



Prospective
research

Can public policies improve old care services and reduce undeclared work in the sector?

Key messages

- 1** The increased demand for home care services demands urgent reforms of the welfare system
- 2** Families adopt personalised care solutions and the polarisation between wealthy/poorer families is growing
- 3** The low reputation and poor working conditions in the care sector make jobs unattractive
- 4** The increased presence of migrant women in care jobs raises important questions about gender and ethnic/race stereotypes and discriminations
- 5** The undeclared work in the home care sector is extremely widespread

Introduction/Summary Of The Problem

There is a growing academic and political interest in Europe on the issue of the increased demand for old care. Demographic changes (e.g. declining fertility and an ageing population) affect all European countries and make it necessary to rethink the care system. Although the Belgian welfare state remains oriented towards a well-developed public provision of services, welfare policies - and in particular care policies - have followed trends that can be observed in all Western countries.

These trends require families to adopt a personalised 'care mix', which combines public, private, formal and informal solutions. Informal care services are carried out in particular by unskilled workers, often migrant women in an irregular administrative situation and without a regular contract. The employment of migrant women with or without regular contracts in the old care sector - as a cheaper and more flexible solution - has become central in some southern European countries.

Despite the significant differences between the care regimes of southern and northern European countries, the increasing presence of migrant women in this sector is now visible also in countries with a stronger welfare tradition, such as Belgium.

In Belgium, however, this phenomenon has not yet been explored in the scientific literature, nor has it been taken into account by public authorities. Not only are reliable data on this subject missing, but undeclared work in the care sector remains an essentially invisible social phenomenon.

Methods, approaches and results/body

This research focuses on home care services for dependent older people and more specifically on the issue of the undeclared employment (without a regular contract) of migrant women or women of foreign origin in the care sector. The main objective is to make visible two hidden and vulnerable populations – older people in a situation of loss of autonomy and migrant care workers without a regular contract, whose working conditions often vary according to their administrative status and origin – and the relationship between these two social groups.

The main objective of this research is to shed light on this phenomenon and to fill the scientific and policy gaps on the employment of undeclared migrant women in the older care sector in Brussels. The three specific objectives, which are mirrored into three distinct parts of the research, are:

A. to make visible dependent older people, with their different needs, as well as the solutions adopted by families to cope with the increasing demand for care for their most vulnerable members;

B. to make visible the existence of the phenomenon of undeclared work in the care sector in Brussels, as well as the life and professional situation of care workers, with a focus on migrant women;

C. to look at the relationship between older people (and their families) and care workers and to explore possible and sustainable solutions that address the phenomenon of undeclared care work.

Given the complexity and sensitive nature of the issue, as well as the difficulties associated with working with two invisible, often isolated and vulnerable populations, this research was carried out by using different methods of investigation: quantitative methods (a survey addressed to older people and their families), qualitative methods (in-depth interviews and focus groups with older people, families and migrant care workers, with different administrative and employment statuses) and visual sociology (the production of a documentary).

Conclusions

The results of this research emphasise the need for urgent solutions and reforms in the care sector. Specifically, home care services and care jobs should be improved as to benefit both beneficiaries (older people and their families) and care workers.

Concerning older people in need for care, affordable and high-quality services should be developed, and families should be offered adapted options (between residential and different types of home care), according to their needs and regardless of their socioeconomic situation.

Concerning care workers, they should benefit from improved working conditions, including competitive salaries and the possibility to have regular contracts, regardless of their family, migration and administrative status. Concrete efforts should be made by public authorities to combat prejudices and stereotypes linked to care work, especially those based on gender and the origin of workers.

Policy recommendations

1. Home care services

The home care sector has undergone significant transformations in recent years. While state-subsidised home care services for older people have developed considerably, in line with trends in other European countries, the results of this research clearly show that existing home care services – and in particular public services (services agréés) – do not cover the entire demand. This may represent an obstacle to meeting the growing demand for care, which is expected to accelerate in the coming years. In the current context, families have to adopt personalised solutions, which will depend heavily on their socioeconomic situation. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the home care sector, the increasingly visible privatisation of care services (with the emergence of private initiatives that are not subject to public regulation) have important consequences for both the beneficiaries (and their families) and care workers, and contribute to increasing undeclared work. Although the results of this research show that there are no ideal solutions and that care services should be as adapted as possible to the needs of the individual (depending on health situation, personal preferences, the presence of a family behind, etc.), the following solutions could improve the care of older people wishing to stay at home:

A. A strengthening of home care services, through an increase in the number of public accreditations (agrément) and the number of subsidised hours for public service providers, accompanied by adjustments to the regulations to which these organisations

are subject. For example, an increase in the number of hours to which older people can be entitled (up to almost complete care), should be considered. In order to limit public spending, a change in the definition of prices (barèmes) should be considered, including a significant increase in the price for beneficiaries with the highest income. Given the number of people involved in home care, better coordination between services is needed to facilitate the care of the older person by the family.

B. Regarding private companies offering home care services, a system of regulation should be considered to avoid abuses, especially with respect to the exploitation of care workers. For instance, home care workers should always have an ‘employee’ status (and not be self-employed), regardless of the employer.

C. The profession of home care (nurses, care assistants, family assistants, domestic helpers, as well as all other profiles of home care workers) should be valorised, through an improvement of working conditions, including salaries. This includes concrete measures to ‘de-gender’ the care profession and to fight against the stereotypes and the bad reputation associated with this profession. This must be done firstly at the level of vocational and professional training and must be accompanied by public awareness campaigns targeting the population. To facilitate a relatively rapid change, the improvement of working conditions for frontline care workers could be accompanied

Policy recommendations

by the adoption of a quota system (for men) both in training and in staff recruitment.

D. Improving the quality of residential care services (nursing homes) and combating stereotypes about institutionalisation, so that older people and families can make informed decisions based solely on their preferences. It is important that the possibility of staying at home, even in less-than-optimal health conditions, does not become compulsory and that the option of living in a nursing home is not experienced as a negative and disadvantageous option.

Undeclared work

The results of this research clearly show that, despite the existence in Belgium of a well-developed system of subsidised home care services, and despite the existence of several other available options (such as private companies, voluntary associations, etc.), the undeclared work in the home care sector is extremely widespread. Contrary to other European countries, in Belgium undeclared work in this sector seems to be deeply linked to (and complementary to) formal services. The intertwining of formal and undeclared care in Belgium implies that different forms of undeclared work exist and that they combine with formal, public and private services. In order to combat undeclared work in the sector, the following measures are necessary:

A. Given the incidence of undeclared work among care workers formally employed in the sector – as a way of supplementing

unattractive wages – improving working conditions and especially wages will help to reduce undeclared work.

B. Given the incidence of undeclared work for night-time home care services, the possibility of financing this type of service should be considered. This will offer the possibility, even to the less well-off families, to pay for it without having to resort to undeclared work. At present, only private companies offer night-shift coverage, at extremely high prices.

C. As in many other countries, undeclared work in this sector often coincides with the need for 24-hour care. In this case, it is often migrant women who end up living with the older person, in exchange for uncompetitive working conditions and wages, and often without a contract. In order to avoid this situation, families with such care needs should have the legal possibility of directly employing staff with a regular employment contract.

D. Opening access to training for home care jobs (nurses, care assistants, family assistants, domestic helpers, etc.) to migrants, regardless of their administrative status. This implies: i) simplifying the system of equivalence of diplomas obtained abroad, including outside Europe, so as to facilitate employment for highly qualified personnel, such as nurses, physiotherapists, etc.; ii) recognising the labour shortage in the home care sector in Belgium and recognising work in this sector as a reason for administrative regularisation for migrants.

List of publications

Giordano C. (forthcoming - 2023).

“As I always say, you really need to tame them!”: the definition of working conditions of live-in senior carers by home care providers in Belgium. In Lutz H. & Palenga-Möllenbeck E. (eds.), Home care for sale. The transnational brokering of senior care in Europe. Palgrave: London.

Giordano C. (2022).

Home care service providers in Brussels: time adjustments during COVID-19 and the consequences for frontline home care workers. In International Journal of Care and Caring.

Giordano C. (2021).

Home care services for the elderly in Belgium: is professionalisation decreasing gender and ethnic segregation and discrimination in the sector? In Comas d’Argemir and Bofill (eds.), El cuidado de mayores y dependientes. Avanzando hacia la igualdad de género y la justicia social. Barcelona: Icaria Editorial.

Giordano C. (2021).

The ‘care mix’ adopted by Belgian families and the growing presence of migrant workers in old age care in Belgium. In Horn V. et al. (eds.), The Global Old Age Care Industry - Tapping into migrants for tackling the old age care crisis. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Giordano C. (2021).

Freedom or money? The dilemma of migrant live-in elderly carers in times of COVID-19. In Gender, Work & Organization, 28(S1), 137-150.

Giordano C. (2020).

The professionalisation of domiciliary care for the elderly: a comparison between public and private care service providers in Belgium. In International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy.

Giordano, C. (2019).

L’aide à domicile à Bruxelles : être femme et migrante dans un métier peu valorisé. In GRESEA Echos, Brussels.

The author & project

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