

The long road towards sustainability: the contribution of domestic work.

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Abstract: About 67 million people around the world qualify as domestic workers, 11,5 of whom are migrants, whereas 80% are women. The latter account for more than half of the migrant workforce. Domestic workers play a crucial role as far as the management of homes worldwide is concerned. In fact, they manage households and take care of children, old people and people with disabilities, thus enabling the members of the employer's household, especially women, to work elsewhere and devote their time and energy to other domains. Migrant domestic workers also contribute to the development of a multicultural society in the destination countries, while constructively impacting their home countries by sending the saved earning to sustain their own households, as well as transferring knowledge and skills to the communities of origin. Nonetheless, domestic work is often underestimated and unprotected, lacking professional acknowledgment, formal contracts, regular wages and social security coverage. Integrating domestic work within a professional framework would ensure the human dignity of every single worker and contribute to tackling exploitation, poverty and exclusion. Above all, it would give an enormous workforce the key to integration in the countries of destination which, in turn, would endow the 'developed countries' with an important resource for social and cultural growth. Granting a professional status to domestic workers and ensuring their protection as an empowering commitment of social integration, we can promote and maximise the contribution of million of people towards a sustainable world.

Key words: sustainability, vulnerability, domestic work, home, intergenerational dynamics, common good

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1. Introduction

Income disparities within and across countries, aging of the world population and increased participation of women in the professional fold, have increased the demand of care services. As a consequence, about 67 million people around the world qualify as domestic workers, 11,5% of whom are migrants. Approximately 80% of such a huge workforce are women. Domestic workers play a crucial role as far as the management of homes worldwide is concerned. Moreover, there is an important ongoing reflection on the role that such dynamics, i.e. migrants and their contribution to the domestic environment growth and management, will have especially in the European and Anglosaxon societies.

In this paper, we will first analyse the reasons why so many domestic workers have the face of migrants, then the sustainability questions that migrations, as intertwined with domestic work, entail (Section 2). Furthermore, we will discuss the importance of a legal framework from the perspective of the protection of vulnerability (Section 3). Finally, we will argue that the domestic environment is proving a crucial developmental context for human beings

as it is able to build value and sustainable growth both at the local and global level (Section 4). Some reflections on the peculiar dynamics that characterize the 'home' and the work done to hold it, will be discussed for their theoretical relevance both in conceptual and explanatory terms of the sustainability concept.

2. Migrant domestic workers and sustainability.

In wealthy countries, domestic work hardly appeals to the local workforce. This feature, paired with the fact that domestic work does not seem to require specific skills and attitudes, make it often the only realistic option for migrants worldwide and help explaining why so many domestic workers are migrants. Domestic work and migration are therefore closely linked and often account for the two sides of the same coin. Migrant domestic workers often play a significant role in the development of a multicultural society as far as the destination countries are concerned. At the same time, they contribute to their home countries' economy by sending the saved earning to sustain their own households. They also transfer knowledge, skills, practices and values to the communities of origin, especially when they return to them and positively reintegrate in the local labour market. Migrant workers thus contribute not only with financial but also with social remittances to the development of the countries of origin, thus proving prospective drivers of local development. Overall, the domestic workers' contribution both to the country of origin and that of destination is of great significance, albeit the empowering and emancipating impact largely depends on the consistency between migration, labour and care policies both at international and national levels.

Despite the differences in what migrant domestic workers actually do on a daily basis, they feature common traits: their workplace is somebody else's household and what they do relates to tending to the personal comfort and convenience of the members of the employer's family. Domestic workers actually manage households and perform home chores, take care of old people and people with disabilities, minister both children and pets, to name just a few of the tasks they are expected to perform. Thanks to their work in the home, they enable the members of the household, especially women³, to work elsewhere and devote their time and energy to other domains (Aguirre, p.9). Therefore, domestic workers actively contribute to the prosperity of the societies where they operate by shaping the way many households function. In so doing, they contribute to fostering human development, productivity and economic growth.

However, despite its social and economic value, domestic work is often underestimated and goes unprotected. Data show that domestic workers are one of the least protected groups of workers under national labour laws or suffer from the poor enforcement of the said laws, often due to poor monitoring. As a consequence, unofficial work is often tolerated. In many countries, domestic work does not even fall within the scope of the labour law. Rather, it is still considered a private, home-related matter, hence lacking professional acknowledgment, formal contracts, regular wages and social security coverage. Without legal recognition and professional status, though, domestic workers unescapably experience a life of hardship: heavy workloads, poor remuneration, job insecurity, limited access to complaint mechanisms, if any, are some of the traits that informal domestic work entails. Whenever working unofficially, domestic workers do not enjoy the same benefits as other categories of workers, such as maternity or sick leave and overtime payment, to name just a few. Besides, in most cases, domestic workers have a very low social profile, also depending on the low level of education and lack of professional qualifications.

In the said scenario, migrant domestic workers are particularly exposed to abuses,

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exploitation and serious deficit of decent working conditions during the entire migration cycle (ILO working policy brief no.9)⁴. In fact, they often take illegitimate routes and end up falling into the loophole of both irregular migration and employment status. Moreover, whenever they reach the country of destination, language issues, cultural barriers, poor education, lack of family and social network, inasmuch as unawareness of their rights and opportunities make their situation even more difficult and integration hardly possible. In addition, irregular employment status makes migrant domestic workers not only vulnerable but also invisible. In fact, they often escape statistics and end up embodying an obscure and undetectable, albeit huge workforce that works in isolation and lives in the shadow. Therefore, it is particularly hard to protect and even define them, whereas their integration may prove unfeasible.

Notwithstanding the fact that millions of vulnerable and invisible people end up working for peanuts, with no recognition whatsoever of their status as proper workers, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development⁵ acknowledges the “positive contribution of migrants for inclusive work and sustainable development” (UN 2030 Agenda, *sub* 29). Therefore, when considering the possible contribution of migrant domestic workers to sustainability, we have to adopt an inherent definition that allows us to infer concrete policy implications and address their intrinsic vulnerability. If we assume that “the core concept of sustainability is that there is some X whose value should be maintained, in as far as it lies in our power to do so, into the indefinite future” (Barry, 1997, p.101) and we agree that “the content of sustainability depends on what we think it matters” (Barry, 1997, p.106), we have to ask ourselves what is it that matters when it comes to migrant domestic workers and what chance do they stand to contribute to sustainability.

We can assume that what matters to many of us is that migrants share the responsibility to sustain the world of today the way it is and contribute building the world of tomorrow the way it can be, thus proving a resource of development and an endowment for our societies rather than a burden or a possible threat to their stability. The world of tomorrow, as envisaged in the above mentioned UN Agenda, is described as “a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination” (UN 2030 Agenda, *sub* 8). We can consider the commitment towards the common good improvement and development as the factor whose value should be maintained (and possibly furthered), as far as it lies in our power to do so, towards the future. We assume, as background notion of common good, the definition taken from the social doctrine of the Catholic Church that interestingly meets the overall discussion of this analysis. The common good is, in fact, described in terms of “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily” (Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, Compendium, chapter 4, section II, 346, IFO 9)⁶.

Despite the commitment, though, we all know that we cannot give more than we already have. Therefore, before endowing the next generations with a better world, we need building one in the first place. The intra-generational construction, both logically and chronologically, needs anticipating whatever inter-generational transfer of values and assets. In terms of policy implications, this entails addressing disparities, injustices and abuses today. Only by dealing with what matters in the present, can we build the sustainable world that the future generations are going to inherit and endow them with the same opportunities that we have. In this respect, the 2030 UN Agenda sets the goal of creating “conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all” (UN 2030 Agenda, *sub* 3) as a key to transforming the world for the better. It also

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highlights the importance of ensuring decent working conditions for all: in fact, it underlines that “all countries stand to benefit from having a healthy and educated workforce with the knowledge and skills needed for productive and fulfilling work and full participation in society” (UN 2030 Agenda, *sub* 27). What the Agenda prioritizes is what matters today, thus the content of sustainability. In this respect, the key to pursuing it is nothing else than commitment and shared responsibility.

Ensuring decent working conditions to all is therefore a priority in the UN Agenda and a way to build a better future for everybody, including those “who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to achieve their full human potential.” (UN 2030 Agenda, *sub* 50). Amongst those, certainly stand millions of domestic workers, especially migrants, who have no legal recognition whatsoever and exist only in the shade of their own clandestinity, precariousness and vulnerability. Hence, enabling domestic workers to enjoy the same status as other workers is an issue of crucial importance and the only possibility to grant them the opportunity to fully participate in societies at large, also sharing the duties and responsibilities that a right-based approach unescapably entails. Only by granting them the same opportunities and resources as all other workers, can we expect migrant domestic workers to do their share in the furtherance of sustainability as a key to a better future.

3. The importance of a legal framework

It is a fact that, in many countries, domestic work still lacks legal recognition and does not enjoy the status of proper work. Rather, it is still considered a private, family-related matter that has no real value and visibility beyond the household where it unfolds in utter isolation. The said approach is a legacy from the past and dates back to the time when domestic work evolved from slavery into servitude. Since then, it has been considered as subjected to the authority of the master of the house over the members of the family, thus falling short of any legal recognition (Ramirez-Machado, p.3). In many cases, domestic workers do not have a formal contract and work on the basis of unofficial, oral agreements which make it difficult, if not outright impossible, to prove the very existence of a working relationship. As a result, unofficial working relationships prove extremely unstable and hardly satisfactory. In fact, unregulated work inevitably entails the predominance of the personal element in a scenario of total inequality in terms of bargaining power between the parties.

Unofficial working relationships may easily lead to abuses and exploitation. In truth, decent working conditions cannot depend on the good will and inner sense of fairness of the employer. In fact, employers are not a homogeneous group in terms of cultural and socio-economic characteristics, therefore they have very different expectations with regards to the skills and attitudes required from domestic workers. Personalization of the working relationship and the resulting abuses between the stronger party and the weaker one can be prevented only by means of a formal contract that draws upon a broader legal framework. In this respect, model contracts of employment certainly help and the standardization of terms and conditions of work proves utterly desirable. In fact, the contract is the tool that clearly establishes rights and obligations for both the employer and the domestic worker. It sets out job description, trial periods, working days, wage, leaves, overtime payment and circumstances under which the working relationship can be terminated⁷, inasmuch as social security coverage. Hence, in all countries, the national legislation should rule the above mentioned clauses and dictate the minimum acceptable standards. The national legislation should also rule the minimum starting age in order to work as domestic workers, with a

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view to protecting children.

Besides, the national legislation should guarantee domestic workers full access to labour justice. This is a sore point, though. In order to claim their rights, domestic workers need being aware of those rights in the first place. In fact, if domestic workers are to benefit from the justice system of the country where they work, they need to know how to access the inherent complaint mechanisms. In this respect, lack of awareness and incapacity of upholding their voice is a significant barrier to effective protection of domestic workers. Hence, self-organization and unionism may play a crucial role. In fact, they are the keys to empowering domestic workers as a category that may contribute to multi-stakeholder dialogue. The objective must be granting the category of domestic workers the benefits of collective bargaining aimed and the standardization of individual contracts.

Collective bargaining is crucial to enabling domestic workers to claim their rights and improve their working conditions. In fact, the unequal bargaining power that domestic workers feature in households make them often accept exploitative conditions and tolerate unfair practices, notwithstanding the rights and benefits set out by the law. Associations and organizations of workers overcome the solitude and invisibility of domestic workers, allow for negotiation of fair labour standards and play a crucial role in ensuring the implementation of the labour legislation in force (ILO, Domestic work policy brief n.8)⁸. Collective bargaining agreements should apply to all domestic workers, including migrants and be relied upon by courts in labour law cases as benchmarks. Of, course, for domestic workers to enjoy the right to collective bargaining and the inherent benefits, they need being acknowledged as proper workers, no different from other categories, by the national legislation.

With regards of the pivotal role of the domestic work, the ILO Convention adopted by the International Labour Organization in 2011⁹ is a remarkable step forward towards the goal of extending the coverage of national labour legislation to domestic workers. It lays down basic rights and principles and requires States to take a series of different measures with a view to making decent working conditions a reality for domestic workers worldwide. This entails acknowledging domestic work as proper work, thus ensuring domestic workers the same rights and benefits as any other worker. The aim is that of formalization of the working relationship and the promotion of equal treatments based on minimum standards. Recently, numerous countries have addressed domestic work by means of legislation, by either extending the scope of the existing labor law or developing specific regulatory frameworks. In both cases, granting domestic workers no lesser conditions than those granted to any other worker has been the targeted aim.

Nonetheless, legislation reforms do not always suffice. Despite the legal framework, domestic workers may still fall into irregular employment status and the resulting exploitative situation thereof. Hence, employers in the first place should be held accountable for minimum standards of working conditions. The State should encourage them to formalize the contracts pertaining to domestic work. Fiscal policies aimed at reducing costs for employers may encourage any such formalization. Above all, it is for the State to make sure that the employers do abide by the law, therefore monitoring what happens in households and what the real working conditions of domestic workers are. In this respect, national laws should set out supervisory mechanisms in order to allow the competent authorities to control the standards of domestic work and the enforcement of legislation. Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, including labour inspection, are pivotal since the regulatory framework does not necessarily mirror the reality of domestic work the way it truly unfolds behind closed doors.

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Not only an appropriate legal framework and the inherent enforcement are essential to the recognition of domestic work as proper work. Support services such as language and financial training, channel of information, legal counselling and representation in the country where domestic workers operate may prove pivotal. They all contribute to guarantee domestic workers real access to their rights, pursuant to the legislation in force. Moreover, support services should be available to help domestic workers acquire specific competencies and skills. In this respect, skills-specific programmes pertaining to house-keeping, caregiving, pet-caring and so forth should generate domestic workers' curricula and help acknowledging domestic work as proper work. In fact, professionalizing is the key to recognizing real value and dignity to domestic work. Abilities and competence training can empower domestic workers not only by providing them with specific skills but also by enhancing self-perception and status. It is important to endow domestic workers with the certainty that their work is of value which, in turn, make them confident that they are valuable. Therefore, access to a minimum level of education or vocational training should be guaranteed by the rule of law as a matter of right to all domestic workers.

Therefore, taking a right-based approach, promoting the rule of law and ensuring domestic workers worldwide effective access to labour justice mechanisms are key-factors to restoring the dignity of million of people and seriously tackling inequalities, exploitation and abuses. A regulatory framework inasmuch as adequate support services are essential to empowering the vulnerable category of domestic workers and enable them to thrive in a safe, fair, non-discriminatory working environment. When domestic workers will have been treated fairly and acknowledged the same rights and benefits of all other workers, they will be enabled to full participation and active commitment to a more sustainable social dynamics in the societies where they do operate. That will be the time when they can be expected to fulfill the duties that unescapably go with belonging to a right-based world. And eventually they will be eligible to undertake the responsibility of a sustained and inclusive world where to share the common responsibility towards other people and set themselves to the care in their capacity as householders and employers.

4. **The role of the home.**

The rule of law is necessary in order to protect domestic workers from unfair treatment, exploitation and abuses, which are a consequence of their vulnerability. There is more to it, though, that can be expressed in terms of solidarity, mutuality and benevolence. In the event, a developed society is the one that is able to take care of vulnerable people and protect them from the turns and twists of fate (Marcos 2016, p.42). To this end, a legal framework is indispensable and yet not sufficient. In fact, it does not necessarily mirror the whole of the reality that domestic workers experience behind closed doors. In this respect, the householders play a key-role as they are the ones who determine the day to day working conditions of millions of workers. Therefore, the emotional and relational complexity pertaining to the relationship between householders and domestic workers inevitably fall into picture. Even when a contract and a fair legislation guarantee the rights of domestic workers, the human factor is still a key-element to the way the working relationship unfolds within private households. In fact, the workplace, for domestic workers, is the home and their job is meant to satisfy the needs of the members of the employer's household. Therefore, domestic workers inevitably establish a personal relationship with the employers and the other members of the household, while carrying out their work under the householder's direction and supervision.

What domestic work delivers, through the daily accomplishment of specific and often

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humble tasks, is therefore a set of conditions which guarantee human flourishing within the home. In this sense, it clearly and interestingly meets the definition of common good we referred to in Section 2. One very simple example may suffice: currently, women place value on their time and the cost of their time increases as they enter the labour force in great numbers. Therefore, they spend less time at home and cut on cooking, laying the table and investing hours a day on the ritual of a family dinner (Aguirre, p.9). By relying upon domestic workers, mothers are still able to perpetuate the family dinner ritual, while deploying their time and energy elsewhere in order to fulfill their potential and work in other domains. The domestic worker who guarantees the family dinner is therefore the one that preserves the social value which is built across the table on a daily basis, also empowering women to contribute to the economic growth of the societies where they belong by productively working outside of the home.

The domestic worker therefore plays a crucial role as an enabler for the members of the household, often relieving them of the caregiving task and taking up the role of ‘guardians of the home’, whose vulnerability immediately impacts on the wellbeing of all members of the family and, to some extent, of the closed social community. In fact, domestic workers take care of those who are not autonomous. We usually think that non autonomous people are usually the children and the elderly, but relying on previous studies, we think that this reflection should include all members of a family. As human beings, they actually show different vulnerable features that are an intrinsic dimension of their human nature, foundation to some extent of any possibility of real autonomy in the professional and social world too (Marcos and Bertolaso 2017). In the home, in fact, practically everybody depends on mutual domestic care and dependancy is somewhat crucial to becoming autonomous. The care is actually essential to the opening towards the others and an enabling factor to effective dwelling (Valera, 2013, p.191).

The domestic work is at the very centre of the said mutuality and web of reciprocal dependencies. Above all, domestic workers enter in the very core of the home’s intimacy by becoming an essential part of the relationships amongst the members of the family. Caring of the conditions that are indispensable for the growth of human beings as persons and as members of social communities, domestic workers enable the family in its capacity as the space where human essence and personal identity may adequately flourish (Marcos and Bertolaso, 2017).

The domestic work therefore entails a huge social value in terms of enabling the personal and collective contribution to the common good growth and development: it empowers all the members of the household, valuing their specificities, while ensuring it the opportunity to thrive as a whole for the sake of a good and better society.

This obviously entails the physical presence of the domestic worker in the home. It is not a kind of job that can be performed from elsewhere. Even if we envisage a forthcoming future where most of the home-chores will be performed by robots and computers, a domestic helper in the flesh will still have a role of paramount importance. A robot may sweep the floor or stir the soup whereas a computer can plan the kids’ activities or remind the elderly what time to take their tablets but will not be able to cuddle an infant or encourage an elderly to make an extra effort and stand on his feet. Therefore, domestic workers not only are but will always be pivotal to the smooth functioning and thriving of millions of households worldwide. It is this enabling, empowering and emancipating impact in the home that has to be considered the core output of domestic workers’ invisible and underestimated job. Only by acknowledging the worthiness of their deliverable output, can we understand the way they contribute to the flourishing of the society at large, well beyond the limits of the

specific household where they work.

It is on this basis that we need undertaking the responsibility of restoring the human dignity of million invisible and often exploited domestic workers around the world, as dignity is the basis of human rights and something everybody is endowed with for the very fact of having a human condition (Adorno 2016, p.264). Given the intrinsic worthiness of every domestic worker and the awareness of its exposure to harm and abuses, not only it is necessary to ensure a legal framework to set out and protect their rights but also to welcome domestic workers in our households and acknowledge the inherent value of their empowering presence. As householders, it is our duty to make domestic workers feel at home, thus safe and protected and enter into a relationship of responsibility for them. Only by addressing their vulnerability, we can expect them to support ours and perform as effective and dedicated guardians of the intimacy and fragility of our own households. In a nutshell, what we need doing in order to maximize their contribution to the thriving of our homes, is making them feel at home.

5. Conclusions.

This paper has highlighted the social and economic impact that domestic work entails as well as the importance of recognizing, formalizing and professionalizing it. In many countries, domestic work is still falling outside of the scope of labour legislation. In other countries, where it is duly recognized and ruled, it often takes place on an informal basis and entails exploitative conditions, since the enforcement of the rule of law is scarce and hardly monitored. As a result, domestic workers often suffer from the same problems: invisibility, marginalization, low social and economic status, lack of legal recognition. Many domestic workers are exploited, and amongst them certain categories such as women and migrants prove even more vulnerable than others. In addition, not only domestic workers around the world are often exposed to exploitation but also unaware and incapable to claim their rights, if any. Therefore, a sound legal framework and the implementation thereof, support services and awareness policies are issues of paramount importance and key-factors towards integrating domestic workers in the society where they operate. Only by integrating domestic work within the organized and formalized world of work, it is possible to ensure the human dignity of every single worker and tackle all forms of exploitation, poverty and social exclusion.

Regulating domestic work within a legal framework and taking a right-based approach, both at international and national level, inasmuch as ensuring the enforcement of the legislation is a matter of social justice that cannot be further postponed. Nonetheless, a legal framework and the implementation thereof are not sufficient, albeit indispensable. A further challenge lays ahead and is cultural in nature. This is for the home to be borne. The home is the right place where to develop cultural values about domestic work and make domestic workers feel respected and protected. Therefore, the home has to be not only the place whose functioning and thriving domestic work impacts and enables on a daily basis but also the space where to start integrating domestic workers by acknowledging the specificity of their job and the worthiness of their social identity. In the rise of a global care crisis, due to the demographic ageing of the world population and the increasing female inclusion in the labour market, recognizing the value of domestic work and protecting it accordingly is a matter of paramount importance. Only by restoring the dignity of million of workers around the world and acknowledging the intrinsic worthiness of their endeavours, we can integrate them in the mainstream of societies and communities, therefore promoting and maximising their active contribution towards a more sustainable world.

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³ On the one hand, working women are becoming more and more numerous, on the other hand, in many countries, traditional gender roles within the home have not changed. Therefore, women in general and mothers in particular are those who are primarily responsible for the performance of households' tasks.

⁴ Reported abuses relate to deceptions about the type of work and inherent conditions, threats and sometimes actual physical and sexual violence, retention of passports, debt bondage linked to the recruitment fees and work. ILO work policy brief no.9, Making decent work a reality for migrant domestic workers.

⁵ United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1).

⁶ Interestingly, the same document insists that the common good that human beings look for and reach through their activities constitute the foundation of the personal, familiar and social good. The pluralism of solutions and initiatives that are commonly adopted in the domestic environment in order to fulfill people's needs and expectations, opens an important reflection, in our opinion, about the cultural and humanizing role that the domestic environment and work actually plays in shaping future and balanced societies. As always the same document says: The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains "common", because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future. Just as the moral actions of an individual are accomplished in doing what is good, so too the actions of a society attain their full stature when they bring about the common good. The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good. Developing further discussion, however, is beyond the aim of this paper.

⁷ Circumstances related to the termination of a contract of employment usually relate to grounds, notice, severance pay.

⁸ ILO, Domestic work voice and representation through organizing, Domestic work policy brief n. 8.

⁹ On 16 June 2011, the International Labour Conference of the International Labour Organization adopted the Convention concerning decent work for domestic workers, which is usually referred to as the Domestic Workers Convention (C189). It is complemented by Recommendation no. 201, also adopted by the International Labour Conference of 2011, which provides guidance with regards to measures to be adopted in order to implement the rights and principles stated in the Convention.

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