



Mobilecare

Social dialogue as a tool to improve the
conditions of functioning of intra-EU labour
mobility in home-based care services

Social dialogue in the home-based care services in Italy, a case study.

**European Social Dialogue to Promote the Application of Best Practices in Intra-
EU Labour Mobility: The Case of Italy**



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Abstract

This report examines the application of best practices in intra-European Union (EU) labour mobility with a specific focus on Italy's domestic work sector. It analyzes statistical data, survey findings, interviews, and focus group discussions to highlight key challenges and opportunities. The report emphasizes the relevance of European social dialogue mechanisms in fostering equitable working conditions and professionalization within the domestic work sector. Recommendations centre on enhancing training, addressing informality, and strengthening inter-institutional collaboration to improve outcomes for workers and employers.

Introduction

The free movement of labour is a fundamental principle of the European Union (EU), serving as a cornerstone for economic integration and social cohesion. Within this framework, Italy has emerged as a key destination for mobile domestic workers, driven by its ageing population and high demand for caregiving services. This report investigates how European social dialogue can be leveraged to promote best practices in labour mobility, focusing on Italy's domestic work sector, an area characterized by informality, gendered dynamics, and high reliance on migrant labour. By integrating insights from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and statistical analysis, this report aims to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders.

Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on a comprehensive desk analysis of existing literature and policies, alongside primary data collected through surveys, interviews, and a focus group. Surveys were distributed to 30 stakeholders, while in-depth interviews were conducted with eight employers and eight domestic workers. Additionally, a focus group involving trade unions, patronages, CAFs (tax assistance centres), and associations for people with disabilities provided a platform for discussing best practices and systemic challenges.

Desk Analysis

The mobility of labour within the European Union (EU) is a cornerstone of the European integration project, enshrined in Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). This principle guarantees the right of EU citizens to work and reside in any Member State without facing discrimination based on nationality (European Parliament, n.d.). European social dialogue plays a pivotal role in promoting best practices in labor mobility by fostering equitable working conditions and protecting the rights of mobile workers. In Italy, the domestic work sector is significantly influenced by intra-EU labour mobility, with a substantial share of the workforce consisting of migrants from other EU Member States.

POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AT THE EU LEVEL:

The European Union has implemented several legal instruments to facilitate labour mobility. The TFEU's Article 45 ensures free movement, while Directive 2014/54/EU aims to enhance the exercise of rights related to this freedom by promoting equal treatment and eliminating unjustified obstacles (European Union, 2014). Additionally, the European Labour Authority (ELA) was established to ensure the proper enforcement of EU rules on labour mobility, including for posted workers.

AT THE ITALIAN LEVEL:

Italy's adoption of Directive 2014/54/EU through legislative reforms underscores its commitment to promoting equal treatment for mobile workers. The National Collective Labor Agreement (CCNL) for domestic work establishes the legal framework for employment relationships in the sector, outlining workers' and employers' rights and obligations (Associazione DOMINA, 2024).

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

The domestic work sector in Italy is characterized by a high proportion of foreign workers. According to the Annual Report 2024 by the National Observatory DOMINA, nearly 70% of registered domestic workers are foreign nationals, with a significant representation from Eastern Europe. The majority of these workers are women, who make up 86.4% of the sector's workforce. Despite these figures, the industry is marked by a high level of informality, with an estimated 47.1% of domestic work being undeclared, far exceeding the national average for undeclared work in other sectors (Osservatorio DOMINA, 2024).

CHALLENGES IN THE DOMESTIC WORK SECTOR

Despite existing legal protections, mobile domestic workers in Italy face several challenges:

- **LIMITED AWARENESS OF RIGHTS:** Many workers lack comprehensive knowledge of their rights, making them vulnerable to exploitative practices.
- **PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS:** The prevalence of undeclared or partially declared work results in limited job security and access to social protections.
- **BUREAUCRATIC HURDLES:** Complex administrative procedures hinder the recognition of qualifications obtained in other EU Member States.
- **GENDER INEQUALITIES:** The sector's feminization exposes women to specific vulnerabilities, including gender-based discrimination.

THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN SOCIAL DIALOGUE

European social dialogue provides a framework for addressing these challenges by promoting cooperation among social partners, including trade unions, employer organizations, and civil society actors.

In the context of domestic work in Italy, this dialogue is critical for:

- **IMPROVING WORKING CONDITIONS:** Negotiating collective agreements that reflect the needs of both workers and employers.
- **ENHANCING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES:** Providing professional development pathways for mobile workers.
- **FOSTERING SOCIAL INCLUSION:** Facilitating the integration of mobile workers into Italian society and ensuring access to essential services.

This desk analysis highlights the interconnected roles of EU and national policies, statistical trends, and social dialogue in shaping the dynamics of intra-EU labour mobility within Italy's domestic work sector. Addressing the persistent challenges faced by mobile domestic workers requires a multifaceted approach that leverages legal frameworks, data-driven insights, and collaborative efforts among social partners.

Results of the Surveys

The survey responses collected from various stakeholders, including employers, workers, trade unions, DOMINA branches in the whole territory of Italy, labour agencies, caregivers, NGOs and social parties, offer a nuanced understanding of the domestic work sector in Italy. Beyond numerical data, the results underscore the sector's socio-economic dynamics, highlighting challenges, opportunities, and the role of intra-EU labour mobility in shaping outcomes. The survey findings highlight the intricate dynamics of the domestic work sector in Italy, shaped by economic, social, and cultural factors. While intra-EU labour mobility helps address critical workforce shortages, systemic barriers: such as high costs, informality, and inadequate training limit its potential. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that combines legislative reforms, enhanced social dialogue, and targeted support for both families and workers.

1. THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC WORK IN FAMILY SUPPORT

A significant majority of respondents (over 80%) agreed that domestic work is fundamental for balancing work and family life. This finding reflects the growing reliance on domestic workers to address Italy's demographic challenges, such as an ageing population and the increasing participation of women in the workforce. The dependency on domestic workers to fill critical caregiving gaps highlights structural limitations in Italy's public welfare system. Moreover, the lack of adequate state-supported care places a disproportionate burden on families, pushing them to seek external support, often through mobile workers from other EU Member States.

2. CHALLENGES IN RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

The most common recruitment channels cited by respondents were word-of-mouth referrals (65%) and local associations or parishes (40%). Only a minority utilized formal employment agencies, citing concerns about high costs and insufficient oversight. These findings illustrate a fragmented and informal recruitment landscape, which undermines professionalization in the sector. The reliance on informal networks also increases the risk of exploitation and irregular work arrangements, particularly for mobile workers unfamiliar with their rights. In addition, training for domestic workers was identified as "very important" by 70% of respondents. However, concerns were raised about the accessibility and quality of training programs. The social implications of these challenges include a lack of structured, accessible training pathways which hinders the ability of workers to meet families' expectations. For mobile workers, limited language proficiency and cultural barriers exacerbate these challenges, impacting their integration into the Italian labour market.

3. ECONOMIC AND LEGAL CHALLENGES

A recurring theme in the survey was the high cost of domestic work services. Over 75% of respondents stated that the costs of hiring domestic workers were “too high,” posing significant financial strain on families. This cost barrier encourages undeclared work arrangements, with many families opting for informal agreements to avoid the financial burden of taxes and contributions. This perpetuates precarious working conditions for domestic workers and undermines the formal labour market.

4. GENDERED AND MIGRATORY DIMENSIONS

The survey reinforced the feminization of the sector, with cultural stereotypes cited as the primary reason for women dominating domestic work. Additionally, respondents highlighted that many domestic workers in Italy are migrants, often from Eastern Europe, due to limited opportunities in their home countries. The sector’s reliance on women, particularly migrants, reveals systemic inequalities. Migrant workers often face dual vulnerabilities: economic dependency and social exclusion. Therefore, these issues underscore the need for policies that address both gender equity and the specific challenges faced by migrant workers.

5. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Approximately 60% of respondents acknowledged the importance of social dialogue in promoting inclusive welfare policies and protecting workers’ rights. However, concerns were raised about the limited representation of domestic workers in existing frameworks. Strengthening the role of social dialogue is critical for addressing systemic issues in the sector. Collaborative efforts involving trade unions, employer organizations, and policymakers can foster better working conditions and support the integration of mobile workers.

6. PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGICAL AND LEGISLATIVE INNOVATIONS

While most respondents (70%) believed that artificial intelligence (AI) could support domestic work through automation, others emphasized the need for targeted legislative reforms to improve worker protections. The cautious optimism around AI reflects its potential to complement human labour, particularly in routine tasks. However, respondents prioritized immediate legislative interventions, such as tax incentives and better enforcement of labour laws, to address the sector’s pressing challenges.

Results of the interviews with employers and workers in the domestic work sector

The interviews with employers and workers highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in the Italian domestic work sector. While intra-EU labour mobility provides critical workforce support, systemic barriers such as high costs, informal recruitment practices, and inadequate worker protections hinder the sector's potential. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative approach, combining policy reforms, enhanced training opportunities, and inclusive social dialogue. This section synthesizes the findings, emphasizing the socio-economic and cultural implications for the Italian case.

1. EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE:

Services and Support: employers frequently expressed dissatisfaction with state-provided services for non-autonomous individuals. Many noted that existing services are either insufficient or difficult to access, placing additional burdens on families. Suggestions included expanding financial incentives and streamlining access to community-based services. The inadequacy of public services drives families to rely heavily on private domestic workers, often at significant personal expense. This reliance underscores the need for policy reforms to better support families in managing caregiving responsibilities.

Recruitment and Training: employers highlighted the importance of experience, empathy, and flexibility when selecting domestic workers. However, many relied on informal recruitment methods, such as word-of-mouth referrals, which they deemed effective but inconsistent. Informal recruitment practices contribute to a lack of professionalization in the sector, limiting workers' access to fair employment conditions and formal protections. Increased investment in training and professional networks could address these gaps.

Economic Challenges: the high cost of hiring domestic workers was a recurring concern among employers. While they acknowledged the value of workers' contributions, they found associated taxes and contributions burdensome. These financial pressures often lead employers to seek informal arrangements, exacerbating the prevalence of undeclared work and undermining efforts to formalize the sector.

2. WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE

Working Conditions and Rights: domestic workers frequently reported issues with long working hours, insufficient pay, and lack of recognition for their contributions. Many cited the need for stronger enforcement of labour protections and greater access to benefits such as paid leave. The systemic undervaluation of domestic work perpetuates economic vulnerabilities for workers, particularly women and

migrants. Addressing these disparities requires a combination of policy interventions and cultural shifts to recognize the essential nature of caregiving roles.

Training and Professional Development: workers emphasized the importance of training to enhance their skills and job opportunities. However, they noted that access to affordable and high-quality training programs remains limited. Therefore, Expanding access to training could improve job satisfaction and performance while fostering greater integration of migrant workers into the labour market.

The Role of Social Dialogue: both employers and workers acknowledged the potential of social dialogue to address sectoral challenges. However, workers noted limited representation and advocacy for their needs in existing frameworks. Strengthening social dialogue mechanisms could create more equitable outcomes for workers and employers, ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented in policy discussions.

Analysis of the Focus Group on Best Practices in the Domestic Work Sector

The focus group brought together representatives from trade unions, patronati, CAF (tax assistance centres), associations for people with disabilities, caregivers, and other social partners to discuss challenges and opportunities within the domestic work sector in Italy. The discussions provided a platform for knowledge sharing and identifying best practices that hold great potential for shaping national strategies to improve intra-EU labour mobility and the conditions of domestic work.

The Importance of Training and Certification

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of professional training and certification for domestic workers. Participants underscored that effective training should extend beyond technical skills to include cultural adaptation and language proficiency, particularly for migrant workers. Structured training pathways, beginning in workers' countries of origin and continuing in Italy, were seen as critical for fostering integration and ensuring preparedness. Certification emerged as a cornerstone of professionalism in the sector, signalling competence and reliability to potential employers. However, to make such programs accessible, participants highlighted the necessity of incentivizing both families and workers. These incentives, whether in the form of financial subsidies or tax credits, would help alleviate economic barriers, particularly for low-income households. By raising the overall standard of the workforce and making formal employment more attractive, such measures can have transformative effects on the sector.

Supporting Families as Employers

The focus group also highlighted the challenges faced by families, who play a central role as employers in the domestic work sector. Many families struggle with the complexities of hiring and managing domestic workers, often due to a lack of clear guidance and resources. Educational initiatives aimed at equipping families with the knowledge to navigate these processes were deemed essential. Furthermore, financial support for families was repeatedly emphasized as a priority, as the high cost of employing domestic workers continues to push many towards informal arrangements. Participants stressed that reducing these economic pressures, through measures like tax relief or subsidies, would not only benefit families but also encourage compliance with labour regulations.

Tackling Informality in the Sector

Informality in the domestic work sector was identified as one of the most pressing challenges. Participants noted that undeclared work remains widespread due to high employment costs and limited oversight. To combat this, the focus group recommended targeted campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of formalization for both workers and employers. Additionally, strengthening the role of employment agencies and ensuring their accountability were seen as practical steps to bridge the gap between informal and formal employment practices. Agencies could serve as intermediaries to connect families with qualified, certified workers, ensuring fair treatment and transparency in the hiring process.

Building Collaborative Migration Pathways

Collaboration with workers' countries of origin also emerged as a significant focus. Establishing structured migration pathways, supported by partnerships with countries such as Georgia and El Salvador, was identified as a best practice. These partnerships could facilitate pre-departure training and ensure a smoother transition for workers entering the Italian labour market. Participants also highlighted the role of embassies and consulates in promoting effective migration practices, and the potential contributions of international organizations like Caritas in supporting these efforts.

Leveraging Innovation and Technology

Innovation and technology were recognized as promising tools to improve the sector. Digital platforms for job matching, contract management, and information sharing were proposed as ways to enhance transparency and efficiency. These tools could also serve as resources for families and workers, providing accessible information about labour rights and employment opportunities. Additionally, participants discussed alternative care models, such as co-housing for elderly individuals, as innovative approaches to reduce the sector's reliance on one-on-one caregiving arrangements.

The Role of Advocacy and Social Dialogue

Advocacy and social dialogue were emphasized as essential components for driving meaningful change. Participants called for campaigns to raise awareness about the rights and responsibilities of both employers and workers, fostering a culture of compliance and mutual respect. Strengthening the representation of domestic workers within policy discussions was also identified as a key priority, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are addressed in labour reforms.

Summary of the Focus Group recommendations:

- **Training and Certification:** Tailored programs for migrants that integrate language and cultural orientation with technical skills.
- **Financial Incentives:** Subsidies and tax credits to encourage formal employment relationships.
- **Social Dialogue:** Establishing formal platforms for employers, workers, and policymakers to address sectoral issues collaboratively.
- **Innovative Care Models:** Exploring alternatives like co-housing for elderly individuals to reduce reliance on individual caregivers.

Overall, the best practices identified during the focus group hold significant relevance for improving the domestic work sector in Italy. By addressing gaps in training, reducing informality, and enhancing collaboration across stakeholders, these practices have the potential to create a more equitable, professionalized, and sustainable sector. The focus group's findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions and collective efforts to address systemic challenges and maximize the benefits of intra-EU labour mobility.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings highlight the dual nature of challenges in Italy's domestic work sector: structural and cultural. While legal frameworks provide a basis for formalization, their impact is limited by economic barriers and a lack of awareness among stakeholders. The focus group underscored the potential of European social dialogue to address these challenges by fostering inclusive policies and practices. Leveraging digital innovation and cross-border collaboration can further enhance labour mobility and professionalization.

Therefore, this report underscores the critical importance of addressing systemic challenges in Italy's domestic work sector, which is heavily reliant on intra-EU labour mobility. Key recommendations include prioritizing professional training and certification, reducing informality through targeted policy interventions, and fostering collaboration between stakeholders at the national and international levels. By embracing innovative practices, such as structured migration pathways, digital tools, and alternative care

models, Italy can set a precedent for other EU Member States. Ultimately, strengthening social dialogue and ensuring that the voices of both workers and employers are heard will be essential in creating a fair, efficient, and sustainable framework for labour mobility. These efforts not only enhance the domestic work sector but also contribute to the broader goals of European integration and social cohesion.

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