Study analyses situation of migrant workers

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Care work in German families is increasingly being taken over by female migrant workers. Their precarious situation is now analysed in an industrial and organisational sociology study from TU Darmstadt.

Support, care and welfare in your own home: "The obligation of care" in the family used to be taken on mainly by female relatives, but nowadays, increasing numbers of female migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe are being employed – because a care home is out of the question, or because many of us cannot or do not want to do the job ourselves. Those affected and their relatives save money by hiring staff from Romania or Poland, and in many cases, secure themselves 24-hour care, seven days a week.

Nobody knows exactly how many female migrant workers are currently working in German households. "It is estimated that a great many cases are unreported", says Karina Becker, research scientist at the Institute for Sociology at TU Darmstadt. In her study "Migrant care workers in German households between structural powerlessness and individual primary power", our expert has looked more closely at the care worker situation, carrying out a total of 27 quality interviews in nine households with carers, those dependent on care and relatives, as well as obtaining expert opinions from advice centre professionals.

"In all cases there was a distinct lack of symmetry with regard to power, to the detriment of the care workers", she reports. In the majority of cases, the hours of work are not regulated, neither are health protection and safe working necessarily guaranteed.

Lack of regulation

A lack of regulation means that the care workers had to negotiate their own working conditions. At the same time, because private households were not subjected to close, public scrutiny, standards such as being constantly available or the expectation that the job will be done for little money but "with passion" became established – and these standards were no longer being questioned. Those affected have hardly any room for negotiation, because the size of the potential workforce means that they are easily replaced.

"If they do not work and behave as the family expects them to, they will be sent back home", observes Becker. In her study, our expert identifies four types of precarious and unregulated employment: illegal workers; supposed home helps coming to Germany under the freedom of movement for workers, but actually working in the "grey area of care"; women sent by a service agency outside Germany, and the pseudo self-employed.

This last group is getting bigger, according to Becker. "But there is no legal lever with the power of negotiation to monitor the households where the self-employed are working". There are currently no "powerful" institutions to represent the interests of migrant workers either, so the sociologist recommends that those affected concentrate on developing better communication and networking.

It is her conviction that a lasting solution can only be found if the problem is made public, and migrant workers in Germany are granted a lobby. Her research should also help to achieve this: "This issue must lose its niche status."

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