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The Domestic Work Sector in the European Union: Quantification, Evolution and Policies to Combat Precariousness

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Abstract

This article analyzes the domestic work and paid care sector in the countries of the European Union (EU), which includes jobs mostly carried out by women, generally with a serious lack of job protection, low wages, degraded working conditions, informality, precariousness and “invisibility” of tasks, etc. However, these jobs represent essential services for society, since in addition to caring for family members and dependents, personal and domestic care needs must be covered. From an operational perspective, the very characteristics of domestic work do not facilitate the collection of specific statistics necessary for the study of working conditions. This problem of statistical invisibility further slows down progress in establishing measures to improve the quality of employment for these workers. Therefore, it is necessary to address the discussion on the conceptual delimitation of domestic work and the measurement criteria adopted internationally, with special emphasis on those observed in the EU. Finally, the most advanced national regulations that try to reconcile the improvement of the working conditions of women employed in domestic work with the fact of promoting these services to cover the assistance needs of many households with economic difficulties are analyzed.

Keywords

Women in domestic and care work, precariousness, COVID-19 pandemic, low-wage, public policy.

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El Sector de Trabajo Doméstico en la Unión Europea: Cuantificación, Evolución y Políticas para Combatir la Precariedad

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza el sector del trabajo doméstico y de cuidados remunerados en los países de la Unión Europea (UE), que incluye trabajos realizados mayoritariamente por mujeres, generalmente con una grave desprotección laboral, bajos salarios, condiciones laborales degradadas, informalidad, precariedad y “invisibilidad” de las tareas, etc. Sin embargo, estos trabajos representan servicios esenciales para la sociedad, ya que además del cuidado de familiares y dependientes, se deben cubrir necesidades de cuidados personales y domésticos.

Desde una perspectiva operativa, las propias características del trabajo doméstico no facilitan la recopilación de estadísticas específicas necesarias para el estudio de las condiciones de trabajo. Este problema de invisibilidad estadística ralentiza aún más el avance en el establecimiento de medidas para mejorar la calidad del empleo de estos trabajadores. Por ello, es necesario abordar la discusión sobre la delimitación conceptual del trabajo doméstico y los criterios de medición adoptados a nivel internacional, con especial énfasis en los observados en la UE. Finalmente, se analiza la normativa nacional más avanzada que intenta conciliar la mejora de las condiciones laborales de las mujeres empleadas en el trabajo doméstico con el hecho de impulsar estos servicios para cubrir las necesidades asistenciales de muchos hogares con dificultades económicas.

Palabras clave

Mujeres en trabajo doméstico y de cuidados, precariedad, COVID-19 pandemia, salarios bajos, políticas públicas.

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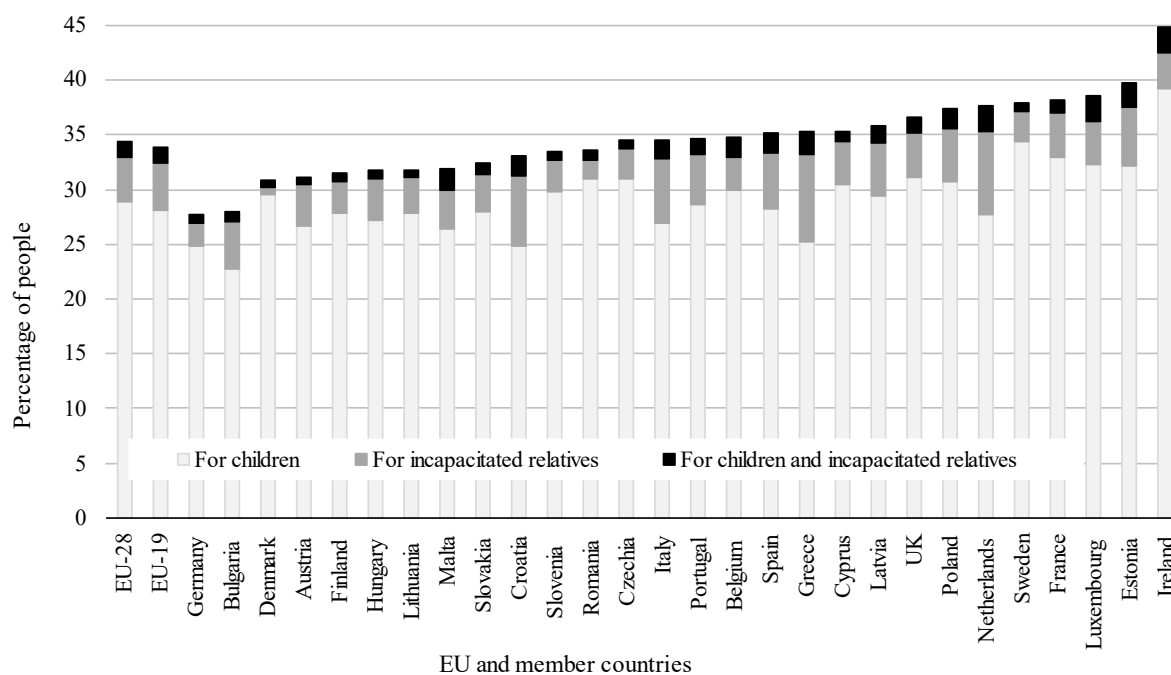
Domestic work and care work comprise a sector often noted for a severe lack of labor protection; indeed, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), approximately 30% of domestic work is excluded from labor legislation, the consequences of which entail a significant lack of social protection (ILO, 2013; European Parliament, 2016). Domestic work tends to be characterized by low wages, degraded working conditions, informality, precariousness, and the ‘invisibility’ of tasks, and it is carried out mostly by women. More than half of domestic workers have no legal limitation on working hours; over 2 in 5 are not guaranteed their right to a minimum wage; and more than one-third are denied the possibility of maternity leave. Nonetheless, these jobs represent essential services for society, as needs for personal care and housework must be met in addition to caring for family members and dependent persons.

From an operational perspective, the very characteristics of domestic work do not facilitate the gathering of specific statistics necessary to the study of working conditions. This problem of statistical invisibility further slows progress in establishing measures to improve the quality of employment of these workers.

Definition of Domestic Work

Domestic work has been defined as that which “involves the direct care of people; it can be paid or not” (Razavi, 2007, p.6); in the approximations presented below, we refer only to those jobs receiving remuneration.

Without question, domestic work responds to the care needs of a population, and this is among the causes mentioned when workers are asked their reasons for leaving the standard labor market. Figure 1 shows the dimension of the problem in the EU, where an average 35% of persons between the ages of 18 and 64 bear certain care responsibilities, amounting to over 100 million people in 2018.

Figure 1*Care responsibilities of persons aged 18 to 64, 2018*

Source. Labour Force Survey (LFS), Eurostat

Basically, there exist two conceptual approaches to measuring the extent of domestic work: that of the ILO, which takes into account domestic employment subject to direct remuneration by households; and that of the EU, based on activities undertaken in the personal and domestic services sector.

ILO Definition

The term “domestic worker” here refers to those who carry out domestic activities in exchange for remuneration. In its Convention on Domestic Workers, No. 189 of 2011, the ILO defines such employment in Article 1, indicating that domestic work is carried out in one or more homes and within a working relationship (not merely occasionally or sporadically). Specifically, these are people “who work in other people’s homes in exchange for remuneration and who provide a range of domestic services: sweeping and cleaning, washing clothes and dishes, shopping and cooking, taking care of children or the elderly, ill, or disabled, and/or providing services such as gardening, driving, or security” (ILO and WIEGO, 2013, p.42).

This definition includes persons who may work either full or part time, who are employed either by a single household or through a service provider, and who may or may not reside in the employer’s home. For purposes of statistical quantification and research, such open characteristics engender insufficient and imprecise measurements.

EU Focus

In this case, the term “personal household services” (PHS) is the institutionalized denomination established in 2012 by the European Commission (EC, 2012); this includes services provided both to and within households, for all age groups and life situations, such as nursing or care for the elderly or disabled, child care, and domestic services in the form of cleaning, laundry, catering, gardening, etc. According to the EC, 63% of PHS work is devoted to care activities and the remaining 37% to non-care activities such as cleaning, food preparation, gardening, minor house repairs, and private instruction. Households that directly employ such workers represent 30%, while 70% corresponds to institutions that are specialized in home services, whether private companies or public bodies, cooperatives, or collaborative economy platforms.

Elsewhere, the European Federation for Services to Individuals (EFSI) – an organization that the EC considers a principal player in PHS – defines the personal and domestic services sector as “activities carried out mainly in the homes of users related to personal assistance services (early childhood and child care, dependency, disability, invalidity, etc.) summarized under the term ‘services related to care’ as well as day-to-day life services (cleaning, ironing, gardening, minor DIY, maintenance, tutorial classes, etc.) united under the term ‘home support’” (EFSI, 2018, p.11).

The EC definition of domestic work is essentially like that proposed by the ILO, although two differences can be highlighted as an attempt by the EC to ‘professionalize’ domestic work through the inclusion of nursing care and domestic repairs. These differences are not especially relevant in practice, as they do not imply significant differences in quantification of the workforce.

Quantification of Domestic Work

Statistics on domestic work are a prerequisite to adequate economic analysis, but such are currently lacking, as no statistical source regards this sector as an independent group or classification. Thus, it becomes necessary to resort to indirect estimates, the disaggregation and precision of which are analyzed below.

Industry-Based Method

This method of analysis collects data from the perspective of production. The ILO calls this the industry-based approach, given that it derives from the United Nations International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC)¹, adapted within the EU as the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community (known as NACE).

The key distinctions to be made are whether the worker is carrying out an activity in a private home, and whether the employment relationship is direct (with the household) or conducted through a company, public institution, or non-profit organization. The requirements are to

break down the data at the level of the first or second digit of the NACE reference code and to select the groups deemed appropriate (EC, 2008).

Section T, Division 97 of NACE (Activities of households as employers) is restricted to activities by private households as employers of domestic personnel. This section includes persons employed in what has been traditionally considered domestic work (“maids, cooks, waiters, butlers, laundresses, gardeners, porters, stable boys, drivers, caretakers, governesses, nannies, tutors, secretaries, etc.)” (EC, 2008). Significantly, this excludes the provision of services such as cooking or gardening by independent providers (whether companies or individuals).

Historically, people have accessed domestic work through direct household employment, as defined by ILO Convention No. 189 (ILO, 2018a; 2018b). However, the general trend in most countries has been to reduce the direct hiring of domestic staff by households as part of the liberalization of markets and the establishment of tax incentives to combat undeclared work. In this context, the contracting of domestic work has been opened to private for-profit organizations. Moreover, use of self-employed workers has increased in recent years, thanks to the development of digital platforms (EFSI, 2018, p.11) that would likewise be excluded from section T. Similarly excluded from this section are employees who provide domestic services to households when these are indistinguishable from unincorporated businesses, as in the case of family farms.

It is therefore necessary to complement these data with figures from section Q division 88 (Social work activities without accommodation), containing information on social service activities without housing, including the direct provision of care for the elderly and disabled as well as children’s day-care activities, among others. Day-care centers for students and for children with disabilities are also grouped here, so long as they are not considered educational centers. In addition, this section includes social services such as counseling, social welfare, asylum, guidance, and similar services provided to individuals or families, whether at home or in other locations, by official bodies or by private organizations, disaster relief organizations, national or local assistance organizations, or specialists who provide counseling and guidance services.

Thus, section Q division 88 can be said to overestimate domestic work, as some of the activities included here constitute employment not intended for households. However, study of this section can prove interesting, given the growing trend in many European countries to employ domestic workers through private, public, or non-profit service providers.

A potential benefit of the industry-based approach is that information can be obtained through surveys of the active population as well as employment data classified by economic activity, or by the institutional sector of the employing entity.

Task-Based Method

Also used in identifying and qualifying domestic work is data classified by occupation. Within the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08), several groups include domestic work tasks, specifically groups 9111 (Domestic cleaners and helpers) and 5322 (Home-based personal care workers). However, these two groups are simultaneously too broad

and too narrow to provide an accurate representation of employment in the domestic work sector (EFSI, 2018).

The task-based measurement method when used alone will also exclude occupations such as gardeners, cooks, drivers, and security guards, as the majority of workers in these occupations are not directly employed by households. The exclusion of workers in certain occupations where men are more frequently employed than women could conceivably have an impact on the gender analysis of domestic work (ILO, 2018a).

One problem associated with the use of occupational data is that many groups commonly engaged in domestic work are also employed in non-domestic settings. In addition, the task-based approach requires detailed occupancy data (at the ISCO 4-digit level) that are not typically published in workforce or household survey reports, but which may be available from survey microdata. Thus, the use of employment data classified by economic activity is likely to be more fruitful for the identification of employment in domestic work (ILO, 2018a).

Characterization of Domestic Work in the EU

As detailed above, the quantification of domestic work is no simple task, as no specific category currently accounts for the sector through the classification of activities or occupations. Furthermore, the diverse definitions of such activities in different national legislations imply significant difficulties in measuring the size and extent of this sector (EC, 2018). Our analytical proposal is based on the industry-based approach, drawing on data from the Eurostat Labor Force Survey (LFS)² with two-digit disaggregation. As regards NACE Rev. 2, analysis is focused on the activities in sections T97 and Q88. Initially, data were processed for 2019 and 2021, to avoid distortions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Estimations of Domestic Work

The considered estimates on the quantification of domestic work in the EU must be understood as partial, as they do not constitute a complete database for analysis but derive from monographs giving estimates for specific moments, without continuity over time.

On the one hand, the industry-based method used by the ILO uses takes into account only employment hired directly by households. Nevertheless, with data from the ILOSTAT database we have been able to quantify domestic work in the Eurozone in 2019 at 2.07 million persons in direct household employment, 89.4% of whom were women, and 3.92 million people employed in the Q88 division, at 83.3% women. These figures are consistent with those obtained from section T97 of the LFS.

At the EU level, the estimate made by the EFSI (2018)³ in the PHS Industry Monitor quantifies the domestic work (personal and household services) sector as having employed 7.92 million persons in the EU in 2016, 91% of whom were women. Obtained with the task-based method, this figure is somewhat higher than that derived from our analysis of LFS data using the industry-based method, which found that a total of 7.62 million were employed in 2016 as domestic workers in the EU.

The two sets of data are not fully comparable, nor do they offer a time perspective. To consider evolution over time, we worked with quarterly and annual information from the LFS ranging between 2008 and 2021, with the aim of obtaining a database that permits sectoral analysis. As shown in Table 1, the number of persons employed in the domestic work sector in 2021 were approximately 6.23 million in the Eurozone and 7.1 million in the whole of the EU. The evolution of the differing methods of contracting domestic work across the past 10 years have meant a significant reduction in employment in the T97 group and a significant increase in section Q88. Our hypothesis is that this may be due to the efforts to reduce informal work in the various EU countries, as well as to the proliferation of internet-based recruitment platforms; even so, this does not imply a reduction in precariousness, as has been proposed by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) (2018).

Table 1*Domestic work 2021*

	AE19			EU27		
	Th people	% women	% change 2011-2021	Th people	% women	% change 2011-2021
T97	1804,7	89,2	-26,2	1852,4	88,9	-26,5
Q88	4455,0	81,3	38,1	5218,7	81,6	35,4
Total	6259,7	83,5		7071,1	83,5	

Source. Own elaboration from LFS, Eurostat

More than 83% of total employment in the sector is performed by women, and in many cases, records of men in domestic work are erratic or unavailable. Taking this into account, and given that our objective is analysis of the dimension and characterization of domestic work in EU countries (especially in the Eurozone) with a gender approach, the following analyses are based on data on domestic work undertaken by women.

Figure 2 shows the numbers of jobs in domestic work performed by women (as a percentage of total female employment) in the Eurozone countries that offer data, both from sections T97 and Q88 for the year 2019 and in aggregate (T97 + Q88), in order to obtain a comparable period.

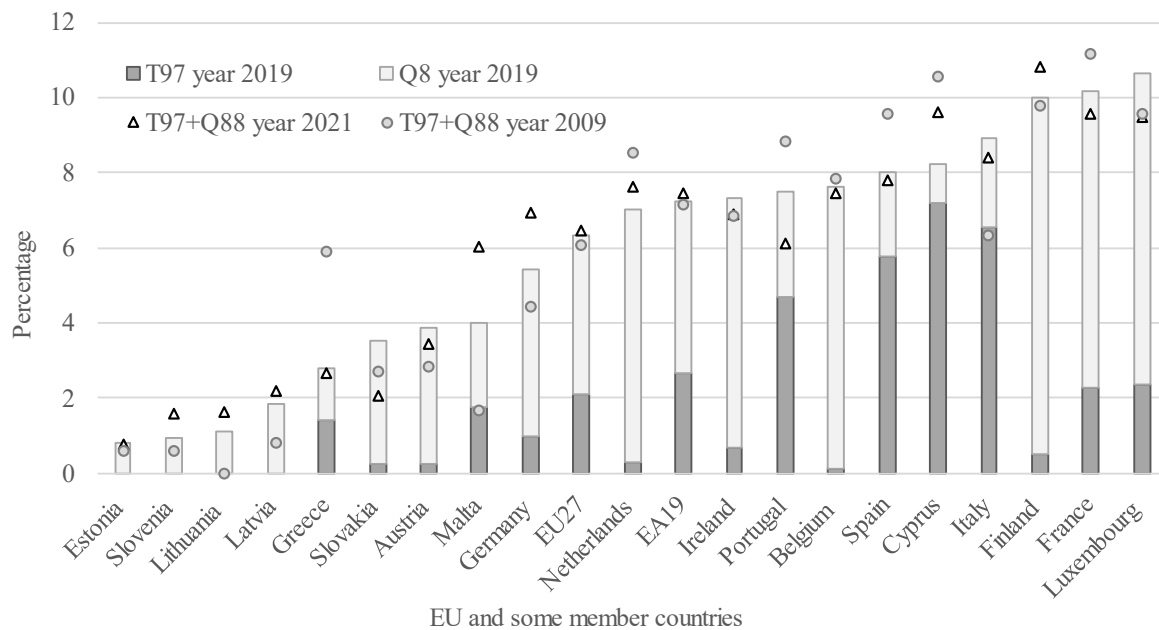
The data reflect considerable heterogeneity between countries, not only in the proportion of domestic work with respect to total employment but also in terms of direct employment through families, collected in section T97. Certain patterns are worth noting:

- Average employment in domestic work by women in the Eurozone represents between 6% and 8% of the total.
- The countries of Eastern Europe show the lowest employment in domestic work, and there is no record of direct employment by families (section T97).

- The Southern European countries of Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece show a higher proportion of domestic work hired directly by households (T97), despite a gradual reduction observed in the previously analyzed historical series. On the other hand, all of these countries with the exception of Italy have experienced a reduction in the proportion of domestic employment of women with respect to the figures from 2008 or 2009.

Figure 2

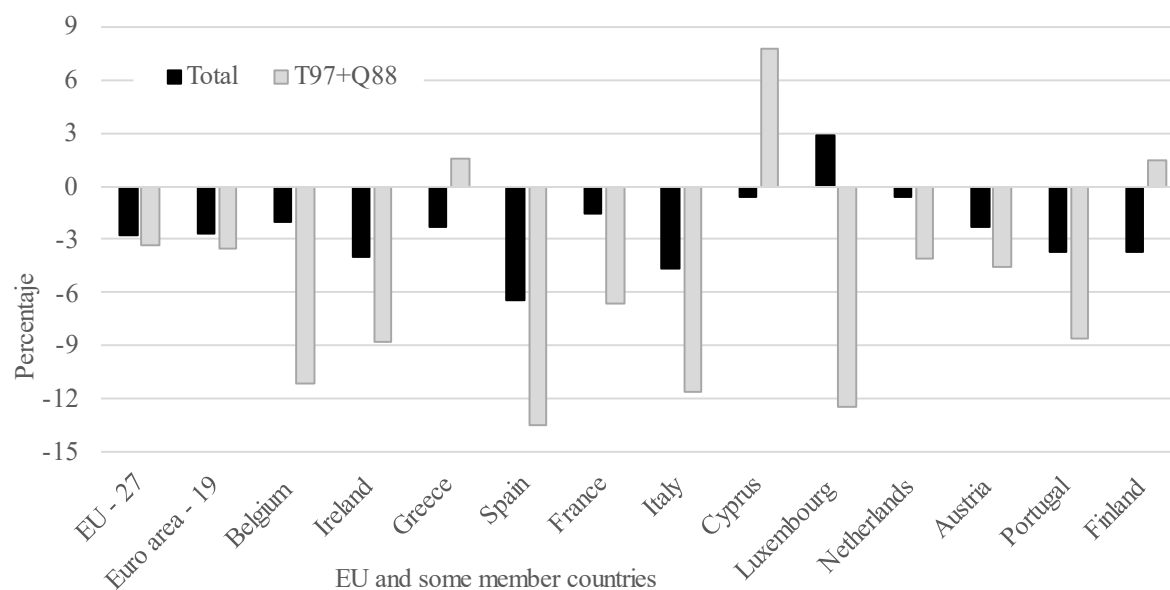
Women's share of domestic work in the total number of employed women



Note. Sections T97 and Q88, years 2009-2019-2021

Source. Own elaboration from LFS, Eurostat

Throughout the pandemic, domestic workers have been among the groups most affected by economic downturn, and their living and employment conditions have further worsened. The loss of jobs has been above the registered average, as shown in Figure 3; the reduction in domestic workers between the second quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020 was four to five times higher than the average drop in employment for women.

Figure 3*Variation in employment in the total economy and in the domestic work sector*

Note. Quarterly data, percentage of variation between second quarter (Q2) of 2019 and Q2 of 2020

Source. Own elaboration from LFS, Eurostat

Despite the greater loss of jobs for domestic workers, those who maintained jobs or were newly employed due to rising need for care by families have worked more weekly hours than those working a full-time job in other sectors. According to the data available from the LFS, between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020, the average weekly working hours for women employed full-time in the Eurozone (EA19, i.e., the 19 countries in the monetary union) fell by 1.7 hours per week, while domestic workers worked 0.6 hours more. This trend is observed to a greater or lesser extent in Greece, Spain, France, Italy, and Portugal.

Other indicators of employment quality as discussed in the previous section do not permit verification of whether changes have occurred since the pandemic. However, an IDWF report (2020) notes that many domestic workers have been denied income, protective equipment, and legitimate access to information on the virus and health-care services, and many women have found themselves ‘trapped’ with their employers and prevented from returning to their families.

Precariousness of Domestic Work in Europe

The main problem related to this employment sector is its precariousness, as reflected both in the wages received (below the minimum wage, as is typical of informal sectors) and in the common lack or non-guarantee of other rights and working conditions linked to regulated employment, such as maternity rights, a fixed work-day duration, or the enjoyment of paid vacation days (ILO and WIEGO, 2013).

The available indicators of precariousness are limited but allow confirmation of high incidence, as well as deviations (in various manifestations) with respect to the average observed for overall employment in each economy.

As regards quality of employment, one crucial issue is the temporary nature of the work relationship⁴. In general terms, the data allow us to confirm a greater incidence of temporary jobs in domestic work than in all other areas of women's employment (Álvarez, 2021; López, 2021).

Another characteristic defining the quality of employment is partiality⁵, as opposed to full-time work, and this is common in domestic jobs, regardless of the particular economy (ibid.). Data indicative of bias in the sector confirm a deviation above that registered by the average of contracts undertaken by women in each country.

In addition to the type of contract, attention must be paid to an aspect that affects this sector in particular: the duration of the work-day beyond the contracting modality (full or partial). Those female domestic workers who state that they work a full day (consisting of 8 hours, the usual norm in other employment spaces) often record longer hours, both daily and weekly. This is especially representative in Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, while in the isolated case of France, indications are that a slightly shorter work-day is common. The situation is striking in the case of part-time shifts, where the hours worked in domestic work is significantly higher than the average for the set of activity sectors. This indicates a potential market for underemployment, possibly as a result of certain forms of partial contracting and the rhythms of work that characterize this sector.

- The number of normal working hours per week is usually reduced to a minimum, with the possibility of contracting more if necessary (unlike in other cases where schedules tend to be more stable, known ahead of time, etc.) (Gómez et al., 2012).
- At the same time, the pace or rhythm of work in domestic employment is usually very high, with pressure exerted to complete work within a time-frame determined by the household (De Villota et al., 2011).
- Finally, the LFS data on the number of employed women above the age of 55 in sectors T97 and Q88 are revealing: the proportion of domestic workers in this age group is well above any other sector of activity, representing more than 50% of employed women in the Eurozone average. This includes more than 60% of the total number of women in domestic work in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal and more than 40% in Spain, Italy, and Latvia.

Another specific dimension of job insecurity in domestic work is that of wages – well below the average in each economy – and these have furthermore undergone a sharp drop as a result of the COVID crisis. In addition to this, and due to the peculiarities of the relationship between employers (households) and the people employed (women, many of them migrants, in some cases irregular, often with minimal training), situations are commonly found of abusive work, beyond the excessive working day. This is reflected in the fact that working activities and responsibilities are not clearly defined, while vacations scarcely exist and even spaces for minimal rest are often prevented (ILO, 2017; FRA, 2018).

Precariousness as in terms of employment status, wages, part-time and irregular shifts, hours worked – all especially representative in this sector – is also observed in terms of social protection (ILO, 2017), due to the special characteristics of the labor relationship registered,

and of the system that normally regulates such in all economies. Thus, precariousness is transferred to the very system of protection of rights that, in cases such as these, views as ‘absent’ those workers who make no unemployment contributions and receive no compensation, again with significant differences in coverage between men and women.

Moreover, domestic workers may be covered by legislation on working conditions, but not by social protection. Such rights may be established through labor or Social Security laws, which define the terms of coverage for domestic workers. These include minimum thresholds for length of employment, minimum working hours, and minimum earnings, but they may exclude certain categories of domestic workers who do not meet such thresholds. Legislation tends also to set parameters such as levels of Social Security contribution and the portability of benefits. Decisions made by employers and workers around compliance or non-compliance with this legislation are further influenced by the informality surrounding these jobs, and by the characteristics of the workers who usually perform them (women, often migrants, who do not always speak the language, much less understand the regulations). Their knowledge is often minimal around rights and obligations, the accessibility of administrative procedures (registration, payment of contributions), and the credibility and efficiency of the system.

Principal Domestic Work Systems and Reforms in the EU

In 2011, the ILO approved Convention 189 on Domestic Work, which makes clear the necessity of compliance with the protection of human rights, a minimum employment age, job security standards, minimum wages and, above all, the contractual formalization of labor relations. In the preamble to this Convention, motives are presented for the alleviation of fundamental problems typical of domestic work through international legal provisions. Major issues include:

- That these are jobs performed mainly by women, many of them immigrants.
- That most of this employment takes place in the informal and undeclared economy, with long and uncontrolled working hours and with fewer labor rights than are enjoyed by other workers.

The EU institutions have urged countries to ratify this Convention on domestic work (ILO, 2014). Table 2 highlights the main reforms to Social Security systems that have favored direct employment, especially for the groups mentioned above. While many countries continue to implement reforms in line with the ILO provisions, around half have not yet ratified the Convention.

Table 2

Analysis of domestic employment reforms in european countries with the highest indicator levels

COUNTRY	ILO 2011*	REG. DW**	MEASURES AFFECTING EMPLOYMENT
Italy	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Assegno per il Nucleo Familiare</i> (latest regulation, Decree-Law June 8, 2021, n. 79) • <i>Assegno di accompagnamento</i> • Tax incentives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct payments from the <i>Istituto Nazionale Previdenza Sociale</i> to families, which in turn generates direct PHS employment. For families with income below the minimum • Accompaniment for dependents • Payments for hiring occasional workers for family care
Spain	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal Decree-Law 16/2022 for the improvement of working conditions and Social Security of workers in service of the household • Law 39/2006 on the protection of people in a situation of dependency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equalization with the rest of workers. • Recruitment of relatives. • Recruitment of caregivers with professional qualifications • Social Security contributions by non-professional family caregivers • 20% reduction in employer fees • 45% reduction for large families
Portugal	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAD: Home Support Services (<i>Portaria</i> no. 38/2013) • ECCI: Integrated Continuing Care Teams for home support, National Network of Integrated Continuing Care, RNCCI Decree Law 101/2006 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation of public support for dependency • Both the SAD and ECCI assist employment in the care sector, but through public and private centers and NGOs • Direct employment is basically submerged in the cases of subjects not covered by the SAD and unskilled workers who cannot be hired in the ECCI system
Germany	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2010 Agenda • Minimum wage regulation (<i>Mindestlohngesetz</i>), 2014 • Fight against the informal economy (<i>Gesetz zur Bekämpfung der Schwarzarbeit und illegalen Beschäftigung</i>), 2017 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence of ‘mini-jobs’ in the expansion of the PHS – part-time jobs (€450 per month, €5,400 per year) • Minimum wage of €9.6/hour is regulated. Low contributions and payment of taxes
Belgium	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity Services Law (<i>titre- service</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service payments are contracted • Employers are not households but companies • The Sodexo company manages payments.

COUNTRY	ILO 2011*	REG. DW**	MEASURES AFFECTING EMPLOYMENT
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Payments allow a tax deduction for the household using the service • Regulation of maximum and minimum working hours as well as payment amounts
France	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CESU / <i>Chèque Emploi Service Universel</i>, 2006 • Internet portal for declarations, 2017 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PHS direct employment declaration and payment service via internet. Informal economy reduction factor • Tax subsidy for adopting CESU • Gross minimum wage of €11.5/hour, €8.95 net of Social Security
Cyprus	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Plan for Social Policy of the Republic of Cyprus, 2014-2020 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulated salary for the direct employment of workers with maintenance and lodging in the attended homes, or coverage payments • Special measures for foreigners • Improvements observed in the PHS work of women and family members
Austria	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law on Domestic Service and Domestic Employees, 1962 • Law of May 1, 2011 (one-person companies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-person companies, tax exemption up to €11,000 • Self-employed with Social Security contributions and maternity and unemployment coverage • Regulation of minimum rates

Source: Authors' elaboration based on reports of the European Commission, European Center of Expertise (ECE).

* ILO Convention of 2011 ratified

** Regulations and or changes in domestic work

As previously stated, Table 2 presents a number of European systems and their major reforms in terms of domestic work. Countries appear in proportional order of women's domestic work as a percentage of total female employment. Through its Strategic Social Policy Plan, Cyprus has managed to raise the level of regularized domestic workers, with special measures to incorporate the immigrant population and women into this type of work (Christofides, 2018).

Italy launched a system of direct aid to families; according to Ciccarone (2018), payments are issued to families who must then compensate domestic workers. In this case, the hourly wage is established at €10 and contributions are made by the employer (or the worker if self-employed). There is an annual salary limit of €5,000 associated with these contracts, or €7,500 for pensioners and unemployed students over 25 years of age. Each payment check is for €2,500 and exempt from taxes. In addition, there is a 19% tax deduction for family assistance expenses in the regular or legal system, with varying tax limits. Picchi (2016) has studied the consequences of the changes made in Italy in the context of economic crises, pointing out that high-income families have been the main beneficiaries of the tax credit system. Despite

measures to boost employment in the PHS sector, Ciccarone (2018) indicates that the irregular economy continues to account for more than half of employment in the sector.

Third in the classification in terms of the relative volume of domestic work through direct contracting is Spain (5.8%). Here the so-called “Dependence Law” includes the possibility of hiring family members for non-professional work. Reforms were established as of 2012 to legalize domestic workers and encourage affiliations to Social Security. According to González and Carrandi (2018) and Consejo Económico y Social (CES) (2021), Royal Decree-Law 6/2019 reformed the system so that the Social Security contributions of domestic workers would be borne by the State system, which has managed to increase the contracting of such services. The total equalization of the rights of domestic workers came with the ratification of Convention 189, followed by the approval in September 2022 of Royal Decree-Law 16/2022 for the improvement of working conditions and Social Security of workers in service of a household.

Next in the ranking of domestic work as a percentage of total employment is Portugal, at about one percentage-point below Spain. Here the Social Security system covers through the SAD (*Serviço de Apoio Domiciliário*) and the ECCI (*Equipas de Cuidados Contínuos Integrados de apoio domiciliário*) the possibility of services directly provided by public bodies, or in support of private for-profit and non-profit organizations. In this case, Naumann (2018) points out that the regulation seeks to professionalize services, but that the qualifications required of personnel hired through intermediaries do not favor the regularization of many informal jobs; thus, as occurs in Spain and Italy, the informal economy remains very significant in the field of care.

In this classification of countries, next is the case of France, which has implemented an interesting system to expedite the regularization of informal domestic work while at the same time incorporating a fiscal incentive. Under France’s CESU (*Chèque Emploi Service Universel*) system, direct employers register workers via a public sector website; following the provision of bank details, the Social Security apparatus pays each worker and deducts taxes and social contributions. Social Security contributions receive a 50% tax credit for online registration. The system must respect the minimum wage per hour (SMIC) and includes contributions for pensions, unemployment insurance, and professional training, among other benefits⁶. Another type of check termed ‘prepaid’ is delivered to employees (Rand & Rossow, 2020). This is similar to the system in Belgium, but in France a company manages the payments, avoiding direct employment by a household. Other companies provide home services, and these must hire workers who are paid based on the checks contracted by households.

Germany is another interesting case for analysis, given the political influence of its ‘mini-jobs’ system and especially its incidence of women older than age 55⁷. These are low-paid, part-time jobs, set in 2013 at €450 per month, or €5,400 per year. Duell and Vetter (2018) state that in the *Haushaltsnahe Dienstleistungen* system, 40% of domestic work is undertaken by family members. As in France, a portal for electronic registration (*Minijob-Zentrale*) has been in place since 2017; electronic registration is made by employers and Social Security does not mediate payments. Duell (2018) points out that the ‘mini-job’ system for domestic employees has specific rules that allow the option of not contributing to the pension system (widely used in the case of early retirement) or to health-care. Notably, the total social contribution is 18.7%

of gross salary, of which the employer covers 5% and the worker the remainder. There is also a contribution for accidents at work, maternity, and occupational diseases, but there is no contribution for unemployment. Regarding taxes, 2% of gross income is transferred. According to the data supplied by Duell (2018), one-third of the workers in this system were regularized and acquired social rights, approximately 15% were retired from other jobs, 19% were students, and 25% were widows. In total, 7.6 million worked ‘mini-jobs’ in Germany in 2016; 4.9 million counted the ‘mini-job’ as their main employment while for the rest, it was a second occupation⁸. The objective has been to combat the underground economy, leaving a low insurance cost for the employer to pay and most social costs borne by the worker, with an additional incentive for self-exclusion, given the low remuneration⁹.

During the pandemic, measures that these and other public sectors have implemented to alleviate negative effects have been limited, and no data are available to assess their effectiveness. However, some countries have taken certain economic and health measures to protect domestic workers (ILO, 2021):

- France offered financial support to households that employ domestic workers, covering up to 80% of the cost of domestic services during the pandemic.
- In Spain, where a special Social Security system for domestic work excludes unemployment benefits, steps were taken to ensure that these workers had access to unemployment insurance during the pandemic. However, given the low wages of domestic workers, this benefit has not been sufficient to keep them out of poverty (and unregistered workers have had no access to benefits).
- Italy initially excluded domestic work from emergency measures, but in May 2020, pressure from both employers’ and workers’ organizations succeeded in extending short-term income support for non-internal domestic workers with a formal employment relationship. Personal protective equipment was also made available.
- Portugal suspended visa applications and guaranteed access to health-care for migrant workers, including undocumented domestic workers.

Discussion

This article has analyzed the problems of conceptual delimitation and measurement of domestic work, affecting women especially. An industry-based approach has been applied to estimate the employment of women in this sector, as it presents valid and accessible information by way of the Eurostat LFS statistics.

The domestic work sector employs between 7 and 9 million persons throughout the EU and is sufficiently large and important to deserve specific statistical treatment. Indeed, specific statistics should be collected so that data on labor conditions in the sector can be treated separately. However, as observed in this analysis, the phenomenon can presently be approximated only by indirect means, through section T97 of the NACE and the particular group designated Q88 (Social work activities without accommodation).

Within the domestic work sector, the direct employment of women in part-time jobs predominates, and these jobs may or may not be compatible with familial obligations. The

percentage of women's employment in this sector compared to total female employment remains very relevant in the Mediterranean countries, especially Cyprus, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The sector also serves as a channel that makes possible the work regularization of immigrants and foreigners. However, despite its great relevance, domestic work is characterized by long working hours and other problems of job quality including a lack of weekend breaks or vacations and, above all, low wages.

Precisely due to such problems, regulation of domestic work must seek solutions to the irregularity of domestic work, favoring the minimum protection of working conditions and sufficient remuneration, while public systems of direct or indirect aid can facilitate equal opportunities and access by families in need of domestic services.

As regards the improvement of working conditions, needs for specific training must be addressed. Domestic workers tend to take care of children and the elderly, and in many cases this involves other activities such as housecleaning. The care-related tasks carried out by domestic workers must be professionalized, to ensure that the persons so employed are not unqualified workers who happen to care for dependents, the elderly, or children, but rather that they possess a minimum of training to deal with critical situations such as accidents. These domestic and care activities present a dual opportunity to redirect the system of qualification through formal education, whether professional or via training modules, and to reform active employment policies in order to ensure minimum qualification and consequently be able to adjust salaries to that qualification, and to determine a minimum hourly wage for the sector, as some European countries have done.

The other focus of action is how to encourage direct employment by families. The reforms so far implemented in Europe are fundamentally aimed at introducing incentives to reduce irregular employment. In our opinion, the implementation of direct aid (or payment checks) to employers is a very interesting idea and generally linked to tax subsidies, reducing the payment of social contributions and taxes. Germany's 'mini-jobs' are an alternative system that has achieved its objective of increasing employment, although at the price of precarious working conditions with a particular impact on women over age 55.

Having analyzed the diverse regulatory systems of countries that have sought to reform the labor and fiscal scope of domestic employment, we believe that the care sector in countries with a high proportion of irregular domestic work (such as Spain) would be well-advised to implement a model of checks and direct registration via the internet (as in France or Belgium), with intermediation in payments and deduction of fees by the Social Security organism. Such a measure would present clear advantages in terms of administrative access and costs for households and families. Systems would have to be in place to ensure lower service costs, and this might include deductions in income taxes or direct subsidies to households, such as the checks for employers now operating in France. In parallel, it is necessary to establish that all countries which have not done so establish and apply a minimum wage for the domestic work sector.

Notes

¹ Taken from the web at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1427&langId=en>

² The LFS collects and standardizes information from the labor force surveys of the various EU countries.

³ Although EFSI is not an EU institution, the European Commission relies on EFSI data in its analyses (EC, 2018).

⁴ According to the LFS, a job is considered temporary if employer and employee agree that its termination will be determined by objective conditions, such as a specific date, the completion of a task, or the return of another employee who has been temporarily replaced.

⁵ The distinction between full-time and part-time work according to the LFS is generally based on a spontaneous response from the respondent.

⁶ See URSSAF (2021).

⁷ See Alonso et al (2022).

⁸ Accumulation of jobs with salaries between €450 and €800 per month is also allowed, increasing the amounts of contributions and taxes but with the same relative contribution by the employer; this is called the ‘midi-job’.

⁹ Jodar and Pericas (2017, p.118) refer to an argument for comparing labor markets.

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