

JAN BAZYLI KLAKLA, AGNIESZKA KULESA  
*Center for Social and Economic Research, Warsaw*

BEYOND VULNERABILITY:  
RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT  
OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN POLAND\*

RESEARCH PROBLEM

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO C189 — Domestic Workers Convention, 2011), domestic workers are individuals who perform work in or for private households. This includes tasks such as cleaning, cooking, laundry, childcare, eldercare, gardening, house guarding, driving and pet care. They may work full-time or part-time, live-in or live-out, and may be employed directly by households or through service providers. In this article we assume that migrant domestic workers are those who work in a country of which they are not citizens.

Migrant domestic work is influenced by gender, legal status, and the nature of the work. It is often seen as “women’s work,” undervalued and carried out in the employer’s home, creating a highly personalised and emotional employer-employee relationship (Kindler 2011; Lutz 2016). Migrant domestic workers face unique challenges due to their

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Correspondence addresses: bazyli.klakla@case-research.eu, ORCID: 0000-0003-1141-4527; agnieszka.kulesa@case-research.eu, ORCID: 0000-0003-2895-102X

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migrant status, which affects their exposure to and responses to risk (Kindler 2011).

The situation of migrant domestic workers in Poland, especially after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, reflects these complexities. The pre-February 2022 group of Ukrainian migrants — who make up the majority of migrant domestic workers in Poland — was gender balanced, with a slight predominance of men (Górny 2019). Data from the PESEL register highlights the unique composition of the post-February 2022 influx from Ukraine compared to previous waves of migration from that country. The figures show that children make up around 45% of those registered. Among those of working age, women make up a significant proportion, accounting for around 43% of the total (Kaczmarczyk 2022). Many Ukrainians who have fled to Poland remain outside the formal labour market or work without proper documentation, often due to limited knowledge of legal procedures and vulnerability to exploitation by employers (Domagała-Szymonek 2022). While integration into the labour market has been relatively rapid for Ukrainian refugees<sup>1</sup>, many have taken up low-skilled jobs that do not match their qualifications or previous work experience, resulting in significant skills mismatches. These mismatches often involve highly educated individuals working in roles such as cleaning or caregiving, which under-utilise their expertise and limit career development opportunities (Dumont, Liebig, Winter 2023).

The number of domestic workers in Polish households is difficult to estimate. This is mainly because a significant proportion of domestic work in Poland takes place in the informal sector. Many domestic workers are employed without formal contracts and are therefore not registered in government labour databases. This practice is particularly common for part-time help such as cleaning, babysitting or caring for the elderly. Kamil Matuszczyk (University of Warsaw, expert interviewed as part of the research) estimates the number of migrants working in the domestic sector in Poland at up to 100,000.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “refugee” [*uchodźca*] in its strict legal sense, but rather as a descriptive and widely accepted category within public discourse. In 2022, following the outbreak of the full-scale war, Polish public narratives predominantly adopted the term “Ukrainian refugees” to describe individuals fleeing the conflict. This reflects a broader societal understanding of their situation as one of forced displacement, even though, under international law, most Ukrainians in Poland were not granted refugee status. Our choice of terminology aligns with this prevalent discursive usage, while acknowledging the debates around its legal accuracy.

This paper presents the results of a research that aimed at identifying the needs, risks and opportunities for the empowerment of refugee and migrant domestic workers in Poland. To achieve this, three interrelated research objectives were identified:

- to understand the needs and risks specific to the sphere of domestic work and the risk specific to migrant and refugee domestic workers;
- to understand barriers to protection for migrant and refugee domestic workers and strategies to enhance protection;
- to identify strategies to empower and increase the resilience of migrant and refugee domestic workers.

In our research, we used the theoretical framework based on the analytical model presented by Helma Lutz and Ewa Palenga-Möllnbeck (2011), which focuses on the transnational migration of domestic work and elderly care. This model integrates approaches from three fields: migration studies (with a particular emphasis on the transnational approach), social policy analysis and gender studies. Following Lutz and Palenga-Möllnbeck (2011), we apply this structure to three analytical levels of analysis: the macro level (social institutions such as labour markets, welfare and migration policies), the meso level (social networks and organisations) and the micro level (individuals). The primary objective of our analysis is to determine how the phenomenon of vulnerability to discrimination and exploitation manifests itself among migrant domestic workers in Poland and to formulate appropriate recommendations, particularly at the macro level. The results section is therefore structured accordingly.

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), emphasises how different dimensions of identity — such as gender, migrant status, class and ethnicity — interact to create unique forms of vulnerability and discrimination. While this research took into account the intersectional perspective, particularly in recognising the overlapping effects of gender and migrant status, it did not focus on this framework. Nevertheless — as previous studies (e.g. Andrejuk 2018) have demonstrated the value of drawing on the concept of intersectionality — the research recognised that the challenges faced by domestic workers are shaped by multiple, intersecting factors.

#### STATE OF THE ART

The literature on migrant and refugee domestic workers in Poland is limited, with only a few dedicated works. Ukrainians, the largest

migrant group in the Polish domestic sector and the largest migrant group in Poland in general, are often categorised as economic migrants, matrimonial migrants or refugees. In the last two decades, they have mostly been mentioned in broader labour market studies (Kloc-Nowak 2007; Samoraj-Charitonow 2011; Klaus 2012; Wysieńska-Di Carlo, Klaus 2018).

Only a few recent studies focus directly on this topic (Kordasiewicz 2010, 2016; Kindler 2011; Sobiesiak-Penszko 2015). These works portray Ukrainian domestic workers as women who clean, often irregularly employed, and find work through referrals, meaning that they receive job opportunities based on recommendations or introductions from someone within their network, such as friends, family, former colleagues or acquaintances. They face condescension and asymmetrical relationships with employers and are vulnerable to abuse due to the unregulated nature of their work (Kordasiewicz 2010, 2016). Reportage<sup>2</sup> and non-fiction accounts (eg. Sobień-Górska 2020) highlight issues such as the “ring test” for trustworthiness — a practice used by employers to assess the reliability, honesty or discretion of workers, in which valuables are left in plain sight — and the complex dynamics between Polish employers and Ukrainian workers. On the other hand, informal and part-time work is sometimes seen as beneficial by workers, allowing for flexible working hours and childcare (Cope, Keryk, Kyliushyk 2021).

Before the escalation of the full-scale war the attitudes of Poles towards Ukrainians were often shaped by socio-economic tensions and stereotypes. These sometimes led to negative perceptions (Bilecka-Prus 2020). Pre-2022 studies highlight how these attitudes were influenced by the increasing visibility of Ukrainian migrants in the low-wage labour market and the generally temporary, precarious situation<sup>3</sup> of Ukrainian migrants in Poland (Józwiak, Piechowska 2017; Józwiak 2020). Many Ukrainians faced exploitation, including working in low-paid jobs or experiencing problems with unpaid wages, as their precarious status and reliance on informal employment made them vulnerable to abuse (Brzozowska 2019; Kindler et al. 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Mikulska, *Ukraińska sprzątaczką: Po kilku latach mówili, że jestem jak rodzina. Ale postojowe zapłaciły mi cztery osoby z dziesięciu*, Wyborcza.pl “Duży Format”, 9 October 2020; Marcin Terlik, Anna Mikulska, *Niewidoczne. Opiekunki z Ukrainy zakładają związek zawodowy: “Musimy o siebie zawalczyć”*, OKO.press, 28 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The terms “precarity” and “precarization” are employed to denote a condition characterized by job insecurity, temporary employment, a lack of life stability, and constrained opportunities for career advancement (Józwiak 2020).

Outside of the domestic work sector, these dynamics have been explored in broader analyses of Ukrainian migration to Poland, which highlight the structural and systemic challenges faced by migrants. For example, Górny, Kindler and Pachocka (2023) examine the needs of forced migrants from Ukraine, highlighting the mismatch between migrants' skills and the limited opportunities available in the Polish labour market, a situation that often leads to deskilling (cf. Burliai et al. 2023). Similarly, Kubiciel-Lodzińska et al. (2024) explore the challenges of labour market integration, contrasting the experiences of pre-war and forced migrants. These works point to a broader pattern of economic dependency, precarious employment, and social vulnerability experienced by Ukrainian migrants in different sectors, highlighting the need for targeted policy interventions to improve their working conditions and social inclusion.

The arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Poland following the outbreak of the full-scale war in February 2022 was initially met with an unprecedented wave of solidarity and public support (cf. Rice-Oaxley 2022; Fomina, Pachocka 2024; Łuczaj et al. 2024). Opinion polls conducted by Staniszewski (2024) consistently showed high levels of acceptance of Ukrainian refugees in the early months of the war, with a majority of Poles favouring both temporary and permanent settlement. Specifically, in spring 2022, 64% of respondents supported allowing Ukrainian refugees to stay until it was safe for them to return home, and 30% favoured permanent settlement. By spring 2024, however, these figures had fallen to 61% and 17% respectively, reflecting a significant shift in public sentiment.

This evolving attitude has been explored in other studies. For example, Łuczaj et al. (2024) discuss the hidden emotional and social costs borne by hosts of Ukrainian refugees, which may contribute to shifts in public opinion over time. Similarly, Kindler (2024) highlights the challenges of sustaining long-term inclusion agendas in the face of social and economic pressures on host communities. These studies underline how the initial outpouring of solidarity has gradually given way to a more complex dynamic influenced by economic pressures, prolonged displacement and evolving perceptions of refugee integration into Polish society.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on desk research and fieldwork conducted between June and September 2023. The research involved primary data collection, complemented by secondary data analysis. The study

focused on Warsaw, Krakow, and Wroclaw, cities with significant migrant and refugee populations since 24 February 2022 (Wojdat, Cywiński 2022). Four main categories of actors relevant in shaping the field of domestic work were identified: (1) migrant and refugee domestic workers, (2) employers, (3) public authorities, and (4) NGOs and academia.

Migrant and refugee domestic workers were given a questionnaire in Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and English, available both on paper and online. It was distributed through NGOs and social media, and 137 Ukrainian respondents completed it. For deeper insights, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted with domestic workers in Polish, Russian or Ukrainian. We interviewed: 6 women in Wroclaw, 3 women in Warsaw, and 3 women and 1 man in Krakow. The gender structure of the interviewees reflects the higher number of women in the domestic sector. The age ranged from 27 to over 40. Eight interviewees arrived in Poland after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022; the others had been in Poland for 4 to 9 years. Domestic workers were either live-in workers, often caring for the elderly, or live-out workers doing cleaning or gardening. Live-in workers had board and lodging but no fixed working hours and often worked beyond the limits set by the Labor Code.

Employers of migrant domestic workers, including individuals and employment agencies, participated in 10 in-depth interviews selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The group of employers included 8 individuals and 2 representatives of legal entities: an employment agency and a small entrepreneur. Of the individual employers, 7 hired workers informally, and one used a formal employment contract. Most employed Ukrainian women, with the exception of one employer who employed a Filipino worker. The employment agency employed several hundred migrants from different countries, often under mandate contracts.

NGO and academic representatives were also invited for interviews. Despite general reluctance due to unfamiliarity with the topic or workload, 10 interviews were conducted with representatives of Amnesty International, Fundacja Dobry Start, Fundacja Ocalenie, the International Organization for Migration (IOM Poland), and The Domestic Workers Committee within the Inicjatywa Pracownicza Trade Union. Eminent academics who participated in the study were Witold Klaus (Institute of Legal Sciences, Polish Academy of Sciences), Marta Kindler (Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw), Kamil Matuszczyk (Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw), Monika Szulecka (Institute of Legal Sciences, Polish Academy of Science), and Anna Rosińska (European

Commission Joint Research Centre, Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography).

Local, regional and national authorities were contacted to obtain their views on the legal and institutional framework for migrant domestic work in Poland. However, they were generally reluctant to participate and those who did claimed that migrant domestic work was outside their remit. Nevertheless, 10 representatives were interviewed due to their indirect involvement with the issue. These were the representatives of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, the State Labor Inspection, the Warsaw Labour Office, the Warsaw City Hall, the Warsaw Family Support Centre (a former employee), the Krakow City Hall, the Krakow Grodzki Labour Office, the Wroclaw District Labour Inspectorate and the Lower Silesian Regional Labour Office.

In terms of secondary data, a systematic analysis of literature (both research papers and grey literature) and legislation was carried out. It was carried out according to the established method of systematic reviews in the social sciences (cf. Petticrew, Roberts 2006).

The primary qualitative data collected (from the interviews) was analysed using the method of thematic analysis (Merton 1975; Aronson 1995; Boyatzis 1998; Attride-Stirling 2001; Braun, Clarke 2006; Joffe 2011), a method of qualitative data analysis that involves screening a dataset to identify, analyse and present recurring patterns (Braun, Clarke 2006).

The literature review and analysis of existing legal frameworks, conducted prior to the empirical data collection phase, already highlighted significant differences between pre-2022 and post-2022 migrants. The substantial differences regarding the necessity of legalizing residence and employment in Poland justified a deeper exploration of the distinctions between these groups. As a result, the development of research tools, data collection, and subsequent analysis were all carried out with this context in mind. At the same time, we remained open to other emerging analytical categories identified in the data.

The ethical dimension of the research lied in its focus on a vulnerable population: migrant and refugee domestic workers. Ethical concerns primarily related to informed consent, confidentiality, and the potential emotional or legal risks to participants of disclosing sensitive information about their work or immigration status. These issues were addressed by ensuring voluntary participation, providing multilingual questionnaires and conducting interviews in participants' native languages. Anonymity was maintained throughout data handling and reporting, and particular

care was taken to avoid re-traumatisation or undue influence. The researchers also acknowledged existing power imbalances and aimed to empower participants by centering their voices and experiences in the research process.

## RESULTS

At the macro level, as outlined by Lutz and Palenga-Möllenberg (2011), our analysis focuses on social institutions such as labour markets, welfare systems, and migration policies. Specifically, we examine the employment pathways of migrants in the domestic sector in Poland, the specific roles played by migrant domestic workers, the challenges they face in their employment, and the complexities of navigating both informal employment and legal barriers.

### Macro level

Employment pathways for migrants in Poland's domestic sector. The employment of foreign domestic workers in Poland is governed by a mix of formal and informal arrangements, reflecting the diverse legal and practical realities of the sector. Formal employment is governed either by the Labour Code [*umowa o pracę*], which provides comprehensive protections such as health insurance, social security and paid leave, or by the Civil Code [*umowa zlecenia* or *umowa o dzieło*], which offers greater flexibility but fewer benefits. However, a substantial share of domestic work occurs informally, on the basis of verbal agreements or unregistered arrangements, leaving workers without legal protection or access to benefits, and employers free from tax and administrative obligations. Unlike other sectors, domestic workers rarely register as self-employed service providers, as the nature of their work is often tied to individual households and involves significant administrative hurdles. This combination of modalities highlights a sector where personal trust often replaces formalised contracts, contributing to precarious conditions for many workers.

The legal situation of migrants working in the domestic sector in Poland varies. As described below, some have unrestricted access to the labour market, while others require a work permit; Ukrainian refugees benefit from special legal provisions.

The Polish legal framework for foreign workers includes the Act of 12 December 2013 on Foreigners and the Act of 20 April 2004 on

Employment Promotion. In principle, a residence permit and a work permit are required for legal employment. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Some categories of foreigners, such as holders of the Pole's Card [*Karta Polaka*] or recognised refugees, are exempt from the work permit requirement.

A special work permit, the “declaration on entrusting work to a foreigner,” introduced in the late 2000s, simplified employment for citizens of Russia (until 2022), Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It allowed for a faster employment of citizens of these countries for 6 months within a 12-month period. This mechanism contributed significantly to the arrival of Ukrainian economic migrants, particularly after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the war in Donbas. However, it is important to note that this migration was not only driven by the direct impact of the conflict, but also by its wider economic consequences, including rising unemployment, currency devaluation and declining living standards in Ukraine (cf. Józwiak, Piechowska 2017).

The permit was reformed in 2018 and then in 2022, and since then it has facilitated the employment of migrants originating from the above countries for up to 24 months in non-seasonal sectors (these are: agriculture, horticulture, and tourism). In 2021 Ukrainians received 82.5% of such permits (1,635,104 out of 1,979,886 registered), falling to 58,82% in 2022 (610,824 out of 1,038,316 registered) and 34,63% in 2023 (175,433 out of 506,554 registered).

The decrease in the number of registered declarations in 2022 and 2023 was related to the introduction of a new type of work permit, specifically for Ukrainian citizens who left the country during the full-scale war — an employer's notification. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland granted temporary protection to forced migrants from that country, allowing them to stay and work without the need for a work permit<sup>4</sup>. These individuals must obtain a UKR PESEL number and employers must notify the Labour Office of their employment (online, using the [praca.gov.pl](http://praca.gov.pl) system); the employers had 7 days to do so until 1 July 2024, and 14 days thereafter. From the introduction of the employer notifications on 15 March 2022 until 31 December 2023, 1,866,000 notifications were registered (the total number of notifications, which can sometimes refer to the same person).

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing this article in September 2024, according to the law, the stay of Ukrainian citizens who have received a UKR PESEL number will be legal until 30 September 2025.

The role of migrant domestic workers and the challenges of employment. Available sources (Fihel, Okólski 2018; Sadowska, Polkowska 2024), as well as expert interviews conducted for this paper, highlight a significant shortage of workers in both the domestic and care sectors. As Poland's population ages, the demand for care services is steadily increasing, exacerbating the existing labour gap. This gap is currently being filled primarily by migrant workers, originating from Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, as well as more distant Asian countries. One of the main reasons for this labour shortage is the poor working conditions and low wages prevailing in the domestic and care sector, which, combined with the demanding nature of the work, discourage domestic workers.

*You know, a Pole will not go [to work]... because so what if they earn 4,000 [zlotys, per month] when they are available the whole time. [A representative of an employment agency]*

According to our research, informal employment dominates the domestic work sector due to extensive bureaucracy, inappropriate solutions and widespread temporary work. Difficult employment procedures, lack of knowledge of regulations and complex legal frameworks create legal uncertainty for both employers and workers. Existing legislation does not address the specific needs of the domestic work sector and treats individual employers similarly to large companies in terms of tax burden. The temporary nature of domestic work and migrants' stays further reinforces informality.

Legalisation of residence and work was a challenge for those arriving before 2022, involving complex procedures and frequent returns to the country of origin, sometimes resulting in loss of employment in Poland. As discussed above and with our interviewees, post-February 2022 arrivals were granted a special status that affected their residence and documentation processes and facilitated their access to the domestic work sector.

*It was very simple. We arrived in March, and in April we were already working. [37-year-old woman, a house cleaner, in Poland for 1,5 years]*

While the granting of temporary protection status to Ukrainians fleeing the war was a humanitarian imperative, it has also created new challenges. The automatic granting of work permits has inadvertently led to an increase in undeclared work, particularly in sectors such as domestic work. By decoupling the right to work from the need for a formal

employment contract, the policy has reduced the pressure on employers to provide legal employment, and on workers to seek it.

Navigating informal employment and legal barriers. All of the employers interviewed for our research employed legally resident migrants. Notably, only one household employed a worker on a formal contract, a national of the Philippines. This illustrates the stark difference in the legal status of migrant domestic workers from Ukraine and other countries noted above (as the former group, benefiting from the temporary protection regime, enjoyed legal residence without the need for formal employment). Undeclared work was common and workers were not entitled to paid holidays or sick leave. The Filipina's employer noted the shock of the officials when a formal contract was about to be signed, underlining the norm of informal employment in the sector.

*[...] at the Social Insurance Institution they were shocked that an individual person wanted to sign a permanent contract with a migrant worker. [A woman employing a domestic worker to look after her children]*

Employers often expressed the belief that migrant workers, especially those in unregistered employment, lacked any significant rights. This perception was often linked to the lack of formal employment contracts and the belief that labour rights were the only relevant legal framework (employers interviewed overlooked other legal frameworks such as human rights). As a result, both parties relied heavily on informal relationships of trust to regulate the employment relationship. The limited reach of the State Labour Inspection into private households further exacerbated the vulnerability of these workers, leaving them without adequate institutional protection.

*[they] are not informed of any rights because they have no rights. If I were just "a wheeler-dealer," I could tell her to clean up everything with a toothbrush and then not pay her. There are no rights, none! [A woman who employs a domestic worker for home cleaning]*

From the perspective of employers the main obstacles to improving labour rights in the domestic work sector include the complexity of the procedures for legalising migrant work and the administrative burdens involved. The high cost of formal recruitment was also identified as a significant deterrent. Employers suggested that simplifying these procedures and improving the efficiency of public administration could facilitate greater compliance with labour laws. A helpdesk for legal employment queries and increased awareness of existing resources such as the "Green Line" were also recommended.

*If the state creates a framework that is attractive to both the worker and the employer, then I would be very happy to use it. [A woman who employs a domestic worker to clean her house]*

Local initiatives, such as the Warsaw Labour Office's Polish language training and information packages for Ukrainian workers, aim to improve some support in this regard. The Grodzki Labour Office in Krakow offers hotlines and webinars, while the State Labour Inspection provides legal advice and counselling services.

The lack of accurate and complete data on domestic work, particularly due to the prevalence of informal employment, is a significant challenge that hinders the development of targeted policies and interventions. Authorities interviewed for this study expressed concern about the gaps in their knowledge of the sector. Despite these data limitations, they acknowledged the various risks faced by domestic workers, such as exploitation, poor working conditions, and limited access to legal protection.

The State Labour Inspection and the Border Guard share responsibilities in relation to the employment of foreigners in Poland, but their roles differ significantly. The State Labour Inspection monitors compliance with labour legislation, including employers' obligations and working conditions, while the Border Guard focuses on monitoring the legality of foreigners' stay and their right to work. However, the Border Guard does not intervene in employer–employee relations, such as the type of contracts used or the lack thereof, which is the responsibility of the State Labour Inspection.

In the domestic work sector labour law enforcement remains a challenge due to the informal nature of employment and the limited access of inspectors to private homes. Despite legal obligations for employers to comply with contractual standards, the lack of regular inspections and the difficulty of monitoring private homes often results in non-compliance, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation.

A notable exception to the prevalence of informal employment is the “activation contract,” a special agreement available to employers of full-time nannies. This contract provides for social and health insurance coverage, with the state contributing to the cost. The “activation contract” represents a limited but significant step towards formalising domestic work and providing greater protection for workers.

### Meso level

The meso level, as conceptualised by Lutz and Palenga-Möllenberg (2011), allows us to examine the role of social networks and organisations.

In what follows, we present the results of our research on the support networks available to migrant domestic workers in Poland. We pay particular attention to the role of both informal networks created by family and friends, and more formal support provided by non-governmental organisations.

Social networks, especially those of family and friends, are crucial in facilitating migrants' initial settlement and providing emotional and logistical support. Almost all respondents reported receiving support from family or friends upon arrival in Poland. Those who arrived before February 2022 were often already encouraged to come by their parents, spouses or friends living in Poland, and those who arrived after February 2022 also joined the existing social networks. This reliance on migrants' social networks is consistent with findings from the broader migration literature, which highlights the importance of kinship and ethnic networks in migration decision-making and settlement processes (Kindler et al. 2016; Kindler, Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019; Józwiak 2020).

*It was very difficult, if not for my family, I wouldn't have made it on my own* [a man from Ukraine, 71 years old, living in Poland for 8 years, working in gardening]

*I'd rather not ask Polish citizens as they have different rights. I prefer to ask other migrant women.* [a woman from Ukraine, 39 years old, living in Poland for 1.5 years, cleaning houses]

These statements reveal the dual nature of social networks among migrants, acting both as vital support systems and reinforcing social exclusion. The first quote underlines the indispensability of family networks in facilitating resilience during migration, particularly for older people facing systemic and personal challenges. However, reliance on family can limit broader integration and hinder opportunities to build connections with the host society. The second quote highlights a worrying dynamic: mistrust or perceived inaccessibility of Polish citizens due to differences in rights and experiences. While migrant-to-migrant networks provide solidarity and practical advice, they can also inadvertently perpetuate segregation and limit access to resources or opportunities available through broader societal connections.

Furthermore, reliance on informal networks affects migrants' access to information, as they often lack reliable information about their legal rights or mechanisms to address exploitation. This makes them reluctant to report issues such as discrimination or abusive working conditions. For example, many migrants interviewed did not know how to report

discrimination or seek help from NGOs. Fear of contacting the police, coupled with undocumented employment, further discouraged reporting. In addition, post-February 2022 arrivals were grateful to Poles for their assistance and were reluctant to report problems for fear of being perceived as ungrateful (cf. Klakla et al. 2023).

*To be honest, I'm not sure [where to go for help]. I don't know any organisations that can help me and I don't know my rights. [woman from Ukraine, 40 years old, living in Poland for 4 years, house cleaner]*

Taken together, these experiences confirm findings from other studies (cf. Kindler, Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019; Keryk 2021) and point to a structural gap in integration policies, suggesting that while informal networks are crucial, they cannot replace formal mechanisms aimed at promoting migrants' inclusion and equality within host societies.

Interviewees — both representatives of public authorities and members of NGOs and academia — identified information dissemination and the role of NGOs and academia as critical factors in supporting migrant workers. Information provided by public authorities is often passive, complex, and in formal language, making it inaccessible to migrants. NGOs play a crucial role in disseminating information, especially through face-to-face interactions and social media. Migrants' social networks are also important sources of information. However, cooperation between public authorities and NGOs is often insufficient, and there is a need for better information sharing and cooperation. The low level of knowledge of the migration system among local officials and NGOs further complicates the support of migrant workers, including those working in the domestic sector.

Local authorities play a crucial role in supporting migrants but face challenges such as the low visibility of domestic workers, the lack of a legal basis for support, and limited resources. Successful initiatives include the provision of official forms in Ukrainian and the development of specific documents promoting diversity and multiculturalism, such as the Diversity Charter, although these documents often do not specifically address the needs of domestic workers. In addition, both local authorities and NGOs often lack the resources to focus specifically on domestic workers.

Migrant domestic work is also a relatively under-researched topic in Polish academia, resulting in limited expertise in the field. NGOs, which have grown rapidly since 24 February 2022, focus primarily on urgent needs and intervention activities, leaving little time for non-intervention

activities such as research and advocacy. In addition, the geographical concentration of NGO services in urban areas marginalises rural migrant workers, who face even greater barriers to accessing support.

### Individual level

The final, individual level of analysis, following Lutz and Palenga-Möllenneck (2011), focuses on the unique experiences of migrants. This level allows us to explore the specific vulnerabilities and risks faced by migrant domestic workers, complementing our analysis at the macro and meso levels.

Employment conditions for migrant domestic workers varied according to the time of their arrival. Those who arrived after 24 February 2022 generally experienced better conditions, with employers being more open and supportive, while those who arrived before this date often faced stricter conditions, mistrust, and employer control. Nevertheless, both groups valued the immediate payment and flexibility of cleaning work, which was particularly important for those arriving with children and limited resources. Employers typically paid between PLN 20 and PLN 35 per hour, with rates set by employers and accepted by migrants. The minimum hourly wage in Poland at the time of the research was PLN 22.80.

Employers described harmonious relationships with workers, often referring to “cordial” or “friendly” interactions. However, they raised issues such as communication barriers and occasional dissatisfaction with the quality of work. Moreover, the high mobility of migrant workers created uncertainty about their continued availability.

Importantly, it was recognised that unregistered employment posed significant risks to both parties — employers and domestic workers. Employers faced risks and challenges, including the need to trust strangers entering their homes. Building trust and finding workers through referrals were key strategies. Written communication, such as WhatsApp, was mentioned as a way to reduce language barriers.

*Hiring a nanny is a big risk. She doesn't clean once a week, but a stranger is with us 8 hours a day and takes care of the children. [A woman employing a domestic worker to look after her children]*

As information on legislation and procedures was scarce and difficult to understand, the domestic workers interviewed relied on informal networks rather than official agencies for support.

*When I first applied for a residence card, I watched a lot of YouTube videos and learned how to fill in the application. I looked for information everywhere, but I found the least information on public administration websites, because it was in Polish and in a very complicated language, and I didn't understand it at all. [48-year-old woman, a house cleaner, in Poland for 4 years]*

In contrast to the above testimony, those who arrived after February 2022 were given a special status and UKR PESEL numbers, which facilitated legal stay and work without additional permits. They could therefore choose to work legally or informally, while still benefiting from health insurance and social services.

Most migrant domestic workers were unaware of their rights and relied mainly on informal sources of information. Like employers, they were often unaware of the rights derived from sources other than formal contracts, with many knowing only that they should be paid for their work. Workers rarely reported mistreatment or abuse, preferring to confide in family and friends and avoiding the authorities for fear of repercussions and job security. This lack of reporting and knowledge left them vulnerable to exploitation.

*Once I had a situation where a lady didn't agree with my rate, and I told her to give as much as she thought. I was there once and I didn't go back and it never happened again. [28-year-old woman, a house cleaner, in Poland for 10 years]*

The future plans of the domestic workers interviewed varied considerably. Some planned to stay in Poland for the sake of their children or because they wanted to start a cleaning business. Others were waiting for the end of the war to return to Ukraine.

*My child likes it here and I like it where my child feels comfortable. [37-year-old woman, a house cleaner, in Poland for 1,5 years]*

The insecurity of their stay in Poland affected their mental well-being, as they did not feel at home and were reluctant to look for new job opportunities or voice their concerns. This insecurity made them vulnerable to exploitation as they believed their stay in Poland was temporary and were less likely to report abuse.

#### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of our research suggest that migrant domestic workers face intersecting risks due to their work, migrant status and gender. The private nature of the work environment creates an imbalance in the employer-employee relationship, amplifying risks and reducing control. Class and

gender issues also play an important role. Migrants and refugees come from diverse backgrounds with different expectations and aspirations, making the domestic sector a temporary job for many. Employers are often middle class and see domestic help as a significant expense. The majority of domestic workers are women, adding a gendered dimension to the power dynamics, leading to potential harassment or abuse.

In our research, we reconstructed four perspectives — those of domestic workers, employers, authorities, and NGOs and academics — which we present together in this article at three distinct levels of analysis: macro, meso and individual. It is important to note, however, that while these perspectives are different, there are many similarities. Firstly, none of the groups interviewed feels responsible for the current situation in the sector. Secondly, each group accepts the existing situation to some extent and has learned to function within it. The inability to exercise workers' rights is seen as something natural — by workers as an inevitable risk of working in the sector, by employers as a consequence of domestic work being considered non-work, and by authorities as a result of domestic work remaining in the informal economy — and efforts are being directed towards coping with this situation rather than trying to change it.

The invisibility of the sector, and therefore of the people who work in it, benefits employers because it reduces the tax burden of hiring, benefits the authorities because it does not oblige them to take specific action, and benefits the workers, who often treat work in the sector as a temporary or occasional source of income.

Each group of actors blames the other for the flow of information, which, according to our research, is highly distorted. The authorities are convinced that they are sufficiently fulfilling this duty (which is, after all, often a legal obligation) and that employers and workers simply lack awareness. Employers believe that the rules are too complicated and abstract to even seek information about them, expecting the authorities to simplify them. Employees, on the other hand, are focused on their work and keep their search for information to a minimum, while at the same time not trusting official communication channels.

Our research was designed with a view to its practical application in policy recommendations (for the full report see: Klakla et al. 2023). Consequently, respondents' statements focus primarily on the macro level of analysis, with relatively less attention paid to the meso and individual levels. However, it is important to note that these are not separate entities, but rather analytically distinct dimensions of the complex phenomenon of migrant domestic and care work (cf. Lutz, Palenga-Möllenberg 2011). This

becomes clear when we examine the relationship between these levels. Problems identified at the macro level of public policies, both those related to migration regimes and those related to the labour market, necessitate migrant women's reliance on informal support networks described at the meso level. These networks, in turn, draw their strength from the individual experiences of each worker, which we address in the analysis of the individual level.

The results of our research confirm the main findings of previous studies on migrant domestic workers in Poland (cf. Kordasiewicz 2010, 2016; Kindler 2011; Sobiesiak-Penszko 2015). The sector is still dominated by informal employment, with jobs being found through complex personal referral networks. Relationships between domestic workers and their employers are based on an asymmetrical, ambivalent connection, often involving patronising or instrumental treatment of migrant workers. More sensational reports found in journalistic publications (cf. Sobień-Górska 2020) were confirmed only to a limited extent, which may be due to both the nature of these publications and the sample selection in our research.

This could lead to the thesis that the risks and challenges faced by domestic workers — both in general and specifically migrant domestic workers — are not temporary issues related to the recent surge in migration caused by Russian aggression in Ukraine, nor are they outdated problems that have been resolved through modernisation or social progress. Rather, they represent persistent, systemic problems that are deeply rooted in the nature of domestic work and its intersection with broader social, economic and legal frameworks. These challenges stem from the informality of the sector, the private and often unregulated nature of domestic work and the undervaluing of this type of work. Domestic work typically takes place in private households, making it less visible and more difficult to regulate than other sectors. For migrant workers, these problems are compounded by precarious legal status, language barriers and limited access to resources or support networks. The vulnerability and lack of rights protection for domestic workers are thus enduring features of the sector, not simply a by-product of recent migration trends or resolved by modern legal and social changes.

Moreover, migrant workers in Poland, particularly those employed in domestic work, often find themselves trapped in roles far well below their qualifications, leading to deskilling and limited job mobility. Many highly educated migrants, including those who arrived after February 2022, take up domestic work out of necessity, as it provides immediate income and does not require formal recognition of qualifications or advanced language

skills. However, this mismatch between their skills and employment leads to career stagnation and makes it difficult to move to other sectors, especially given restrictive work permit systems and the informal nature of much domestic work. Addressing this issue requires policies that facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications, create pathways for skills development and promote sectoral mobility, allowing migrant domestic workers to move into roles that better match their education and experience, while improving their economic and social integration in Poland.

In order to support migrants in domestic work, representatives of the authorities point to the importance of simplifying legal procedures, ensuring fair wages, raising awareness of available services, and improving institutional cooperation. A national integration policy that recognises migrants in the domestic sector is needed to provide consistent support. Additionally, maintaining a database of legally authorised domestic workers, publishing information on the rights and responsibilities of both employers and workers, developing simple model contracts, and involving the Consumer Ombudsman in disputes can help to streamline the system.

*The change must be far-reaching, otherwise it is like putting a band-aid on an open wound.* [Witold Klaus, Institute of Legal Sciences, Polish Academy of Sciences]

Empowerment activities aimed at equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to improve their working conditions, assert their rights, and enhance their overall well-being, should draw inspiration from other sectors and countries. Legal solutions tailored to the domestic work sector, such as those in Austria and Belgium (the service voucher system), can be adapted to Polish conditions. Comprehensive measures are needed, addressing both legal reforms and social beliefs, in order to recognise domestic work as legitimate work that deserves rights.

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### *Abstract*

The paper examines the situation of migrant domestic workers in Poland, focusing on their needs, the risks they face, and the opportunities to enhance their resilience and empowerment. The research is based on the analytical model developed by Helma Lutz and Ewa Palenga-Möllnbeck, which addresses the macro (labor market, migration policies), meso (social networks), and micro (individual workers' experiences) levels. Particular attention is given to Ukrainian migrants who arrived both before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Data was collected primarily through in-depth interviews with migrant

domestic workers, employers, and representatives of public authorities, NGOs, and academia. The findings highlight the prevalence of informal employment, a lack of legal protection, and challenges in enforcing labor laws in private households. The article offers recommendations for improving the working conditions of migrant domestic workers and proposes policy changes to support their integration into the labor market.

*key words:* Ukrainian migrants, domestic workers in Poland, refugees, informal employment, labor rights, migration policy, employer–employee relations