Crossing Boundaries. Rethinking labour history through the lens of paid domestic work

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Abstract:
The author of this paper investigates the developments in labour history and emphasizes the significance of global labour history in rethinking the fundamental concepts of social and labour history, as well as the working class, beyond free wage work and male and white factory workers in the global north. She emphasizes the relatively recent intersection of labour history and domestic work studies, and her main contribution to the topic is the deconstruction of boundaries between public and private spaces, as well as the linking of studies on labour coercion and im/mobilities through the lens of migrant paid domestic work.
According to that, in the second section of the paper, she provides some fresh research horizons, beginning with her case study on the experiences of capeverdean, eritrean, ethiopian and filipino domestic workers in Rome between 1970 and 1989. Furthermore, this analysis puts into doubt the notion that Italy suddenly changed from an emigration to an immigration country in the late 1980's.

Keywords:
labour history, feminist labour history, global labour history, labour coercion, domestic work, separate spheres, history of migrations.

1. *Introduction*

Labour history is a field of study with uncertain boundaries. That's due to the historical importance of work as a social phenomenon crossed by cultural, economic and political tensions – which also influence our point of view. This complexity has repeatedly implied discussions on what has been considered work (and by whom) through different historical periods. Therefore, each time we talk about work the first question to ask ourselves is what's considered work? And from which point of view do we question it?

It's valuable to emphasize the remarkable role of gender studies and of the gender perspective within historical analysis and labour history, especially starting from the 1970's[1]. In the decades that followed, new perspectives enriched the complexity of

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1 G. Lerner, *Placing women in history: definitions and challenges,* in «Feminist studies», 3, 1975,

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the analysis, focusing on the relationship between class, origin, the social construction of race, sexual orientation and gender identity. I mainly refer to feminist labour history, black feminism, postcolonial studies, queer theory and intersectional studies[2]. A key contribute was also brought by chicanas and decolonial studies[3]. The combination of all these new theoretical and historical contributions enabled the deconstruction and rereading of a wide range of issues, including the long-standing relationship between gender and work.

My study strives to situate itself among this lengthy tradition that, through gender and historical views, continues to highlight the multiplicity of roles presented as "natural" and unchanging, but the product of social and cultural constructs. My research project is a case study about the experience of capeverdean, eritrean, ethiopian and filipino paid domestic workers in Rome between 1970 and 1989.

During the decades under review, the accessibility, desire and need for extra-domestic work increased for italian women (mainly from middle-class backgrounds). This was followed neither by a redistribution of domestic and care tasks between genders, nor by any welfare reform – the welfare system in Italy continues to rely mainly on the family. Domestic and care work was still considered as women's business, their *essential role* within the family – quoting the Article 37 of italian constitution, which emphasises the "natural" role of women in the households and contributes to undermining the recognition of both paid and unpaid domestic work[4].

We need to reconsider the link between gender, work, and domesticity. This was an explicit political agon in 1970's theoretical development and feminist practice, but there was no explanation for the steady delegation of household duties to foreigners. Italian feminism in those years was mainly focused on the issues of sexuality and abortion and the practice of self-consciousness in small groups, or on the relationship between greater accessibility of extra-domestic work and women's emancipation. The movement enjoyed a certain social and political strength and to some extent this seemed to inhibit an interpretation of the different levels of power that

pp. 5-14; J.K. Gadol*, Methodological implications of women's history*, in «Signs», 4, 1976, pp. 809-823; N. Zemon Davis, *Women's history in transition: the european case*, in «Feminist studies», 3, 1976, pp. 83-103; J.W. Scott, *Gender: a useful category of historical analysis,* in «American historical review», 91, 1986, pp. 1153-1175.

2 J. Butler, *Gender trouble*, Routledge, New York 1991; A. Davis, *Women, race and class*, Women's press Ltd, London 1981; T.de Lauretis, *Queer theory: lesbian and gay sexualities. An introduction*, in «Differences», 3, 1991, pp. 3-18; K. Crenshaw, *Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color,* in «Stanford law review», 43, 1991, pp. 1241-1299; b. hooks, *Aint I a woman?: black women and feminism*, south end press, Boston 1981; J.W. Scott, L.A. Tilly, *Women's work and the family in Nineteenth century Europe*, in «Comparative studies in society and history», 17, 1975, pp. 36-64; G.C. Spivak*., Can the subaltern Speak?*, in C. Nelson, L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, MacMillan, Basingstoke 1988, pp. 271-313.

3 R. Acuña, *Occupied America: a history of Chicanos*, HarperCollins, New York 1988; L. Pulido, *Black, brown, yellow, and left: radical activism in Los Angeles*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2006.

4 J. Andall, *Gender, migration, and domestic service. The politics of black women in Italy*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2000.

exist among women, especially at a time when it seemed a priority to build gender solidarity. Even in feminist groups (such as the Padua-based *Wages for housework* collective) where domestic work returned to the centre of an economic discourse, the analysis focused just on the role of housewives.

This had important consequences in terms of the exploitation and invisibility of migrant domestic workers; it contributed to the failure to address the links between waged and unwaged reproductive work; it reinforced the reproduction of gender relations and functions[5]. Paid domestic work still finds it very difficult to be considered as a "proper" work: the International Labour Organisation (ILO) only recognised the need to address the issues of greater protection and better wage conditions for paid domestic work at a global level in 2011, with Convention 189, which set out standards for achieving decent conditions for domestic work. This convention wasn't ratified by all ILO member countries and, when ratified, this passage didn't necessarily imply consequent actions, as in the case of Italy, where the convention was ratified but the legislation wasn't adapted according to that[6].

2. *Labour history*

Initially, work was viewed almost exclusively as something with significant implications for the definition of socioeconomic and institutional political sectors. This intellectual approach established, above all, political histories that had been crucial in recreating the strategies of trade unions, political organizations, and the history of leadership groups. The 1960's movement led scholars to pay more attention to the social nature of work and to the subjective, cultural, and identity aspects of workers' experiences. Despite the important interpretative passage, research continued to gravitate around the (mainly male) workers' movement and factories (of the north of the world), although extending the focus towards the subjective and conflictual making of the class[7]. However, the issue of focusing solely on this type of workers must be addressed from a historical (and geopolitical) standpoint, considering the growth of factory workers' economic and social roles, which also led to a certain political importance. Post-1989 transformations weren't immediately readable and led to the disintegration of the discipline of labour history and to the emergence of new approaches, such as economic and cultural history, which often tended towards economic reductionism or the absolutisation of cultural identities. Starting from the 1990's and after an initial phase of intellectual stalemate, gender, feminist, spatial, global and postcolonial turns provided an alternative path in proposing a new discourse on work, which would go beyond the structured view on

5 B. Busi (ed.), *Separate in casa. Lavoratrici domestiche, femministe e sindacaliste: una mancata alleanza*, Ediesse, Roma 2020.

6 E. Boris, J. Fisher, "*Slaves no more": making global labour standards for domestic workers*, in «Feminist studies», 4, 2014, pp. 411-433.

7 O. Capitano, *Pensare la storia del lavoro. A che punto siamo?*, in «Società e storia», 75, 2022, pp. 101-121.

the narration of the european experience and workers' movements. The central site of this experiment was the international institute of social history in Amsterdam (IISH), thanks to the contributions of authors such as Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen[8].

The step from widening the geographical scope to criticizing eurocentrism was quick, whereas the chronological extension allowed to overcome the seemingly impenetrable border of the industrial revolution. The establishment of these principles permitted the critique of traditional and established interpretative schemes, resulting in a considerable rethinking «of the fundamental concepts of social and labour history» and of the «working class beyond wage labour»[9]. In Italy in 2012, the first italian association of labour historians and historians was born, the Società italiana di storia del lavoro (SISLAV), which is part of the European labour history network (ELHN) and is developing an epistemological, methodological and heuristic rediscussing that is largely linked to the proposals put forward by global labour history[10]. Furthermore, Worlds of related coercion in work (WORCK), a network of researchers, emerged in 2013 within the larger field of global labour history, shifting the focus from the analysis of working relations to the analysis of forms of coercion expressed within and outside of different working relations[11]. WORCK has recently concluded its experience and its work is currently carried out by the Labour&Coercion working group operating within the European labour history network (ELHN). Scholars involved decided to maintain a very open conceptualization of the term coercion, with the aim of not establishing new definitions, but to provide a conceptual tool useful to interrogate and question previous categories, binomials and dichotomies traditionally associated to labour history. Possible definitions of coercion are at the very centre of current academic discussions[12]. In essence, and in my view, reflecting in terms of coercion means above all investigating multiple social and labour dynamics from a relational perspective, paying attention to the plurality of ways in which domination and subalternity are articulated within hierarchical relations and horizontally, that is, among subaltern subjects.

8 J. Lucassen, *Global labour history: a state of the art*, Peter Lang, Bern 2006; M. van der Linden, *Prolegomena for a Global labour history*, IISH, Amsterdam 1999; M. van der Linden, *Workers of the world: essays toward a global labour history*, Brill, Leiden 1999.

9 C.G. De Vito (ed.), *Global labour history. La storia del lavoro al tempo della globalizzazione*, ombrecorte, Verona 2012, p. 61.

10 Società italiana di Storia del lavoro https://www.storialavoro.it/ (last access: 10 June 2024) European labour history network (ELHN) https://socialhistoryportal.org/elhn (last access: 10 June 2024)

11 C.G. de Vito, J. Schiel, M. van Rossum, *From bondage to precariousness? New perspectives on labour and social history*, in «Journal of social history», 54, 2020, pp. 1-19. Worlds of related coercion in work (WORCK) https://worck.eu/ (last access: 10 June 2024). WORCK's experience formally ended this year but such research work is currently conducted by the working group Labour&Coercion within the ELHN network.

12 J. Heinsen, J. Schiel, *Through the lens of coercion: for a shift of perspective in labour and social history*, in J. Heinsen, J. Schiel (eds.), *Labour and coercion: doing social history after the global turn*, (forthcoming).

3. *Studies about domestic work*

The traditional historiography of domestic work was mainly linked to family history, historical demography and, later, women's history and gender studies. Domestic service had long been studied mainly by historians as there was a tendency to emphasise its residual character and its inescapable extinction. This idea was challenged by the intense growth of a global market of domestic and care work, which led to a broadening of scholarly interest in the subject, particularly involving gender studies, social sciences and marxist feminist economics. Thus, the growth of multidisciplinarity allowed for a significant increase in opportunities for discussion during the 2000's, through a series of conferences, conventions and projects, including the *Servant project*, financed by the european Commission, with the aim of coordinating some twenty european universities and research centres to organise five conferences and several meetings between 2002 and 2004[13].

Mary Romero, Evelyin Nakano Glenn, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Jacqueline Andall, Arlie Russel Hochschild, and Barbara Ehrenreich were among the pioneers in expanding the understanding of the globalization of reproductive labor and the growing economic and demographic inequalities between the north and the south of the world[14]. Each of these scholars, in their own unique way, rejected a merely economic perspective and contributed to highlighting the relational and affective aspects that define the domestic and care work market and its trajectories.

For a long time, however, the history of domestic work and the history of labour didn't find many points of contact, probably because of the persistent social difficulty of considering domestic work as "proper" work. Domestic work and labour history historiography started to be discussed together since a few years: in 2013, the forty-ninth international conference of labour and social history (ITH) was held in Linz and, on this occasion, waged domestic work was integrated into the conference agenda for the first time. *Towards a global history of domestic and caregiving workers* (Brill, 2015) is the volume that collects the essays on paid domestic work from the Linz conference. The research presented, from historical, sociological and anthropological perspectives, dealt with aspects such as the relationship between Global labour history and the history of paid domestic work; the historical relationships between migration and domestic work; the connections with migration projects and postcolonial dynamics; the role of the public sphere in the transformations of domestic work; the issue of the valorisation of paid domestic and care work as the provision of goods and services that, although exchanged

13 R. Sarti, *Historians, social scientists, servants, and domestic workers: fifty years of research on domestic and care work*, in «International review of social history», 59, 2014, pp. 279-314.

14 J. Andall, *Gender, migration, and domestic service,* cit.; B. Ehrenreich, A.R. Hochschild, *Global woman: nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy,* Henry Holt and Company, New York 2002; E. Nakano Glenn, *From servitude to service work: historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labour*, in «Signs», 18, 1992, pp. 1-43; R.S. Parreñas, *Servants of globalization: women, migration and domestic work*, Stanford university press, Stanford 2001; M. Romero, *Maid in the USA*, Routledge, London 1992.

on the market, are valuable because they are imbued with trust and affection and undergo familiarisation processes[15].

Another seminal text was *Colonisation, and domestic service. Historical and contemporary perspectives* (Routledge, 2015), published in the same year and edited by Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie. This collection of articles raises crucial questions, including the historical and contemporary relationship between domestic service and colonization, as well as the role of power imbalances within the working relationship in orienting interpretive paradigms. Thus, this book underlines the importance of a decolonial perspective on domestic labour studies and, in the same direction and to great effect, Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma's two-volume work *Servants' pasts. Late eighteenth to twentieth century, south Asia* (Orient black swan, 2018) was published just a few years later[16].

4. *Domestic work: a case study*

My research seeks to strengthen the relationship between labour history and studies about domestic work. As already introduced, I am working on a case study concerning the experience of capeverdean, eritrean, ethiopian and filipino paid domestic workers in Rome between 1970 and 1989. I decided to focus on the mentioned immigration groups because they were protagonists of the first and largest flows to Italy and to Rome. Regarding the periodization, I chose the 1970's and 1980's because these decades preceded the great wave of migrations in the early 1990's. I collected almost 90 interviews among domestic workers and employers, representatives of associations and trade unions related to domestic work or immigration, and benchmark figures within each different group of immigration.

Oral sources are an important tool for labour history in contemporary age: quantitative, archival, literary and journalistic sources wouldn't be equally capable of rendering, if not for glimpses, the subjectivity, identities and individual and collective cultures in the history of workers, which are instead best detected through interviews focusing on life stories – all the more so if one intends to analyse relationships in the informal economy, often intertwined with the formal economy, or those that take shape within the households and don't leave many written traces. Quotidianity and material culture are undoubtedly important topics but:

> Not a few social historians have ignored politics, whereas both individual and collective strategies should be studied, which, incidentally, mostly coexist with different mixes in the same people. In addition to politics, which has to do with broader horizons, with the values of parties and movements, policies should also be

15 D. Hoerder, E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, S. Neunsinger (eds.), *Towards a global history of domestic and caregiving workers*, Brill, Leiden 2015.

16 V.K. Haskins, C. Lowrie (eds.), *Colonization, and domestic service. Historical and contemporary perspectives*, Routledge, London 2015; N. Sinha, N. Varma, *Servants' pasts. Late eighteenth to twentieth century, south Asia*, vol. 1-2, Orient black swan, Telangana 2018.

> studied in the sense of the production of laws, governance and regulatory systems, with their impact on the lives of citizens: what regulations, for what purposes, who supported them and who opposed them in the decision-making process, how and to what extent they were applied or circumvented as a result of the reactions of collective and individual actors, what effects they produced, how they influenced people's orientations.[17]

In this sense, it's important to overcome an approach to the question of agency that fixes attention on the individual and the subjective perimeter. Understanding agency as a set of social practices, on the other hand, leads to including multiple subjectivities, in their individualities and actions, whether singular, collective or collectively developed through the socialisation of practices and knowledge. Agency must not be understood as something which can be expressed just if confined to the "below" and predefined by structural logics descended from what is understood as "above". Subjects and their practices are participants in the production of historical processes which, in turn, influence subjectivities and social practices, according to a logic of mutual and reciprocal construction. Studying agency from a historical perspective and as a set of social practices makes it possible, on the one hand, to show the different processes of subjectivation, rather than keeping the focus exclusively on individual actions; on the other, it makes it possible to investigate the relationship between agency as practices and structures as processes, blurring the distinctions and including both individual and collective perspectives. From a methodological point of view, this allows to approach various types of sources without any hierarchy. In my case, I opted for a constant dialogue between archival sources (including legal sources, printed sources, surveys and contemporary research) and oral sources. Moreover, while my clear ambition is to break out of traditional patterns of analysis related to labour history and the history of domestic work, my research relocates these discussions in a european context, so it's even more crucial to rely on the voices of migrants in order not to slip into eurocentrism.

The main aim of my research is to interrogate through the perspective of domestic work the social construction of the two separate spheres, one public (masculine, productive, extra-domestic and linked to "proper" work) and one private (feminine, unproductive, domestic and associated with activities considered as female "natural" duties). The experiences of domestic workers reveal the fictitious nature of this division and how public and private are part of the same historical and social process. It clearly emerges that the continuation of this separation contributes to a non-recognition of domestic work as real work and to an increase in coercion in this working sector, in the space of the home, outside of it and in the integration between the two. Additionally, this research challenges the notion that Italy abruptly shifted from a country of emigration to a country of immigration in the late 1980's. This idea, which was prominent during decades under exam and continues to impact general opinion and much historical research on the subject,

17 S. Musso, *Il senso di fare storia del lavoro oggi in Italia*, in «Passato e presente», 1, 2023, pp. 1-14: p. 13.

stems from a prejudiced and skewed perspective. Historically, foreign domestic workers' flows to Italy increased since the late 1950's, although this fact was sometimes neglected. The incorrect and traditional view of female migration as mostly following or joining fathers and husbands resulted in Italy's prolonged status as an emigration country, despite the growing number of foreign female domestic workers in the country.

Data on migration flows to Italy across decades were scarce and unreliable, owing mostly to a lack of understanding of the problem and inadequate methods for analysis. Nonetheless, all the sources I was able to review verified that these flows were mostly directed to Rome, were predominantly female (but not exclusively), and were tied to domestic work.

For example, the first two national surveys which were *La presenza dei lavoratori stranieri in Italia* (CENSIS, 1978) and *Documentazione di base per un'indagine sui lavoratori stranieri in Italia* (ECAP CGIL, 1979) estimated the stock of foreign workers at 150.000 to 500.000 in the mid-1970's[18].

Both documents emphasized the role of Rome as the main centre of immigration and the extent of female immigration related to domestic work. Most of domestic workers arrived from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Capeverde (already in the 1950's and mostly in the 1960's) and then from Philippines (since the 1970's). There was an overlap between the minimum and maximum estimates: eritreans and ethiopians would be between 12.000 and 42.000, capeverdeans between 6.000 and 22.000, and filipinos between 7.000 and 25.000. A passage in a survey pointed this out:

> However, the situation in this area seems to be changing, albeit slowly, probably due to the experience accumulated during their stay in Italy, in some cases for more than ten years. The gradual development of associative moments among foreign workers based on their country of origin has promoted the circulation of experience and information and the establishment of specific organizations of female workers and security in relations with the employer.[19]

Although both studies linked the uncertainty of the data to the novelty of the phenomenon, they emphasized the entrenchment of several immigrant groups in italian urban contexts, as in Rome. Thus, the novelty seemed to concern more the detection of the phenomenon than the phenomenon itself. In the next part of this article, I will try to reason on the relationship between public, private, domestic work and labour coercion, focusing on the immobilization by law of domestic workers in the sector and in working relations with their employers. Several laws and circulars exacerbated the abusive conditions experienced by these workers. However there existed some ways to escape from these coercive mechanisms, but for what price?

18 Archive Fondazione Migrantes (AFM), Centro studi investimenti sociali (CENSIS), *La presenza dei lavoratori stranieri in Italia*, Roma, 1978; Archive Biblioteca nazionale centrale (ABNC), ECAP CGIL, *Documentazione di base per un'indagine sui lavoratori stranieri in Italia*, in «Esperienze e proposte», 38, january 1979.
19 Ivi, p. 15.

5. *Laws and foreign domestic workers*

In Italy, circular n. 51/22 IV was issued in 1963 and it was the first document on immigration. This circular tried to regulate migrants' access to Italy but also to discourage the general phenomenon. Between 1966 and 1972, other specific regulatory procedures were defined. These ones were meant to regulate access to work for domestic workers[20].They didn't have to pass through employment offices but there was the sole obligation for employers to report their hiring. The only possible mediation involved a few institutions recognized by law n. 339 enacted on 2 of april 1958. This law regulated domestic work in Italy.

Furthermore, paid domestic workers in Italy didn't have a national collective agreement until 1974, as the ban on collective bargaining for the sector was declared unconstitutional only in 1969[21]. Nonetheless, this contract didn't really involve foreign domestic workers. Suffice here to say that the contract didn't discuss an almost unknown phenomenon and that only in 1986, with the promulgation of law n. 943 on 30 december 1986 or the Foschi law, all non-european workers legally resident in the territory and their families were guaranteed equal treatment with other workers and equal rights, finally adapting the legislation to the ratification of the ILO convention n. 143 of 1975[22].

In 1972 the circular of 30 december n. 37/107 facilitated the granting of work authorization to domestic workers and provided full-time employment as live-in workers, as an unavoidable condition. Within a tangle of rules and administrative practices that contradicted one each other, there existed a recurrent topic: a female migrant in Italy normally received a residence permit only if directed to domestic service. Some, despite having found «different employment, or as service personnel in institutions instead of families», were refused by the italian authorities the necessary authorization to be hired, «as these are jobs that even italian citizens are still willing to do and the unions themselves are opposed to a loss of jobs in which compatriots could be employed»[23].

On 17 december 1979, circular n. 140/90 was issued. It seeked to reorganize foreign domestic workers' access to Italy, to regulate their working relationships and contain the phenomenon of irregular presences. The procedures became further complicated and involved many administrative steps. These interventions made it possible to maintain a formal rigidity in the approach to immigration, but their complexity facilitated irregular immigration, and irregular workers were even more threatenable by employers[24]. According to the 140/90 if the domestic worker man-

20 M. Colucci, *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai giorni nostri*, Carocci, Roma 2018; Circular 4 december 1963 n. 51/22 IV (https://www.datalabor.com/it/default.aspx).
21 R. Sarti (ed.), *Lavoro domestico e di cura: quali diritti?*, Ediesse, Roma 2010; Law 2 april 1958 n. 339 (https://www.normattiva.it/); National collective agreement (CCNL) on the discipline of domestic work 22 may 1974 (https://www.cnel.it/Archive-Contratti/Contrattazione-Nazionale).
22 Law 30 december 1986 n. 943 (https://www.datalabor.com/it/default.aspx).
23 A. Gissi, *Le estere. Immigrazione femminile e lavoro domestico in Italia (1960-80)*, in «Meridiana», 1, 2018, pp. 37-56: p. 46.
24 Circular 17 december 1979 n. 140/90 (https://www.datalabor.com/it/default.aspx).

aged to regularly access the residence permit for work reasons she was bound to the contract for a year, under penalty of expulsion. The contract couldn't be terminated by the domestic worker who, however, could be fired. At the end of the employment relationship, the domestic worker had three months to find another job, obviously only in the domestic sector; otherwise, she got expelled. There was the option of annual renewal of the same contract, also linked to the continuation of the contract for the entire period and to the prior payment of social security charges, which were very frequently evaded by employers. Circular n. 51/22 IV already provided for the obligation of contractual continuity for one year for all foreigners but, with this new document, the domestic sector was bound to this clause, regardless of any changes in the regulations on immigration and extending the obligation also to contractual renewal. Therefore, through a series of previous interventions and then with the 140/90, an occupational segregation was defined, binding female migrants to domestic work as live-in and consolidating the link between the mobility of migrant workers and their immobilization in the domestic sector and within their first employers' households.

These first passages were significant because on the one hand they stimulated these specific incoming mobility flows, recognizing an ongoing migratory process and creating preferential channels for the entry of foreign domestic workers; on the other hand, they forced this movement within the sector and imposed the obligation to live with employers. The cumbersome bureaucratic recruitment system favoured irregular immigration, leaving a high number of unauthorized workers with little bargaining power. In relation to the domestic sector, the mechanism which was developed allowed italian families to employ domestic workers for a reasonable cost. In parallel with official efforts to stem flows and irregularities, families welcomed and protected clandestine domestic workers, at least until a s*anatoria*'s enaction by the State. *Sanatorie* are still very common in Italy, and they are administrative or legislative acts that, retroactively, negate the penalties established by law for a certain activity and imply a renunciation of legal action against persons responsible for illegal actions, or that normalize dangerous or abnormal conditions. In this way, after having complicated the regularization process, impeded integration attempts, and implemented security rules, the State practiced a sort of action of kindness towards irregular domestic workers.

These dynamics constituted a paternalistic game that affected the interactions of italian families, migrant domestic workers, and the State. When merging techniques of public and private coercion, two levels of power emerge that find a key point of convergence in the immobilization of foreign domestic workers: the State and employers. The interaction between them, as well as their relationships with domestic workers, reveals a wide range and regular interchange of forms of protection, acts of neglect, and punitive actions – threatened or implemented. This game never provided comprehensive benefits to foreign domestic workers as a social group, and it maintained a certain consistency in succeeding years.

On the 28 february 1990 the law n. 39 – also known as the Martelli law – was enacted and it reformed the previous Foschi law[25]. This law, in simple terms, facili-

25 Law 28 february 1990 n. 39 (https://www.datalabor.com/it/default.aspx).

tated access to Italy and abolished the national preference, which was the previous criterion whereby no foreign worker could be hired if there was even just one italian available for a given job. Furthermore, the law abolished the geographical reservation whereby the right to asylum was previously granted only to people coming from Europe. Although the approach was apparently less rigid, this law also maintained some of the typical problems of all italian legal interventions in the field of immigration. I'm referring to the maintenance of an excessively bureaucratic system; to the absence of an overall vision of the phenomenon, for which no social integration policy was promoted; to the continuous use of exceptions and derogations.

Regarding foreign domestic work, on 29 november 1991, circular n. 156/91 was issued and it once again placed domestic foreign workers in a weaker contractual position compared to foreign workers from other sectors[26]. According to this document anyone who entered Italy to carry out this job could avoid the live-in condition but had to work a minimum of 40 hours per week; the contract couldn't be solved for two years under penalty of expulsion and once concluded, domestic workers could look for another job but necessarily in the same sector. Migrant domestic workers' immobilization within this sector and within first employers' households was again confirmed by the State. This form of public coercion increased the coercive behaviour of employers in the private sphere of households.

6. *Domestic workers' immobilization and coercion*

From the interviews conducted with the 42 domestic workers who immigrated to Italy (20 capeverdeans, 8 eritreans and ethiopians, 14 filipinas), it appears that as many as 90% of the capeverdeans and 75% of the eritreans and ethiopians entered the country already with a signed contract. Among filipino domestic workers, however, this only applies to 7,1%. The latter are also those who have used illegal agencies most frequently, as in the case of Maila's sister:

> They ask you for a fee and then they make you come. I did that with my sister. I brought her in 1989 and made $2,000 to get her to submit some documents and then they moved across Philippines Budapest, Budapest Milan car and Milan Rome train and then I gave another $2,000. It was an illegal business. They passed by at night and went hidden, from the mountains. They pass, walk then go with the light in the mountain to check if there are people. That is, they wait for the light to pass. Then thank god they come, but it's very dangerous, very dangerous. Also, my friend and nephew of my daughter [...] from the Philippines, in Germany, in Germany, then here but in Germany they had to do prison.[27]

Even if many of them got in Italy with a contract, not all those who arrived with regular documents were able to complete the regularization process. That was of-

26 Circular 29 november 1991 n. 156 (https://www.datalabor.com/it/default.aspx).
27 Interview with Maila, filipino domestic worker, 16 september 2022.

ten due to employers' choice not to pay social security contributions. For example, Edna, a capeverdean who arrived in 1973, encountered difficulties with her employers. They purposefully chose not to pay social security contributions, didn't allow Edna to be in good standing, and extended the period required for the domestic worker to accumulate enough contributions to qualify for a pension:

> E: He wasn't a good employer. All the people who were with him left because he didn't enforce the rules. With me too. Because he didn't want to pay the contributions.
> O: So, he never sorted out this matter?
> E: No at that point I preferred friendship from that family. But to make documents I had to fight with him. He didn't accompany me to the police station to report my stay. He didn't go but then my friends helped me a lot and in church, with the Tra Noi movement. They explained to us that employers had to go to get us accommodation, medical records, and other things and then I started to fight and after a year I could.[28]

It's crucial to underline the ambiguous perception of one's own role as a worker, which is linked to the idea of *collaborazione familiare*. According to this concept, working for a family was meant as a form of collaboration. This interpretation damaged the status of a domestic worker as a "real" worker and could also lead to prefer «friendship from that family» rather than claiming rights to better working conditions.

The link between public coercion and private coercion had important implications before (legal constraint in the sector to have access in Italy and personal attachment to the employer family), during (immobilization of at least one year in the employment relationship, dependence on the employer to complete the regularization) and after the employment relationship (failure to pay contributions and maintenance of an irregular position or, if it was possible to regularize subsequently, impact on the pension).

Informal social networks and catholic groups had a key role in providing immediate support. They also allowed to socialize one's experiences, start learning processes, and become able to assert one's rights. In the face of domestic employers' arbitrariness, the point became to understand how the boundary moved between the legitimization of a behaviour that you were accustomed to, the legal legality of the Treaty, and the methods available to renegotiate dynamics or reject them entirely. However, first foreign domestic workers who arrived in Italy didn't have a structured social network to turn to, they had nowhere to go, they didn't know the language, they were afraid, and the contract couldn't be terminated.

It's important to examine the relationship between the immobilization of domestic workers and coercion in relation to mobility processes that include formation and transformation of flows but also moments of entry and exit from work: work is often one of the main reasons behind movements entangled in a myriad of power and control relationships. Even if immigrants came to Italy voluntarily, the option could nonetheless be forceful. All the domestic workers interviewed stated that their decision to leave was part of a voluntary migration initiative, which was typically

28 Interview with Edna, capeverdean domestic worker, 13 october 2022.

motivated by economic concerns or the presence of war in the ethiopian and eritrean cases. Risaba, Amna, and Fatma were compelled to make this decision due to the repercussions of war:

> My older sister had come here previously than me, always through friends and the church. We all went to the school of the nuns who found us work. Then my sister came earlier, and I didn't want to leave Asmara but then the war came. The war has destroyed everything, everything…[29]

> People often think about us as slaves... But we had to come for the war, we were also forced to leave our country.[30]

> I came here for work, for war. Our brothers also went to the USA. Or they had gone to fight against Ethiopia. Under Ethiopia it was bad, when they saw you, they killed you. With the war there was hunger, and we died, for violence and hunger. We had to go.[31]

While these methods of coercion are more evident throughout times of conflict, they may be less so when migration occurs solely for economic reasons. The question is whether we recognize coercion in the impact that a lack of resource redistribution, as well as rising global economic inequality and power, have on individual choices regarding migration. This in no way diminishes the importance of human decisions in establishing complex mobility plans. However, migrant domestic workers' options were limited after they arrived in Italy, and they were legally required to do household activities:

> When you work here as a domestic worker, no one is happy, no human being. You can't work well, even if you do it well, you can't feel well, it's different. Her you are forced. You can't choice anything else. Then everyone wants us, but they aren't always good.[32]

Jair suggests a possible link between acceptance of constraint in domestic work and the idea of a temporary nature of this occupation:

> There was the dream of Europe and emancipation. And there was misery. And even now, remains poverty and dreams. For example, many said I go to Italy and work three years, I do the trousseau and return home, then I marry, I too. I didn't do it myself and, in the end, I even accepted it, that was. You know, but then in general it almost never happened to anyone, really, only some… Then speaking of sacrifice, others already had children and did it for this, to make them study and not miss anything.[33]

29 Interview with Risaba, eritrean domestic worker, 18 july 2022.
30 Interview with Amna, ethiopian domestic worker, 16 july 2023.
31 Interview with Fatma, eritrean domestic worker, 19 august 2022.
32 Interview with Amna, ethiopian domestic worker, 16 july 2023.
33 Interview with Jair, capeverdean domestic worker, 18 october 2023.

There's a long-term historical association between migration at various distances and domestic workers' perception of their job as temporary employment[34]. When we look at the experiences of foreign domestic workers in Italy, there are many features that put in relation planning and beliefs about the temporality of migrations with material requirements, hopes and expectations, and a certain understanding of the ineluctability of domestic service:

> I came because I lost my father, and I was the eldest daughter. So, I felt the duty to help my mother, and I had four younger brothers... So, I came here to help them financially, but I planned to stay for a short period. I told myself to stay about ten years and not more, but here I am, for more than 40 years. Sometimes you feel frustrated, useless, you feel useless, and even the attitude of employers that make you feel nobody, you are worth nothing. But then you think about mom, the little brothers, who must eat. But in the end even if you miss them, you must be strong because you know that you have a family, can you understand? I could have left here before, but each time I was thinking about leaving I was also thinking about my little brothers, about my mother who was alone and who needed my help…You can't give up for them[35].

> At the beginning you must be a domestic worker. There's no choice for anyone. You know it's bad, but you must accept it even if you feel like a slave. Yes, we were here like slaves…We were relieved because we thought we would come back early from the families, after having earned enough. We were looking forward to coming back, but then…[36]

But then…some come back, but then... many remain. Coming back can be difficult because «after all these years relationships are often lost. When we return, we feel weird because our mentality is now different»[37]. Almost all the domestic workers I interviewed still intend to return, but they have frequently postponed it for a variety of reasons. In certain circumstances, after years of working and living in Italy, domestic workers formed social relationships with friends or new families, making it impossible to return to their home countries:

> O: But do you plan to return to Cape Verde?
> C: No... here I have family but at least for vacation yes... I would wish it so much but now you know, how do you do, who knows…maybe one day…[38]

Material conditions were frequently lacking: despite their years working as domestics in Italy, many were unable to gather all of the contributions required to retire due to employers' inability to make social security contributions. Or it could be that, although getting a very little pension, domestic workers chose to continue working

34 R. Sarti, *"Noi abbiamo visto tante città, abbiamo un'altra cultura". Servizio domestico, migrazioni e identità di genere in Italia: uno sguardo di lungo periodo*, in «Polis», 18, 2004, pp. 17-46.
35 Interview with Eunice, capeverdean domestic worker, 13 october 2022.
36 Interview with Catarina, capeverdean domestic worker, 23 january 2023.
37 Interview with Helena, capeverdean domestic worker, 13 october 2023.
38 Interview with Marisa, capeverdean domestic worker, 14 april 2023.

because they were concerned about being unable to do so in their home country. For the capeverdean women, Francisca and Luisa:

> O: But you would like to go back to Cape Verde?
> F: Yes, I wanted to go back before, then you know school, university, the new job.
> O: But aren't you retired?
> F: No, no, otherwise I would have gone straight away! But I don't know if I'm going to wait, maybe I'll go earlier and open a pizzeria, I don't know... I've always been here with the fixed idea of going back down, and luckily, I go every year, because sometimes those who come back don't feel so integrated.[39]

> O: Do you wish to return to Cape Verde?
> L: I can't wait to take my pension and go back home, also because for me all this time I've had to do this work, but I can't wait to take my pension, to go back home. I don't know how long it is, but I have paid contributions even though many, many at the beginning weren't paid, and then they had to work more to get that minimum. Then I don't understand that a pension an 18-year-old girl has worked all her life. There's tiredness there, there's fatigue. And, because that money they give you, it's minimum, it's not so much. No, it's not so much. I want to go back home, we even knew the dialect, we even forget the dialect, I want to go back. I want to go back home. I want to live a little bit of my country. Of course, not forgetting Italy, because here I love Italy, then mainly I love Rome. Of course, I love, I love so much the city where I have lived all my life.[40]

Leonora, a filipino domestic worker, describes a widespread practice among all immigration groups: utilizing a portion of their salary to build or refurbish their homes in their countries. While domestic workers continued to work in other people's houses, they found comfort in the solid reality of their own environment, where they could project their ideal future image. Such buildings were frequently put up in the style of western employers' luxurious homes therefore workers' investment had significance in terms of social mobility processes that relied heavily on the concept of emulation. In the Philippines, this phenomenon was prevalent in Batangas, also known as the Little Italy:

> L: Did you build a house in the Philippines?
> L: Yes, yes, I do in Manila, but many people do it in Batangas the little Italy! Many build because we need our own house, to stay in a house. But few come back, Batangas is so empty. I would like to come back too but for now we still need money even if there is work in the Philippines. Sooner or later, we will too, we'll stay in our beautiful house.[41]

In some ways, domestic workers who draw inspiration from their employers' houses and lifestyle demonstrate a desire to resist power dynamics and project themselves outside such a difficult work environment, well described by Luisa:

39 Interview with Francisca, capeverdean domestic worker, 15 december 2022.
40 Interview with Luisa, capeverdean domestic worker, 17 september 2023.
41 Interview with Leonora, filipino domestic worker, 3 february 2023.

> It was hard, it was hard, because from freedom to prison... I call it prison, from freedom to prison, because you who are free and then when you come here to be a domestic worker you can't leave whenever you want. In short, there were also those things where one was contractually required to work 24 hours a week, including 12 hours on Thursday and 12 hours on Sunday. Then there was also the holiday. Then you had 10 hours of work, including 2 hours of rest, always working fixed hours. But in the end, it was never 10 hours, but always more, and you hardly ever rested, and even the free time on Thursdays and Sundays was never more than 3 or 4 hours. So many times, you would get up in the morning and end up working until 1:00 or 2:00 at night or even later because, if there were dinners... and you weren't paid at all, not even a little. Even on the weekend when we were supposed to have those 12 hours... if they had lunch with friends, you were working and maybe then you left at 6:00 PM and had to be back by 9:00 PM, forget about those twelve hours... even those 12 hours, maybe they were having lunch with some friends, you finished work at 6:00 PM, and left at 8:30 PM. I was supposed to be back by 9:00 PM. So those 12 hours were... for us who were free, and for me it felt like living inside a prison where they give you those hours of fresh air. It really was truly hard for those things. It really was a prison; it was truly a jail, and some have returned precisely because, how do you do it? First, you are free, then you are in prison. You are truly a slave. Yet, for those who remained, it was like this for everyone; we knew it, and there was little we could do.[42]

Domestic workers often felt like one of the family or a prisoner, or both at different times. These feelings aren't necessarily contradictory and can be interpreted in relation to a paternalistic relationship that oscillates between benevolent attitudes and threatening or punitive practice. The affective dimension related to living together could have a fundamental role within these dynamics. The domestic worker could actively request an act of employer benevolence using affectivity as a resource to open negotiations, as it happened to Luisa. Luisa couldn't get time off to study for a long time, so she started playing football on Sundays after church, but when there was a football game she must gave up because she didn't have enough free time. At church, talking to other domestic workers and some social workers, she noticed that many of the other capeverdean domestic workers had been able to study and to better manage their free hours. So, she adopted a strategy and invoked the contract, although she didn't go so far as to claim her right to the full 24 free hours a week:

> I wanted to continue studying, but she didn't give me this opportunity. My dream was to become an architect. I suffered until after 40 years…that was my dream… there were other girls who came here and worked and studied a lot, becoming journalists and even doctors while still working, but I wasn't one of them. I loved school, I loved it so much and I still love it, school was my world, and the *signora* (female employer) wouldn't let me do it. I was only given free hours on Thursdays and Sundays by her.
>
> However, I had two great passions, studying and football. I got into women's football. I went to football trainings, sometimes on Thursdays, other times on Sundays. But I had to fight. And like the others, I had to enforce the contract and get more free time.

42 Interview with Luisa, capeverdean domestic worker, 2 april 2023.

> Because by contract we had 12 hours on Thursdays and Sundays and that's all you could do, but employers just gave you 3 or 4 free hours even during these days. I tried to ask them to reorganize my free time, just when I had to go to matches. At first, they said no, but then I said I had to enforce the contract and after a lot of fighting I got it.[43]

Some workers like Tasnim from Eritrea deliberately decided to remain clandestine to have the opportunity to move and seek higher wages. Irregularity was the price to pay for refusing to be immobilized in an employment relationship in which employers were essentially legitimated to do whatever they wanted:

> O: Have you never had problems with salary, contributions, rest?
> T: No, no, everything is fine.
> O: Was everything OK?
> T: Yes, but in the sense that I didn't want to sign the contract, I didn't really think about it, so I moved around, I felt freer and for ten years I worked illegally.[44]

Employers' broad decision-making spectrum implied many types of private coercion that extended beyond the contractual relationship. Among the several themes that emerged from the interviews, domestic workers frequently mentioned threats and punishments such as food restriction, which was reported by 45% of capeverdeans and 35,7% of filipinas, as well as the enforcement of a very stringent (and not legally needed) curfew. Many workers reported that if the curfew was not followed, their employers forced them to sleep on the threshold before reopening it the following morning at the start of the working day. Other various difficulties that arose, which I am unable to address here, included the intertwining of behaviours that indicate an asymmetry of power in favour of employers, as well as different types of coercion that intertwined gender, race, and class oppressions. For example, many of the domestic workers I interviewed were subjected to harassment, rape, or forced abortions. Sometimes, some worker ran away to fight too bad working and living conditions, as for Amna, an eritrean worker who arrived in the 1980's:

> A: I don't want to speak badly of her, but she was crazy. She made me get up in the morning and gave me a whole list of orders, and in the evening, I was exhausted, and I don't know how I got through that year, because at the beginning you couldn't leave your job for a year, otherwise they'd give you the pink slip. You had to finish the contract and then you could decide whether to renew it or leave the house. I slept there, I did everything there, I only went out on Sundays. Everything in that house, everything. Then one night I was late, I had a ten o'clock curfew on Sundays. I was late talking to my friends, then I was late for the bus, I must have arrived at eleven, and then she didn't open the door for me, just the gate, and made me sleep in the courtyard. She said it's my house, not a hotel, you can't come in whenever you like. She opened the door in the morning for me to work. And she screamed, screamed.

43 Interview with Luisa, capeverdean domestic worker, 2 april 2023.
44 Interview with Tasnim, eritrean domestic worker, 26 october 2022.

I slept with the dog; it was so bad that time, I just waited for it to end. But at that moment no contract had been broken, nothing could be done, so you can't, you can't leave. They were all against you. In the end I just ran away after an argument because they didn't want me to go, but I couldn't resist any longer. I couldn't wait for the end of the contract.[45]

But even then, by breaking the contract prematurely, there was no way to avoid irregularity. Employers learnt to respond to these escape attempts by developing new immobilization devices, including the withholding of passports, as a lawyer who belongs to a domestic workers' association explained me:

O: Have you encountered situations where your passport was withheld?
AM: Passport, entry visa, work permit. But today these actions are almost non-existent.
O: But how did it work?
AM: In the seventies there was a great need, a thirst, for domestic work, but Italians no longer wanted to do it, and until the immigrants arrived there was little supply. When migrant domestic workers realized that they could be paid more, that there were other people who were paid more because of the low supply, they escaped. They left their jobs and looked for higher wages. Then it happened that employers asked them to hand over all their documents on arrival, so that they could be immobilized and threatened.[46]

Whether they entered illegally, decided to remain illegal or flee from previous employment relationships, foreign domestic workers could move through different working relations, but they could also be blackmailed[47]. All the foreign domestic workers who came to Italy, in one way or another were wrapped in a spiral of coercion which took place both in the private, in the public sphere and in their relations.

7. *Conclusion*

In Italy, most of the State's welfare system is based on the private institution of family. The number of italian women working outside the home increased in the 1960s and 1970s, but this trend was not followed by a redistribution of domestic and caring tasks between genders, nor by a reform of the welfare system, which in Italy is still primarily based on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the family unit. As a result, (particularly middle-class) families began to explore for ways to acquire the greatest aid at the lowest expense. At the same time, the number of foreign women entering the country was increasing; they required a place to work as well as a place

45 Interview with Amna, ethiopian domestic worker, 16 july 2023.
46 Interview with Emanuele Montemarano, API colf, 5february 2023.
47 C. Basa, V De Guzman, S. Marchetti (eds.), *International migration and over-indebtedness: the case of Filipino workers in Italy*, Filipino women council, Roma 2012.

to live; they were more susceptible than Italian domestic workers, and even more so if they were irregular.

Migration policies contributed to the social construction of migrant domestic workers as persons dependent on their employers' willingness to complete the regularization process. Furthermore, the complex bureaucratic structure of recruiting encouraged irregular migration, resulting in a huge population of unauthorized workers with little negotiating power. The State's legal initiatives helped to immobilize migrants in the domestic sector as live-in workers and in their employers' homes. At the same time, the State kept poorly governed sectors, allowing for exceptions, withdrawals, or legal modifications to maintain the balance. To summarize and simplify, the State legitimized the combination of protection and threat in the domestic realm; it gained from this in economic and welfare terms; it made interventions or non-interventions to maintain its own and employers' interests. Already in the transition between the 1963 circular and the introduction of facilities for the entry of domestic workers (as live-in workers) in 1975, we can see the relationship between the initial strictness and later exemption and the persistent need for a figure that embodies the private and preserves the private and public function of italian families.

The exchange between institutional action and social dynamics demonstrates the interaction and mutual effect of the public and private spheres as components of the same process. However, the specific State's intervention took on a special meaning: through a form of public coercion, the juxtaposition of workplace and home was imposed, expanding the possibilities of coercion within a working and subaltern relationship that took place in the private space of the home. The immobilization of mostly female migrant workers in this sector calls into question these and other power relations that include forms of op-pression related to race, class, and gender, and that intertwine certain coercive dynamics historically linked to domestic service and the ambiguities that exist in the relationship between one's positioning as a worker and "feeling part of a family". When the State legally immobilized foreign domestic workers in domestic work and their employers' households, it contributed significantly to the consolidation of these relational ambiguities, as well as the employers' arbitrariness and power, and thus expanded the possibilities of exercising coercion in the domestic space. Finally, I believe that this summary of legislative interventions and oral sources begins to recognize the false nature of the distinction between public and private, as well as some of the ways in which these two spheres interact to create coercive social and working dynamics both inside and outside the household.

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