideration of two main health problems connected with the elderly person: senile dementia - of which assistants rarely have any knowledge nor have they got specific skills to deal with it, thus easily exposing their own health - and geriatric diseases that do not require specific nursing skills provided that the family and doctor clearly explain how and when to administer the required treatments. The relationship is however psychologically demanding, due to the long time devoted to the assisted person. Families, although explicit when requiring the knowledge of the Italian language to talk with the elderly person, are often ambiguous when expressing which tasks the assistant is expected to perform and how, this can result in misunderstandings: families expect kindness to be used towards the elderly parent, bossy behaviour to be avoided, but on the other hand they totally put a person in the hands of the assistant, who has to be nurse, housekeeper, companion and sometimes supervise and guide the person constantly (in the case of people affected by the Alzheimer disease).

"Psychologically (heaving a sigh) since he has a mental illness, you must have very strong nerves: he always pushes me, hits me, spits at me, spits on the floor. She also has mental problems, she often loses her temper, starts screaming, fighting with the old man, and he gets even more nervous. They often fight, two or three times a week, I intervene to calm them down, he often pulls her hair, hits her...(heaving a sigh). It's a constant stress and my head is aching very much...(starts crying)[13]"

88.9% of family assistants who took part in the survey, work in the assisted person’s home, only 2.6% in retirement homes and 0.4% in hospitals. As regards presence at work, 51.5% are there night and day: although this does not always mean performing specific duties, it involves being alert all the time, and aware that you are likely to be disturbed.

"No assistant can tell exactly how many hours she works. We really work 24 hours a day. How can I stay in bed at night when the lady feels sick, how can I sleep when she calls me at night? Can you be indifferent, keep away,
not assist an ill person outside the working hours? My only resting time is at the weekend when I go out. My contract is for 40 working hours, eight hours a day, easier said than done (19)."

34.1% affirms to work only during the day, while a very tiny percentage (2.7%) works only during the night.

As the years of residence in Italy go by, the continuous working schedule (night and day) changes towards less working hours, indicating that assistants tend to look for a better solution in consideration of their own mental health.

The night-and-day working schedule is often connected to a status of irregular immigration and in many cases it becomes a form of complicity with consequences on the wage and other forms of blackmail.

Taking into account the long working hours, the kind of work itself and the fact of cohabiting with the assisted person, the care work deeply involves family assistants.

The sample group shows that 56.7% have their own room, 33.8% sleep in the same room with the old person or have a precarious accommodation in the corridor next to the old person’s room.

Having their own room has a particularly important influence on the quality of life of assistants: a room of their own offers care workers some privacy, time to be on their own, a retreat for a little relief; sleeping in the same room with the elderly person means further discomfort during the night time.

Data show a variety of wage levels, however this does not depend upon the amount of working hours or upon the condition of the elderly person, but it is connected to the fact that the contract is, in the majority of cases, drawn privately by the parties.

The most common wage levels are between 600 and 800 euro (47%) and 800 – 1,000 euro (26%)

The people involved are often foreign women planning to stay in Italy for a few years and therefore willing to accept exhausting working schedules, as long as this allows them to earn a calculated amount of money in the shortest possible time.

Their living condition is even worse if they have no opportunities to meet their conational, because the house they live in and the surrounding area is scarcely served by public transport facilities, and therefore it is difficult to reach the nearest city in the free time, which is not always enough to go, stay and come back.

To reduce the stress and get relief, family assistants should have someone who listens and understands them, to express their fears, to tell about vexations they may suffer, their discomfort, their concerns. Sometimes what the person really needs is talking: being helped find a meaning in the experience she is going through, having psychological help to avoid nervous breakdowns, which unfortunately are frequent. Duties should involve looking after the elderly person without performing nursing tasks. Elderly people often cannot afford to employ different persons to cover various needs, therefore the assistant is in charge of everything. Salary levels and payments (entirely or partly registered in a payslip) seem to be connected to the degree of urgency in finding an assistant to “fix the problem of the old person”, but they depend also on the ambition of family assistants to avoid fiscal deductions and the payment of social contributions to INPS.

In a context of emergency for both parties, some objective elements are disregarded, such as: health condition of the elderly person, working schedule, accommodation, holidays, etc.; all of these factors should instead be taken into consideration to determine more fairly the right salary, the necessary time off to regain the psychophysical well-being, external help when needed, etc…

Some family assistants object to the fact that families request references without offering any guarantee; family assistants in fact sometimes face risky situations: there are elderly people that do not display any particular thing when the contract is being discussed, but once the working relationship has started and they are in the same home, they have different requests, which are difficult to be disregarded because assistants, in particular irregular ones, are afraid of losing their job.

There are cases of assistants who want to work the least possible number of hours. They look for a person in the worse possible mental conditions, in order to have the house completely at their disposal, and sometimes even to use it as house of prostitution.

Different behaviors can be found also in the relationships among colleagues: some try to take advantage of every possible situation, for instance if they want to change family they sell their job to a conational usually for an amount
of money which equals the salary of one month, they ask for money to provide information; others, on the contrary, are disinterested in offering their help especially to newly arrived co nationals. Some factors show that the care job requires specific training and psychological background: the critical psychophysical conditions of the elderly people requiring night-and-day assistance, discrepancies between expectations before the departure and the real situation in Italy. The care work with a non self-sufficient elderly person should not be seen as a kind of “refuge” for foreign women, because this would mean that to help one person, another one risks to be in difficulties. As a matter of fact a lot of family assistants report psychosomatic diseases, problems in the behaviour (alcohol abuse) or real psychiatric diseases. Family assistants usually plan to stay in Italy for a short time, therefore they do not make any efforts to become involved in the new environment, to be more integrated or look for another job; the way of the highest possible earning in the shortest possible time leads in most cases to “self-destruction”.

36.2% of family assistants responded that the main cause of their discomfort is the loneliness related to the long working hours, in the inadequacy of public transport in relation to their free time, in the difficulties to make new friends, etc. Health problems (25.2%) and depression (24.7%) rates are also quite high, showing a widespread discomfort.

Data on physical (8.9%) and psychological (8.3%) mistreatment have also been collected. As regards the use of public health services, 41.3% have never applied to the National Health Service either for language difficulties or because they are unaware of the possibility to benefit of such services even if they are irregular immigrants for fear of being removed from the country. Family assistants feel that their job has a social meaning, but realize that they are not adequately respected, in many cases their position in Italy is not as good as the job they do in their home countries or it is not up to their qualification.

The job back home explains very well the degree of discomfort of people who used to carry out intellectual or prestigious jobs and are now working as family assistants in a foreign country. Only 13.9% was unemployed in the home country. The rest of the sample group used to have a job which was either unsatisfactory or not enough to achieve a socio-economic improvement for themselves and their families. In many cases the job carried out in the country of origin was completely different from the care work; this shows that the main reason for immigration is profit, even when this means being involved in a humble and hard work. The satisfaction degree of family assistants ranges from “little” to “enough” in respect to the following aspects of their job: salary (81.3%), rest and time off (73.7%), safety at work (62.4%) and variety of tasks (60.9%); higher satisfaction rates ranging from “enough” to “very” are expressed regarding the following aspects: relationship with the elderly person (73.2%), relationship with the family (67.4%) and social purpose of the job (58.8%). Being aware of the usefulness of their job and of the psychological and physical difficulties involved leads assistants to a strict judgment on their wage. Good relationships with the assisted people are on the other hand the most important factor in the current situation of family assistants.

The care work with elderly people is considered heavy by 27.9%, useful by 21.4%, while 17.3% thinks it is undervalued because it is a delicate activity with not enough recognition, especially in consideration of the fact that Italian women are not willing to do that. 13.5% consider it precarious, since it is connected to the life of the assisted person: when they pass away it is difficult to quickly find a new family thus avoiding to remain without an accommodation, a salary and running the risk of losing the permit to stay.

82.1% of family assistants consider this a temporary job and only 14.5% sees it as permanent; as regards future decisions 50.9% plan to go back to the home country, while 31% wishes to achieve family reunification, they want to be the first migrants of a family and lead other members to migrate, but with a plan to find jobs different from the care work.

Future prospects

The majority of women involved in care jobs live a very unstimulating day-to-day life, with memories of the past but no expectations, their idea of the future being marked by uncertainty and fear. These women torn between their home country and Italy, between the past and the present time may feel the wish and willingness to become integrated in the new territory without losing their origins, escaping marginality. A lot of them see the country of origin as the term of comparison: although they may feel exploited, many consider themselves more lucky than those who remained at home and they are rather inclined to accept heavy working conditions. 53.8% of the sample group do not picture their future in Italy, but express their intention to go back to their home country; 30.8% are
planning a family reunification (husband and children) in Italy, showing determination in their choice of immigrants and willingness to become permanently integrated in the Italian territory with their entire family. 11.5% is represented by single and young girls who want to stay in Italy by themselves.

Women over fifty, generally Ukrainians, are more likely to go back home, they cohabit with the elderly person and work very long hours; they can stand such exploitation (and self-exploitation) only for short periods of time.

“In the future I think to go back home, actually I would like to do it as soon as possible. But now it's not possible yet because I need money to start my own business. I love animals and in the future I would like to have a farm and take care of it. Since my husband is a vet, I think I can make it with his help.”

“Staying here for a while to help children. But I am afraid that in the future something might change here and someone might tell me to go away. My husband long time ago didn’t understand me, he wanted me to go back because he cannot live without me, now he understands that I still need to stay here a little more.”

“Everybody thinks of going back home. I arrived here in Italy with the thought of going back, when they asked me ‘how long do you want to stay here’ I said ‘two years’. Now it’s almost six years”.

“I made this proposal to a Ukrainian woman: ‘there is a job in a retirement home’. She earns about 200 euro, she thought about it for a while and then she called me back. ‘No, Father, I should also have to pay the rent, food and all the rest. I would be free, but I’d rather be at home all the time but have more, because I’m here not to loose but to make money’. (Focus group, Novara)

On the contrary, younger women (under 30) are less likely to go back; they live in Italy on their own or with family members. The same situation involves separated or divorced women, with no significant love bonds worth going back to the country of origin. Family reunification, with children first of all, but also with the husband and the parents, appears to be more common in the group of Romanians, Maghrebians and Latin Americans. Women over fifty show little interest in family reunification in Italy, they are willing to make sacrifice for a period of time and then go back to their country. The migration project of family assistants depends on the perception of the own job as permanent or temporary; the number of those who consider the care work as temporary and plan to go back to their home country is considerable (53.8%).

Although the work of assistant is perceived as temporary by the majority of women, this does not always imply the return to the home country; a lot of women would like to achieve an improvement in their working condition and possibly change profession, therefore not all those who consider this a temporary job (82%) plan to go back to the home country (53.8%) and it is clear that those who intend to remain in Italy do not wish to be employed in the care sector for the rest of their life. Interviews suggest that the return is planned only after the achievement of specific results, after having set aside enough money to live a quite life, help all family members, improve the retirement pension, or start up a business; it is quite common, instead, for Eastern European women to unintentionally extend the migration project; they leave their country with the idea of spending just a few months in Italy and going back home with a considerable amount of money, but they eventually extend their stay; such behaviour has negative effects on women who are forced to remain and on their integration process in the working environment.

The prospect of a return to the home country is a constant thought in women’s everyday life and gives them the strength to carry on in difficult working and living conditions.

The other important prospect of women taking part in the research is about family reunification in Italy. When the wish to have their husband, children and family members come to Italy becomes true, they gain a sense of complete fulfillment, because together with economic wealth they achieve gratification from the affective point of view.

The care work, in the case immigrants wish to stay in Italy, is not considered as definitive, because it forces women to spend a lot of time away from their own family; they are willing to improve their condition, start to study again, open a restaurant in Italy offering their traditional cuisine or start doing the job they used to do back home.

The care work is the beginning of emancipation for migrant women, the way to attain economic independence, their first form of social promotion that can lead to an improvement in their condition through specific training in the field of assistance or cultural mediation. In this perspective, Italy is considered as a country offering jobs and opportunities, even when the only possibility of a career is care work. For some women expectations for the future are the normality, regularity and lawfulness.
they have been denied along their migration path, marked by problems and obstacles; they wish to have a regular permit to stay, an employment contract, be able to bring their children to Italy, have a double bed for themselves and their husband; these are just a few of their ambitions.

As far as the second generation is concerned, foreign women place great trust in school and training, considered as the first social mobility tools in Italy for their children. Women wish their children to successfully go through the immigration process and they refuse the idea of them being unqualified workers like their parents. These children are often between the first and second generation of immigrants, since they share with the first one the economic motivation, their belonging to families torn apart, the focus on work; with the second generation they share the young age and the chance to becoming adults in Italy.

“A dream for the future: buying a home in Peru and seeing my children become professional people. This is the main benefit, here you don’t need much to study”

“I miss one daughter, but I can stand it, first she has to finish her study, she is studying nursery in Nigeria, as soon as she’s finished, if she wants, she can join me here”

“I would like our job to have more recognition and respect and not just be called ‘carer’ because someone likes it this way. It must be considered as a job we do for this Italian society and that we have an important role. What if we stopped doing these assistance jobs, baby-sitter, housekeepers? I think that the society has not taken this into consideration. There will soon be problems, because the new generation refuses to do these jobs and they will ask for more and we, as parents who had to go through this, don’t want our children to do the same. That’s why we want our children to have an education, if we cannot find anything better we will go back to our country with a European certificate, which is very much worthy in our country. I want my children to come here, study, get to know Europe, another world. Always respecting our culture”

As regards the attitude about Italian citizenship, 47.1% of the sample group is planning to make an application in the future, 19.5% has no such plans, while 29.4% is confused and uncertain. Those wishing to go back to their home country show little interest in the Italian citizenship; family reunification outlines, on the other hand, a project of integration on the territory and the citizenship application represents a consequence.

“I hope that my children in Morocco will be able to join me, so we can be closer. I would like to be Italian. I feel better here: here I have been able to find an overcoat, trousers, skirts. Down there there was nothing.”
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Italy is facing an increasing demand for foreign family assistants in the short, medium and long term due to its population ageing.

The emergence/regularization, the support and the qualification of the private home-care work are not easy challenges to meet. The increasing number of initiatives and projects concerning family assistants and the home-care sector converge in an effort to bring out / regularize, regulate and support the private home-care work.

Many Projects on home care have been implemented in the last few years in Italy, financed by different institutions: the European Social Fund, Equal programme, Regional funds, Provincial funds, Municipality funds. 4 types of projects have been financed:

1. window offices for matching demand (families) and supply (migrant workers), offering counseling on regularization procedures, contracts. Offering staff substitute worker in vacation period, health leave, etc.
2. Vocational training aimed at qualifying home care work;
3. Registers (municipal, provincial) of family assistants;
4. Bonuses, vouchers, care-checks for people hiring a regularized family assistant

Public services/support to the elderly differs from region to region and sometimes from province to province. These include public RSAs (residence for the elderly), day time assistance centers, home care and assistance.

In the last 5 years, in most Italian regions, public efforts have mainly been targeted to home care and assistance. Most regions give vouchers, bonuses or care-checks to no self-sufficient people and/or their families.

Some regions offer care-checks only to those hiring a caregiver, others offer care-checks as a monthly support to the family (without control on how it is spent). Levels of income to obtain the care-check differ from region to region. The Number of beneficiaries differs from region to region (from 0.3% to 4%).

A sustainable “caregiver” model- What future? Can the private home-care model (as it is today) have future financial sustainability, considering that:

- It is currently based on workers’ weak protection and low salary, but it’s nevertheless very expensive for medium income families and not sustainable for low income families;
- Increasing population ageing means increasing demand for live-in caregivers vs. a decreasing willingness of workers to live in;
- Future pensioners will have lower pensions/savings than today’s and finally an improvement of working conditions (8 hours on the workplace) would require for no self-sufficient persons a shift from a 1 to 1 relation (1 person/1 assistant) to a 1 to 3 relation.

1. How to address future challenges. Innovative national strategies / practices

Interventions can be divided into two policy goals:
1) to support the demand for assistance
2) to support the supply of assistance.

Support the demand. These include efforts to meet families‘ demand for home care: sharing responsibilities, supporting different spending opportunities, helping them manage costs associated with finding a suitable worker. In the first group of interventions we find:

a) care checks and economic support
b) tax benefits
c) window offices for job matching

a) Care-checks

Some regions grant financial support in the form of a care-check to the elderly who hire a family assistant (care-checks for caregivers). This is not to be confused with the usual regional care-check for non self-sufficiency (the so called “check for autonomy”), which has no binding constraints on its use. These regions are Abruzzo, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Valle d’Aosta, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Sardinia. These checks can have two purposes:

1) Support and regularize: Support families and foster the emergence of illegal work. The care-check is tied to the hiring of a family assistant and it
is designed not only to support families, but also to encourage the emergence of undeclared work. Is the case for example of Abruzzo, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Veneto Regions.

2) **Support, regularize and qualify:** Support families, promote the emergence of illegal work and qualify the care work. In this case the check is bound not only to the regular hiring of a caregiver but also to her registration in the register of qualified family assistants. The contribution for caregivers - in these case - is part of a broader strategy, which aims at sustaining care work, fostering its emergence from illegality as well as qualifying the private home-care work and making it part of the network of social and health services. Sardinia and Valle d’Aosta Fall into this category.

Information on beneficiaries of care-checks reveal the critical aspects of these measures. Critical issues relate primarily to the low rate of participation demonstrated by the elderly and their families. Their small number, in different contexts, is very significant.

In Veneto region, in 2007, 2,800 families received care-checks for caregivers, compared to 24,000 families recipients of region care-checks for authonomy. That is about 1 out of 10 families.

In Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, the number of beneficiaries of care-check for caregivers were in the same year less than 400, compared to over 3,000 recipients of checks for autonomy. Again about 1 out of 8.

These are very small numbers. It is reasonable to estimate that at least half of the recipients of care-checks for autonomy have a home caregiver (Ola, 2005; Region Lombardia, 2008), as the monitoring carried out by Emilia-Romagna region on care checks confirms, where it appears that at least 40-45% of those who receiving it recur to the assistance of a caregiver (Emilia-Romagna, 2006).

The rate of the elderly beneficiaries of these measures, therefore, is a problem: the real beneficiaries are much less than potential ones.

Why is this type of care-checks meeting with such a lukewarm response? We can answer very briefly: **because families still prefer the illegal market, even if it means giving up an economic incentive.**

The amount of these contributions is - from this point of view - a key variable, which differs significantly according to the load of care-work necessary.

The amount of the carecheck for caregivers may be fixed (as in Emilia-Romagna and Sardinia, respectively, 160 and 250 Euros per month) or variable, that is changes according to the number of working hours and according Isee index (measuring income levels): for example, between 50 and 260 euro in Veneto, between 120 and 200 Euros in Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

**Fixed or variable, these figures do not cover - in most cases – the cost of social security contributions paid by households, ie the cost difference between the black market and the regular market.**

A care check that really encourages the emergence of illegal work must offer a coherent economic benefit. Moreover, an increase in the participation rate will also depend on the ability to offer a coordinated package of services. That is the added value that the public authority can provide, compared to the private market, and that added value is the possibility of offering different services at the same time: facilitation of job matching (marching supply and demand for assistance), long term support and protection, integration of social and health services, home services and (even temporarily) residential services.

**b) Tax benefits**

Costs of workers’ social security borne by households are the most significant obstacle to the emergence from the black market. It is known that the private care sector is characterized by a large share of submerged market, which according to estimates of 2008 (prior to the Sanatoria 2009) covered the 60-70 percent of domestic workers (IREF, 2008; Ismu Foundation, 2008; Pasquinelli and Rusmini, 2008).

Increasing the regularization of labor relations is a prerequisite for improving the working conditions of family assistants, for qualifying their work, for driving families towards a care market that is connected with the public social and health service system.

Fiscal regulations allow - for those whose income does not exceed 40 thousand euros - a 19 percent deduction of an amount not exceeding 2,100 euros per year for the care of
not self-sufficient elderly. The total amounts to 399 euros. There is also the possibility of a tax deduction from the employer's income, within a maximum amount of 1549 euros. Even adding the two options, these are very limited. In the face of social security costs of up to 3,000 euros per year, the current tax rebate touches, at best, 15 per cent of these costs.

The minimum wage for family assistants increased by an average of 30 percent with the introduction of the new collective contract on domestic work in March 2007, while the possibilities of tax deduction are still the same, essentially irrelevant to the goal of the emergence of the informal/irregular economy characterizing this sector. In addition, minimum wage and social security costs for domestic workers paid by families is updated yearly by INPS according to the cost of living index.

The costs gap between regular and irregular market is significant, particularly in the case of co-residence (live-in assistants). In this case hiring a worker would cost about 40 percent more than offering irregular job, without a contract. The same family caregivers - moreover - tend to give up a regular contract, in exchange for greater money. Except when the moment comes to renew the permit when they have to prove that they have a job.

The subterfuge used is hiring a caregiver for the minimum 25 hours a week, even when she works longer hours, or lives in with the elderly. This is an increasingly used practice: it is convenient for the employer - who pays little social security costs and has a regular contract, it is convenient to the employee, who has a contract that does not penalize too much her net pay.

The illegal market is not only economically convenient. Many families prefer the black market for immediacy of response that is, to enjoy a degree of freedom and the absence of constraints. These same aspects are valued by the family assistants, especially those with short-term migration projects, who prefer to give up contractual protection in exchange for maximization net profit of their working time (Pasquinelli, Rusmini, 2008).

The above said shows the need to complement tax breaks with other family friendly and labor friendly types of interventions. You must be able to deduct a much more significant share of social security costs in order to make the regular hiring less penalizing.

More tax breaks may be an important new signal for employers from the state, because is socialize part of the costs of care that families bear and manage privately.

Different suggestions have been put forward in this direction (see: Baldini et al., 2008), including the increase in the amount of tax rebates, and a tax deduction of social security contributions paid by households. We can widely agree with these two proposals: their cost for the state budget would be relatively low, ranging from 184 million to 636 million Euros.

Both proposals offer benefits that are proportional to the household income level, so that in the lowest income groups the benefits ultimately cover more than two thirds of social security contributions. They concern a significant proportion of elderly people who opt for family caregivers, 4 percent of people aged over 65.

Una soluzione ancora più incisiva è l'offerta di un credito di imposta per le famiglie che si avvalgono di un'assistente familiare. Ipotizzando un credito fino a tremila euro, la spesa stimata si aggirerebbe intorno a 1,4 miliardi di euro (Baldini et al., 2008). Un impegno rilevante, che tuttavia assicurerebbe la drastica riduzione del mercato nero, oltre ad affermare con i fatti il ruolo di uno Stato family friendly, che si prende cura degli oneri familiari.

An proposal that would have an even stronger impact is offering a tax credit for families hiring a family assistant. Assuming a credit of up to three thousand Euros, the estimated cost will be around 1.4 billion Euros (Baldini et al., 2008). A major challenge, which however would ensure a drastic reduction in the black market, and would show the role a family friendly state must play, taking care of families’ burdens.

c) Job matching (demand and supply) window offices

What is most lacking in the black market is information: families are under pressure and unprepared, they use random recruitment channels and the so-called matching between demand and supply is more or less impromptu, generating chains of endless problems.

in recent years the number of dedicated window offices have multiplied, and they are probably the most successful services in this sector. These offices meet with two solitudes. That of the caregiver - who wants to free herself from the closed circuit of her countrymen - and that of a family in search of urgent aid.
They both look for an answer to their immediate demands, but also for someone who can listen to them, who can assess their skills and experience on the one hand, and their needs on the other.

In many regions two types of window offices have been created: some simply offer information for families, others offer guidance, tutoring, ongoing support.

Available evidence suggests positive response to the first level, with a large quantity of first contacts between families and workers, and success both among those who look for workers (families) and especially among those who offer work (caregivers). The numbers decreased significantly when considering numbers of job matchings and contracts regularly signed (1 contract out of 10 first contacts).

The willingness to sign a contract remains low for obvious reasons of mutual convenience. Caregivers without contracts earn more net money and costs are lower for families. In this situation, trying to regularize care work through the action of window offices only risks being too vague and not enough.

Job matching, if not linked to other interventions, is short of breath and the effort seems disproportionate to the results achieved. The job matching is what people want, but far more extensive needs hide behind. Families in particular are not looking for just the "right caregiver", but they are interested in a place that gives information, which listens to them and their needs, which we can support them over time, which they can trust, a place that can break the solitude of the private market.

We can define the complexity of variables involved in the process of matching family needs and labor supply, to make some further comments. The experiences differ on two crucial aspects:

1. the insight into the needs of a family on one hand and in the working skills on the other. In particular, the presence or absence of a real "skills assessment" helps making the matching the more appropriate and most effective;

2. accompaniment after matching. A formal agreement between the parties does not in itself guarantee any stability: problems, disagreements, misunderstandings can arise starting from the day after. Criticalities may include divergence from expectations, the level of appreciation of the work, quality of housing, use of time off hours, the salary level and the turn-over of family caregivers and their substitutes. Hence the importance of offices that are connected to social services and can be of help in relationships characterized by a recurrent instability.

The added value of window offices is being able to connect the support to demand (security benefit contributions, guidance, case management) to the support the supply (training, accreditation process, professional registers). They thus become places where the different interventions are complementary.

We may hope that these experiences can grow, in coordination, also through regional support (now largely missing). Pure matching between supply and demand captures only one dimension of the needs in play, which include listening, coaching, understanding the needs and assessing skills. Activities that call centers or computer bulletin boards cannot perform.

**Support the supply.** The second objective concerns those who offer assistance, i.e. the caregivers: it includes actions to facilitate their regularization, the qualification of their profession, recognizing their role in a regulated market. Supporting the supply includes actions concerning:

- **a) Professional training, skills accreditation**
- **b) Professional registers**
- **a) Regional training**

Training family caregivers is one of the most frequent actions undertaken with the aim of regularizing the private market of care-work. The training courses for family assistants, defined at regional level, has three aims:

1. **Ensure a basic skills level.** The definition of a standard training guarantees a minimum standardized level of skills acquired.
2. **Standardize the training course programme in the region.** The recognition of the validity of the training course on the all regional territory allows assistants to work in a City or province other than where they attended the course.
3. **Offer a course for professional growth.** Caregivers can undertake a course of qualification which - if coupled with higher level of qualifications and accreditation, - allows them to grow professionally and to plan their professional career.
9 regions have defined the terms and contents of the training course for family assistants: Tuscany, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Liguria and Lazio, Valle d’Aosta, Lombardy and Marche. Other regions such as Sardinia, Veneto, Umbria and Piedmont are trying to (Rusmini, 2009).

Overall, some findings show some criticalities in the training of family assistants:

1. **High dropout:** matching training and care-work is not easy: on the one hand, women employed as family assistants often see training as time taken away from paid work, on the other hand families have difficulties (and lack of interest) in giving up the presence of the assistant even for a few hours.

2. **Poor participation by family assistants with short-term projects:** people most interested in undertaking a training program are women with long-term migration projects, especially those who aspire to work in the service sector, in nursing/resting houses and hospitals. This means that attendance to the courses can be stimulated by the recognition of training credits that allow future professional developments.

3. **The risk - or the opportunity, depending on your point of view - that the training may lead to a change in the work sector,** ie that the family assistants continue their education course in order to get other qualifications, such as, OSS (social-sanitary operator), moving to the public service sector. In this way, the unskilled private care work is reproduced.

You should not forget that access to training is only possible for family assistants legally residing in Italy. Undocumented family assistants are therefore excluded from professional qualification, and their number was estimated to amount to over one third of the total in 2008 (before the “sanatoria”) (Pasquinelli and Rusmini, 2008).

**The need for greater coherence between regional interventions in regulating the private market and national policies on immigration is therefore evident.**

**b) Professional registers**

Besides the activities and services offered by window offices, you can create registers or "lists" of accredited family assistants, ie caregivers who have attended a training course or demonstrate expertise in this work. These experiences are still limited: there are few local authorities who have been active in this direction, especially because they consider it to be a sensitive aspect in terms of responsibilities bore by the local authority.

he existence of a register raises sensitive issues of legal nature concerning the family assistants' home –work and assistance. And yet the registers ideally close the circle of a possible link between supply and demand and it is vital to foster regularization.

**2. Suggestions for improving the legal framework.**

In spite of those who foresaw it as short-lived and temporary phenomenon, that presence and work of family assistants (caregivers) is more and more consolidated. Nevertheless, the way to the regularization, regulation and qualification of this sector is still long. We can conclude that:

1) **Efforts undertaken with the purpose of supporting families and improving the quality of home care work must rely on national migration policies and tax relief policies oriented to this same purpose.**

Many family assistants have no permit (undocumented migrants). With the last "sanatoria" their number was significantly reduced, but there remains a system (that of the flows decree), especially in the remote job call/offer, clearly inadequate for this type of work and stakeholders.

The "sanatorias" are never an elegant way out for governments. They invariably lead to further infringements of laws and to the need for new "sanatorias". On the other hand, they seem hardly avoidable when the number of undocumented migrants and of Italians acting out of law as favoring a crime (that of illegal migration), is so high.

Rather than fixing situations that were not managed with foresight in the first place, we should try to seek other solutions in the future. We can identify at least two solutions.

The first is the **regularisation on an individual basis,** as in France, of people who can no longer reasonably be expelled for various reasons: for the extended stay in the country (for example, five years), their de facto employment, the establishment of stable personal ties, the
presence of children to look after. For this last reason, the presence of minors, the Italian law already allows the granting of a residence permit.

The second solution would be to convert the residence permit, as it has happened repeatedly in the United States. Those who enter with a three months tourist permit and find someone willing to employ them, particularly within the family, perhaps with certain guarantees (regular contract, deposit, mediating institutions and associations, sponsors, etc.) may be allowed to turn their provisional permit into a permit to work. This would avoid long period of irregular stays - that for mothers workers means years without being able to return home and see their children - and the loss of taxes and contributions.

Ultimately, the sanatoria is a recognition that the criminalization of illegal immigrants is first of all unrealistic: it is used for the purposes of political propaganda, but it does not solve the actual problems of governing immigration and meeting the needs Italian labor market.

Wiser policies to prevent the formation of large pools undocumented working migrants that become difficult to manage without further damaging the country would be better than sanatorias.

2) As to tax incentives, the objective must be to lessen the burden of hiring a family assistant, making families able to deduct at least half of the social security contributions.

3) Creating an alternative requires a network of circular mutual supportive interventions. Window offices dedicated to matching demand and supply, training, assistants’ registers, financial support.

Isolated actions lead to little or nothing. Because the added value that the public authority can offer is to connect different interventions: economic support and services, protection on the demand side and supply side.

Let’s take the case of training: what happens to trained the family assistants? If there is no regulated market that welcomes and values it, training is of little help. Training along, if not part of a larger design, is likely to be ineffective, because there is no attractive and viable market. It becomes a possibility to become another: type of worker (Asa, Oss. Sanitary-social operator)

Mutual and circular supporting interventions can find their center in the window offices offering supply and demand matching. They can really become the link between the families - with their needs for information and support - and immigrant women – to whom they can offer regularized a set of training and skills accreditation.
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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This case study was written in the frame of the “Decent Work for All: A Key for Effective Industrial Relations”, a one-year project which aims to produce recommendations on how to improve working conditions around Europe in sectors with higher incidences of precarious working conditions (ie construction, health and long-term care) and more vulnerable groups (ie youth, undocumented migrants) through coordinated efforts by governments, employers and trade unions in the framework of social dialogue. It also looks into the role of social partners in fighting precarious labour and promoting decent work and quality jobs.

All “Decent Work for All: A Key for Effective Industrial Relations” briefings are materials on www.solidar.org

SOLIDAR is a European network of 52 NGOs active in over 90 countries working to advance social justice in Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR lobbies the EU and international institutions in three primary areas: social affairs (more social Europe), international cooperation (development cooperation) and education (lifelong learning for all).

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