

The DoCUp project  
position on  
empowering policies  
for a sustainable  
future in the  
domestic care sector



**UPSKILLING DOMESTIC CARE WORKERS TO ENSURE  
RESILIENT EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS**



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

GA n° 2021-1-SE01-KA220-ADU-000028268

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## Introduction

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Providing care and support at home for people who are not self-sufficient is becoming an increasing challenge in Europe, requiring an integrated approach and skilled resources. In this Erasmus+ DOCUP position paper, the project aims to highlight the importance of consistent and up-to-date training provision, while underlining the need to formalise career paths for those working in this crucial sector. Recognising the rights of care workers is crucial to ensuring a fair and sustainable working environment, reducing the risk for discrimination and exploitation. In this context, regularisation and formalisation of professional roles emerge as key factors in improving the well-being of workers and the quality of care provided. Particularly in light of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic experience.

## Context

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Europe is facing a growing challenge in supporting people who are not self-sufficient, driven by an ageing population and an increase in chronic diseases. As a result of these socio-demographic changes, the need for domestic care workers for families and individuals is increasing and there is a shortage of local workers to meet this demand.<sup>1</sup> Migration could be seen as a potential solution to labour shortages, particularly in the domestic care sector, where a significant number of workers are migrants, mainly women. However, migrant workers often face challenges such as language barriers and a lack of specialised training, which hinder their effectiveness in the sector. In addition, current working conditions in the sector are sub-optimal, making it difficult to attract and retain new workers. Moreover, a proportion of care work is still undeclared, preventing workers from accessing adequate pay, social protection or labour rights. There are no precise statistical data describing this situation, but it is estimated that 35% of care workers work in undeclared conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Another key issue is the pronounced feminisation of the care sector, with women making up 86% of the workforce. Recognising the gender dimension of domestic work is essential when assessing national legislation and policies that affect the status and conditions of domestic workers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> European Economic and Social Committee, Florek, K., Rogalewski, A. (2020). *The future of live-in care work in Europe – Report on the EESC country visits to the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Poland following up on the EESC opinion on "The rights of live-in care workers"*, Publications Office, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2864/67086>

<sup>2</sup> ELA, (2022). *Tackling undeclared work in the personal and household services sector*.

<sup>3</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality. *Essential Workers*. <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-genderequality/essential-workers>

In addition, recognising domestic workers' rights is a fundamental element of social justice and worker protection. This principle has become even more important following the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by workers in the domestic care sector.

The care sector faced many challenges in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. In particular, in accordance with the desk research carried out during the DoCU Project, it emerged that domestic care workers have faced additional challenges in providing care, lacking the protective measures initially available to the health sector, and taking on increased responsibilities beyond their original roles. Despite escalating demand, precarious working conditions have prevented care workers from responding consistently. The lack of labour rights in the informal sector has put workers at risk of losing their jobs, either temporarily or permanently, especially in cases of contagion. Although demand for care workers has increased, recruitment has declined, often due to families' fear of infection. This situation has had a significant impact on the mental health of domestic care workers, who have experienced increased levels of depression, anxiety and other psychological distress, particularly during the pandemic, but also more generally.<sup>4</sup>

With regard to specialised training, few countries enforce minimum educational requirements, licensing or certification for domestic care workers. Less than 25% of long-term care (LTC) workers in OECD countries have tertiary education. The majority of LTC workers in OECD countries (63%) have upper secondary education, 16% have lower secondary education and 21% have tertiary education<sup>5</sup>. Despite the predominance of low-skilled workers, LTC involves the performance of complex tasks beyond basic care. Domestic care workers often lack the necessary knowledge and training, which affects the quality of the care they provide. Disparities in staff qualifications and skills can affect the quality of care provided, highlighting the urgent need for harmonisation of training.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the mental health of domestic care workers, but has also highlighted the vulnerability of the care sector and the need for comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

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<sup>4</sup> Eileen Rocard & Paola Sillitti & Ana Llana-Nozal, 2021. "COVID-19 in long-term care: Impact, policy responses and challenges," OECD Health Working Papers 131, OECD Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> EU-LFS; ASEC-CPS for the United States; Census 2016 for Canada; LFS for Israel; Survey on Long-term Care Workers FY for Japan. <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934018678>

## Position

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### FORMALISATION OF OCCUPATIONAL PATHS

The formal domestic employment sector faces a dual challenge: conveying positive integration for workers and their families, while also ensuring their inclusion in a society that upholds and safeguards their fundamental rights, including access to social protection.

It is evident that collective bargaining agreements result in better-defined and structured employment conditions, benefiting both employers through improved service quality and workers through enhanced working conditions and vocational training. Undocumented workers, on the other hand, often remain undeclared, thus struggling to assert their fundamental rights, particularly decent working conditions, and are excluded from social protection schemes, leading to situations of exploitation or servitude. It is therefore imperative that the multitude of jobs in this sector be officially declared and secured, while ensuring the professionalisation of domestic workers. It is also crucial to support through dedicated policy measures the regularity of labour relations.

In addition, the formalisation of careers offers domestic care workers the opportunity to see their commitment recognised through a clear and well-defined career structure. This not only serves to motivate these professionals, but also underlines the social importance of their role. A well-structured career path includes different levels of competence and specialised roles, ensuring that each operator has the necessary skills to provide high quality care. Continuous training and specialisation become integral parts of this process. In addition, the prospect of a clearly defined career path can provide incentives for career choice and reduce turnover, thereby contributing to the stability and continuity of care. Finally, the formalisation of career pathways creates a cohesive and well-defined community of practice where domestic care workers can share experiences, exchange knowledge and improve their skills, fostering an environment of continuous and enriching learning.

In conclusion, recognising workers' rights by regularising and formalising professional roles goes beyond mere regulation; it is about fostering a culture that values and dignifies work in the care sector.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A CONSISTENT AND UPDATED EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM

Although the economic and social value of these roles is clear, it is essential to improve the professional skills of workers to ensure their protection and to foster the provision of high-quality services to needy families.

Ensuring a consistent standard of care requires the development and implementation of a standardised curriculum for domestic care workers. This curriculum should cover medical, psychological and practical aspects of care to ensure that all professionals are thoroughly prepared. Given the rapid evolution of medical practices, healthcare technologies and socio-demographic changes in the population, the integration of continuing education courses is paramount to keep operators abreast of the latest advances. Including courses on stress management and effective communication can further enhance the skills of these professionals.

### Practical proposals and recommendations:

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- Establish a European standard curriculum: Work together to formulate a standardised training curriculum, setting minimum standards for this profession, that can be universally adopted by all Member States, ensuring a common foundation of knowledge and skills. The Erasmus+ DOCUP project advocates an updated curriculum that meets the diverse needs of all partner countries.
- Encourage continuous training: Introduce financial and contractual incentives for domestic care workers to participate in continuing education courses to promote a culture of lifelong learning and the adoption of best practices. Raise end-user awareness of the importance of recognising qualified and specialised professionals.
- Promote the formalisation of professional roles: Support national and international initiatives aimed at recognising professionals and establishing clear career paths in the care sector. This will ensure rights for workers and guarantees for service users.
- Foster cooperation between institutions and organisations: Encourage cooperation between educational institutions, health care organisations and public authorities to ensure a coherent approach in promoting educational opportunities and formalising professional roles.
- Favour culturally sensitive care: Include in training programmes topics that promote greater cultural awareness and sensitivity, both to the host country and to other cultures, supplementing with tools that foster better intercultural communication.

- Increase awareness in gender equity: Dedicate pathways for domestic care workers that include gender equity issues, emphasising the importance of treating and being treated with respect regardless of gender. Emphasise issues such as equal pay, the division of domestic work and gender-specific challenges in family care.
- Mental health support for domestic care workers: The need to support the mental health of domestic care workers must be recognised. It is recommended that psycho-educational programmes be implemented to effectively manage stress and anxiety in order to prevent burnout.
- Integration of ICT in the care sector: The pandemic has highlighted the potential for the care sector to integrate information and communication technology (ICT) for remote care delivery. To adapt to this evolving landscape, domestic care workers should be encouraged to improve their technological skills.

## Conclusion

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Ensuring a consistent and up-to-date educational framework, combined with the formalisation of career pathways, is essential to address the challenges in the care sector across Europe. It is only through collective commitment and the adoption of innovative practices that we can secure a better future for those who depend on these key professional roles.

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