

Do you know who cleans your place?

Female migrants and paid domestic work

Press conference on 13 June 2014, at CERGE-EI, Politických vězňů 7, Prague 1

Agenda:

- 1) Domestic work overlooked and underrated - here and abroad
- 2) Stories of female migrants
- 3) About the media campaign "Foreign Housekeepers" and the project "Equal Opportunities on the Threshold of Czech Homes"
- 4) Recommendations for politicians and employers



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1) Domestic work – overlooked and underrated

According to the statistical data of the **International Labour Organisation**, paid domestic work is currently performed by at least 52 million (possibly up to 100 million) people, of which the vast majority are women (about 92%). Why is there such a high demand for housekeepers and nannies in the Western world at present? There are a growing number of women who are employed and, at the same time, there is a lack of state-run care facilities for children. There is also an increasing number of single mothers who have no other option but to work. Also grandparents, who used to help with upbringing in the past, work or lead their own independent active lives. There is also an increased pressure on work performance in general; ideas of active leisure time which families do not want to spend caring for their households have changed, too. All these factors contribute to an increased demand for domestic workers.

Paid domestic work is mostly performed by female migrants (even though of course, for example, in the Czech Republic some Czech women earn their living by domestic work, too). Many women from the South / East migrate to the North / West in order to meet job demands over there. However, their departure from the country results in a lack of care for their own children and/or seniors. Someone else needs to take care of them – either another family member or someone paid from the money earned abroad. So-called “**global care chain**” develops in the world.

Emigration brings about a number of negative and potentially positive features. Most migrants of course earn money with the only fixed idea: to send at least some of it to the families left behind in their home countries and the sums of money crossing state borders in such a manner are not negligible. The exact volume of so-called **remittances** cannot be detected. However, experts estimate that up to USD 300 billion per year go to less developed countries in such a manner. This is twice the amount of the development aid provided to these countries by the governments of economically more advanced states.

With each qualified person leaving the country loses not only a precious labour force and its investment into their education but, in particular, is asking for enormous social problems. A long-term stay of one or even both parents abroad helps the family financially, but it may also have serious impacts on the adolescence of their children who very often grow up without due supervision, care and upbringing. In this respect experts speak about so-called **social orphans**, who at best are taken care of by their grandparents, and at worst end up in streets or in children’s homes. In this respect the position of female migrants is much more complicated than the position of men as their emigration for the purposes of providing for the family is mostly perceived positively by broader society, while female migrants are considered to be heartless mothers who fail in their key role of caretakers.

Female migrant domestic workers are extremely vulnerable

Domestic work has many specifics. First of all, it is still overlooked and underrated as it had long been considered a “traditionally female” unpaid job. This work is on the one hand a public activity; on the other hand it takes place in a private environment. It means that even though working conditions are stipulated by law, their **monitoring and enforcement of rights in practice are very difficult**. A typical example is unpaid overtime work. Failure to comply with working conditions, humiliation and social isolation as well as physical and psychological violence are risks that female domestic workers may face. The rub does not lie so much in the above mentioned threats but in very limited chances to defend themselves if they turn into reality. In this respect the situation of irregular female migrants seems to be the most difficult in terms of controllability.

Undocumented female migrants living in and working for one family have very limited chances for negotiating better working conditions. However, documented female migrants are also often afraid to speak up. It is not only in the Czech Republic that the validity of the residence permit is linked to a work for a specific employer and if they lose it they have – at best – two months to find a new job and arrange all the necessary formalities. Otherwise they have to go back and it is obvious that if their entire family, education and future of their children depend on their earnings, they are willing to make various “concessions”.

Situation in the Czech Republic

Czech society gets richer and the living standard of its population gets closer to that in the countries that are situated to the west from us. However, the offer of services does not grow as quickly as their demand – to have a nanny or a cleaning lady at home is still not so common and therefore it is not so easy to find her. Services of this type are, among others, provided by specialised agencies, which bring nannies for better well-off people from the countries like the Philippines. They work as live-in nannies, doing cleaning and providing for upbringing of children in English and also – due to language barrier – meet the requirement for discretion, not disclosing private information outside the family circle. So the care work in this country is performed by not only female Czechs but still more often by female migrants. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of aggregate data on how many female migrants and from which countries work in Czech households, but perhaps every female migrant – especially at the beginning of their life in the Czech Republic – has done some kind of domestic work. Even though domestic work is not a marginal issue any more, it is still overlooked, among others, by the Czech government and politicians as well as by trade unions.

A significant milestone in the approach to paid domestic work was the Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in June 2011. The state parties which will ratify the Convention will have to make sure that basic

working standards are respected even in this area of informal economy. The **Czech government** formally recognised it but **refused to submit it for ratification**. It declared that the phenomenon was of no concern to it and therefore it was not relevant to us. It based its position on incomplete statistical data which mentioned only 49 persons doing domestic work. However, the Convention as such has its limitations. First of all, it does not apply to people who are trade licence holders or are undocumented.

2) Stories of female migrants or everything you should know about your housekeeper (and you do not want to ask)

“I originally was a kindergarten teacher. I am not a cleaning woman, I have a proper education. But when I came to the Czech Republic, I was looking for a job at first. I worked in a restaurant kitchen...As the time went, I started to do some cleaning in various households. I arranged for a trade licence thinking that I would be more independent. However, it is not as easy as I thought...,” says 31-year old Nina from Ukraine. She left a little daughter behind in Ukraine who is taken care of by her relatives. However, there are many more such stories taking place in our households.

As has been shown by the research, most women who take care of our children have their own offspring. *“I’m trying to love that boy; he comes to me and cuddles up to me. He feels that I am fond of him. But his mother is sometimes jealous. She told me that I should not become so close with him. But that is hard when she is at work all day long. Recently I wanted to buy a small fur coat for my daughter for Christmas, I’ve seen a nice one. But when I was in the shop I didn’t even know what size she needed. I had to call home. I haven’t seen her for six months (crying). But I know what clothes Max (the baby she takes care of) wears. I can see how he is growing up.”* Another story from Ukraine, this time from 32-year old Oxana.

The research has also confirmed that women are very vulnerable in this position, having very few possibilities of how to defend themselves. *“My ex-employers thought hiring a Ukrainian woman means that I would sweat my guts out. I wasn’t allowed to take any time off, they did not comply with the employment agreement. When I wanted to complain they answered that I as a Ukrainian should be happy to live in “civilisation”. To me who comes from Lvov! If I lost the job I would be in big troubles. I would at least have to find another one quickly. If I didn’t find it I would lose my residence permit. At these times of economic crisis even Czechs have problems finding a job, much less foreigners. The whole family in Ukraine is waiting for the money I send and I am a widow so I am responsible for all of them,”* says Natalia who works as a caregiver for a senior.



Marjorie and Therese from the Philippines came to the Czech Republic together and they had their work arranged for by the same agency. Therese is 21 years old and works for a Czech-Italian family. *“I do work for about 10 hours a day but I have free weekends and I also have a flat – my employer pays the rent for me. So I am really well-off. Most people I know don’t have all this so I am really grateful and I don’t complain about overtime work”*, describes her situation. On the other hand, Therese is in her early thirties and has four children at home – she has come to the Czech Republic to provide for them and pay for their kindergarten. *“We see each other over Skype every week – on Sundays, which are free days. The other days I work from about eight in the morning to ten in the evening. It is tiring especially because I live with my employer. I actually have my own room but I never get a real rest – even if I am in my room I can hear what is going on and sometimes they knock on my door. If I want to get a real rest I have to go out,”* says Therese.

3) Who are Foreign Housekeepers? Or what lesson did we learn from the viral campaign for female migrants’ rights promotion

A year ago we were supposed to decide how to attract attention of the general public to the issue of paid domestic work and to the situation of female migrants who often perform it. The ideas of the whole team composed of representatives of an advertising agency, non-governmental organisations and female academics rather differed. Long discussions, ideas and visions, as well as their differing representations resulted in the establishment of the

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Foreign Housekeepers Agency – an agency which will find you the most suitable help to your home and, moreover, “at low cost, discreetly and without any pointless extra paperwork” and even “24 hours a day, 7 days a week”.

The basic idea of our campaign was to transform the stories we know from both the counselling practice and from the research into such a form that would really cause a stir. Therefore, we established a fictitious agency with its own website and Facebook site where it publicised cheap household help. **The campaign was based on descriptions of individual women who were actually offered as inanimate commodities – nameless, fit for this or that, depending on actual employer’s needs. We did use real stories gathered during our work,** as well as examples from specific website pages of agencies that offer domestic workers. It has come out that the real situation is so controversial that we do not have to make up anything when promoting our fictitious agency.



On 24 September 2013 the agency started its publicity by saying that in three weeks they would start to operate. By that time people could register and get a 15% discount. The face of the agency was presenter Kateřina Kristelová who publicly promoted and supported it. **During the above mentioned three weeks the website of the Foreign Housekeepers Agency was visited by more than 21,000 people and 164 people registered as those who were interested in having a domestic worker at their homes.** News about the agency appeared in almost all media and links to the website and Facebook site became a viral which was spreading

across social networks. During sharing on social networks people often discussed whether this was really true or whether something like that could really happen even in Europe. This was exactly what we intended to achieve – to have such discussions. And three weeks later we gave an answer to the above question when instead of opening the agency we revealed its non-existence and the intention of organisers. We invited media representatives and celebrities to a party, which was planned to be the agency opening party. However, at the party Kateřina Kristelová disclosed that it was a campaign for the rights of female migrants.

Over the three weeks of the fictitious agency’s virtual existence we were able to gather 50 diverse media outputs and so we managed, at relatively low cost, to get big media coverage for opening a discussion on domestic work and on the employing of female migrants.

The entire campaign aimed to show that **domestic work is like any other work.** It is governed by the same rules and by the Labour Code. In practice, however, domestic work is often underrated and underestimated. Through the campaign we therefore challenge

employing families to be fair to their employees. With this intention we have elaborated our **ten commandments of a fair employer** (targeting at both female and male employers) that are to be found on the website www.pracovnicevdomacnosti.cz together with an instructional video how to actually become a fair employer.

The “Foreign Housekeepers” Agency provided the service of a fictitious agency that was intended to incite a broader societal discussion about this, so far little visible, phenomenon. It was based on real experience of women and it explicitly offered what is otherwise happening or may happen in real households including Czech ones.

The campaign of the Foreign Housekeepers Agency was organised as part of the project “**Equal Opportunities on the Threshold of Czech Homes**”. Apart from the media campaign we also focused on the following activities during the project:

- 1) **Free legal and social counselling services for female migrants** as well as for their employers, simply, for all those for whom domestic work was of concern.
- 2) **Creation of a thematic website www.pracovnicevdomacnosti.cz**, collecting all relevant information on the topic for domestic workers, their employers and the general public including practical advice and useful contacts.
- 3) **A specialised research**, which mapped out this field, until now unexplored in this country, providing us with the required data. Questionnaires, a survey and a subsequent analysis of economic impacts of given issues provided us with the data required as basic materials for discussion on further development and necessary legislative measures.
- 4) **We held a specialised conference with public presentation of project outcomes.**

4) Recommendation

Ten Commandments of a fair employer

1) Domestic work is work like any other.

Therefore, it has the same rules and is subject to the Labor Code. Domestic work is often underestimated and undervalued; be unbiased towards your employees.

2) Ensure that the written contract made with your domestic worker is in a language she understands.

The contract must detail: job description, employment duration, remuneration, holiday entitlement, and place of work.

3) Agree on a detailed job description and respect it.

Domestic work is a varied activity. It can include house cleaning, babysitting, dog walking, gardening, window cleaning, etc. It is crucial to make clear that your expectations are from the very beginning, and not ask for more than previously agreed upon.

4) Pay on time, always, the entire remuneration including overtime and extra work.

Respect the contract. Domestic workers are wage-dependent and need their wages on time. Ensure your employee is compensated for all extra work.

5) Mind legal employment.

If necessary, arrange a work permit, contact the employment office and pay the appropriate taxes. Otherwise your domestic worker can risk deportation or dependency on so called clients (mafia), whom they need to pay for law circumvention.

6) Respect working hours, holidays, sick days and the right to rest.

Domestic workers need rest, home and family visits, and sick leave. Discuss in advance how you will deal with absences and working hours during holidays and weekends.

7) Provide working tools and protective means; mind workplace safety.

Injuries can happen even in domestic work. Mind the working environment as the employer bears the responsibility.

8) Be polite and respectful.

A domestic worker is your employee despite the fact that she works in your home. Respect her, greet her appropriately, keep in mind the tasks expected of her, and honor her work schedule. Thank her for the work carried out and she will thank you for your respect.

9) If you employ a live-in domestic worker, respect her privacy.

Provide her with a separate room, respect her leisure time, provide access to the internet so she can contact her family and agree on rules regarding shopping and alimentation.

10) Treat your domestic worker the way you would want to be treated by your employer.

For politicians and law-makers:

1. Remove dependency on employers

The loss of employment in most cases results in the loss of the residence permit. The law should allow for at least a 90-day time limit to enable those who have lost their jobs, regardless of the reason for employment termination, to find a new one. This time limit does exist now but only for specific types of terminations, mainly for organisational reasons. In most cases it does not apply to domestic workers. Female migrants therefore often stay with their employers even though the mutual cooperation does not work and they are exploited because they just do not have an opportunity to go elsewhere – they would immediately lose their residence permit, too.

2. Labour inspection

We believe that labour inspectorates should assume outright responsibility and carry out inspections of employers of natural persons working at homes. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs refuses to carry out inspections because it is not allowed to violate the freedom of habitation - the protection of privacy. However, there are also other possibilities than to enter homes. For example, in Ireland they invite employers to the inspectorate's office and the refusal to cooperate is sanctioned. The labour inspections should be strictly separated from the residence permit inspections so that migrants would not be afraid to discuss their situation.

3. Ratification of the Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers adopted by the International Labour Organisation

This document does not resolve all problems and as such is not a panacea. However, we do believe that its ratification would at least simplify further steps and make the situation more transparent both for employers and for female migrants, too.

4. Awareness-raising

Representative offices (prior to departure for the Czech Republic), the Ministry of the Interior and the Immigration Police should provide information on the rights and obligations in the Czech Republic.