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# POSITION AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN WORKERS IN CLEANING AND CARE SERVICES IN SERBIA

## RAPID ASSESSMENT

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trafficking  
action

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## SUMMARY

The exploratory study “Position and Challenges of Women Workers in Cleaning and Care Services in Serbia” discusses the phenomenon of domestic work, exploring the working conditions, social challenges, and experiences of women engaged in household cleaning and care services, both in Serbia and abroad. The overarching goal was to capture and understand the perspectives of women workers and agencies and digital platforms actively providing these services. The research was carried out by the SeConS Development Initiative Group, for the needs of the organization ASTRA - Anti Trafficking Action and in cooperation with them, and with the financial support of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe.

## BACKGROUND

Domestic work, as defined by ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, refers to labor conducted within households that can be performed by individuals employed and paid for such tasks.<sup>1</sup> This Convention aims to guarantee domestic workers access to decent work and labor rights afforded to all other labor groups since this crucial (yet often marginalized) work contributes significantly to households, the economy, and society.

Domestic work<sup>2</sup> has received insufficient research attention in Serbia. There is a limited number of studies addressing the position, rights, and challenges of workers in this sector, especially in cleaning and caregiving. Existing literature on household and auxiliary tasks in Serbia shows that nearly half of individuals are informally engaged, with care work being the most common occupation, encompassing babysitting, elderly care, and pet care.<sup>3</sup> This is followed by small home repairs and cleaning and maintenance duties. Gender plays a role in task distribution, with most women taking on childcare and older people’s care responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Although cleaning and care workers form a significant part of Serbia’s informal workforce there is no official record specifying their exact numbers. Specific data on formal and informal employment in activities like cleaning and caregiving is not available in the Labor Force Survey. Also, obtaining reliable data on agencies providing these services is challenging due to their varied registrations in the Agency for Business Registers.

In addition, the legal framework of this topic in Serbia is insufficiently regulated. Namely, there is a lack of regulations that ensure access to the formal economy and social security rights for women in household and care work. The primary

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C189](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189).

<sup>2</sup> The term domestic work implies a broader meaning, including cooking, washing laundry, gardening, driving, etc. However, in this research, it will be used only for two services: 1) paid household work that provides house cleaning and 2) paid care work that provides caregiving for children, older and sick persons or persons with disabilities.

<sup>3</sup> Đorđević (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

relevant legislation is the Labor Law<sup>5</sup>, which covers various labor rights, including employment arrangements for household support activities (Article 45), but is insufficiently precise in defining the concept of household work and its detailed regulation. Another important law is the Law on Simplified Work Engagement on Seasonal Jobs in Certain Activities<sup>6</sup> which was enacted in 2018 to facilitate seasonal workers' employment rights, focusing initially on agriculture, forestry, and fishing. Amendments were later made to include household jobs (e.g., cleaning, babysitting, elderly care) with limited duration. This law changed its name during the amendments<sup>7</sup>, but it has not yet been adopted due to numerous criticisms from experts and trade unions who believe that the labor rights of seasonal workers are not covered by this law and harmonized with international standards.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, Serbia has not signed and ratified important international documents such as ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers<sup>9</sup> and Recommendation 201 concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers<sup>10</sup>. It also does not have unions and associations that would advocate for domestic and care workers, as it is a practice in some other countries.<sup>11</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

**In pursuit of the study goal**, a rapid assessment<sup>12</sup> was employed as a suitable methodological approach to investigate a limited sample of service providers, encompassing individual women workers and agencies involved in providing these services. **The data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten individuals in December 2023. They were all women from Serbia, mostly falling within the age bracket of over 50. These participants were divided into four groups.** The first three groups were based on places and the channels through which these workers seek and find a job – women who seek a job informally through advertisements or recommendations, women who seek a job formally through an agency, and women who seek a job abroad (whether informally or through an agency). The fourth group consisted of agency representatives, including digital platforms, who mediate the provision of cleaning and care services. Respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique, and some of them were approached with the support of ASTRA through its internal channels. On the other hand, the selection of agencies and a digital platform was arbitrary, relying on internet searches as the primary channel through which they typically promote themselves. All interviews were carried out following the highest ethical standards. They were conducted by

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<sup>5</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 24/2005, 61/2005, 54/2009, 32/2013, 75/2014, 13/2017 - decision of the Constitutional Court, 113/2017 and 95/2018 - authentic interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 50/2018.

<sup>7</sup> The name has been modified to the Law on Work Engagement due to Increased Workload in Certain Activities.

<sup>8</sup> Reljanović (2022), available at: <https://pescanik.net/povampireni-zakon-o-sezonskim-poslovima/>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C189](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189).

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:2551502](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551502).

<sup>11</sup> ILO (2013).

<sup>12</sup> The rapid assessment is an innovative methodology primarily used in qualitative research because it emphasizes the use of participant observation techniques, interviews, and/or focus group discussions, without a long-term engagement of participants. The rapid assessment is carried out to gain a rapid understanding of a particular problem or situation in a relatively short time and as such allows for the research to be conducted despite temporal and financial constraints. The rapid assessment is particularly suitable for research conducted in smaller and clearly defined geographic areas (such as local rural/urban settlements). ILO (2005).

researchers from SeConS who have extensive experience in researching sensitive topics and who provided strong measures to ensure the absolute anonymity of all respondents and the confidentiality of data shared during the interviews.

The complexity of the collected data allowed for a flexible thematic approach, enabling a comprehensive exploration of nuanced insights. Accordingly, four key themes of analysis emerged – 1) motivation and the job search process, 2) working conditions and job satisfaction, 3) support networks, and 4) safety, potential risks, and exploitation. This thematic approach enhanced the transparency of the study, helping to synthesize findings and formulate broader implications that extend beyond the specific cases examined. However, it is important to note that, due to the qualitative nature of the research and the small sample size, the findings should not be considered universally representative or generalizable.

## **KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Motivation and Process of Finding a Job**

- Individuals providing cleaning and caregiving services employ a diverse range of methods in their job-seeking endeavors, but they predominantly rely on recommendations and personal contacts as crucial channels for job acquisition.
- Younger respondents favor online platforms, attracted by their wide availability and diverse range of opportunities, making them a compelling tool for quick and efficient job research.
- Economic imperatives are important motivators for women to search for jobs in domestic and care work sectors.
- In addition to economic reasons, the need for flexibility affects women choosing these jobs, as well as socio-cultural factors.
- Professional experience and educational background play a significant role when seeking a job or recruiting workers.

### **Working Conditions and Job Satisfaction**

- The most common cause of workers in this sector dissatisfaction is the absence of a written employment contract that would regulate the relationship between the client and the worker and allow workers to enjoy labor rights and benefits.
- These workers do not have health, pension and disability insurance as well as paid sick or annual leave.
- Autonomy is a key aspect that significantly affects the job satisfaction of cleaning and care workers.
- The level of earnings greatly affects workers' well-being.
- Long-term commitment to the profession is also influenced by the quality of workers' relationships with clients, as well as their perception of the value of their work.
- Payments are regular, and the method of payment depends on how the service is provided.

- Most of the respondents noted that clients (and agencies) mostly uphold the terms of the verbal agreement but there are exceptions when they ask for tasks that were not initially agreed upon.
- Even if there is a signed (written) contract it is not always a guarantee that the agreed working conditions will be fully respected.
- Each of the interviewed agencies adopts distinct agreement approaches, emphasizing respect and clarity in their respective operational models.
- Representatives of the agencies emphasize the importance of transparency of work and the conditions of work.
- Working conditions differ in Serbia and abroad.

## **Support Networks**

- The research highlights the nuanced interplay between autonomy and the perceived benefits of professional association.
- Support networks are not only professional resources but also play a key role in building a sense of community and solidarity among these female workers.
- There is an expressed need for the formalization of the networks that would come from the outside (through institutions) and that would additionally protect their rights and work opportunities.
- The representatives of the agencies also see the need for professional associations that would strengthen the rights of female workers in the market.

## **Security, Potential Risks and Exploitation**

- The lack of written contracts, as well as formal safety protocols at work, potentially increase safety risks and reduce the privacy of workers in these occupations.
- There is a nuanced perspective on the experiences of individuals working abroad, particularly concerning the potential risks of exploitation.
- Cleaning and caregiving often entail physically demanding tasks, taking a toll on the health and well-being of female workers with potential long-term effects.
- Agencies are somewhat perceived as the primary resource for assistance when workers face conflicts or encounter problems in the workplace.
- Most of the respondents said that they would resolve the conflict themselves, without any help.
- There is a noticeable lack of information about which institutions workers can be turned to for help in cases of violence, labor exploitation, or human trafficking.
- Although the potential security risks can be multiplied for women working abroad, these respondents do not perceive their work as risky or unsafe.

Ultimately, the analysis yielded significant insights, allowing for the formulation of recommendations presented as practical guidelines to address systemic issues within the context of this study. The following recommendations provide a structured framework for addressing numerous challenges through legislative, social, and political strategies, ensuring enhanced protection and equitable treatment of workers

in these frequently marginalized sectors. Furthermore, recommendations create an avenue for future research, facilitating a deeper exploration of this phenomenon to enhance its comprehension.

- **Normative framework for regulating working conditions:** It is essential to conceive and adopt legislative acts that define minimum standards of wages, working hours, and working conditions for workers engaged in the household and caregiving sector. These laws should also encompass arrangements currently considered informal, thereby ensuring legal protection against possible exploitation.
- **Strengthening policy and legislation to protect workers' rights:** Ensuring political support and will for reforms directly addressing the improvement of working conditions and rights of workers in the household and caregiving sector. This includes collaboration with unions, non-governmental organizations, and international labor rights bodies to create effective legal solutions.
- **Rights to social security and health care:** Implementing legislation that guarantees compulsory social and health insurance for workers in this sector is crucial. This includes access to basic health services and pension insurance, thus ensuring their social security and protection from economic risks.
- **Educational programs and campaigns to change social norms:** Implementing educational programs and campaigns aimed at changing social norms and perceptions related to the work household and caregiving labor sector. These activities should be focused on empowering workers, raising awareness of their contributions to the community, and promoting their rights.
- **Media campaigns to increase social awareness:** Creating and conducting media campaigns that highlight the importance and value of work in this sector, as well as the need for better social valorization and recognition. The goal of these campaigns should be to increase social awareness and recognition of the importance of this sector.
- **Educational prevention from potential risks of labor exploitation:** Implement targeted awareness-raising and education programs aimed at women at risk, ensuring that they acquire comprehensive knowledge of the dimensions and risks associated with human trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation. Efforts should be directed towards informing them about prevention strategies, the rights of victims of labor exploitation, and support services that are available both through institutional frameworks and through civil society organizations.
- **Further research:** A more comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon is imperative to enhance our understanding, shedding light on its prevalence, the nature of work, associated risks, and the overall work conditions faced by providers of cleaning and caregiving services. The deeper examination is crucial for informed policymaking and interventions aimed at improving the working conditions and socio-economic status of these (often marginalized) workers.
- **Establishment of an effective phenomenon monitoring mechanism:** It is recommended to establish a practice of monitoring and tracking this phenomenon. Currently, there is a significant lack of data and official records from statistical agencies like the National Statistical Office. Implementing a system for better data collection and analysis will enable a more accurate understanding and effective resolution of the challenges faced by these workers.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The research study “Position and challenges of women workers in cleaning and care services in Serbia” was conducted as a rapid assessment<sup>13</sup>, aiming to describe the phenomenon of household and care work services in Serbia and better understand the working conditions, social challenges, and experiences of women who formally or informally provide house cleaning and care services in Serbia, as well as Serbian women who go to work abroad. The overarching goal was to capture and understand the perspectives of women and agencies actively involved in providing these services on the market.

The research was carried out by the SeConS Development Initiative Group, for the needs of the organization ASTRA – Anti Trafficking Action and in cooperation with them, and with the financial support of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe. The data were collected in December 2023.

Following the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 189, domestic work is characterized as labor carried out “in or for a household or households” and a domestic worker is any individual involved in household work under an employment arrangement.<sup>14</sup> This definition encompasses a paid form of work performed within the private sphere of people’s daily lives. As such, it holds a significant role in sustaining households, contributing to the economy, and benefiting society as a whole. Given that domestic workers represent one of the most marginalized labor groups, the Convention aims to guarantee their access to decent work, akin to the rights afforded to all other workers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The rapid assessment is an innovative methodology primarily used in qualitative research because it emphasizes the use of participant observation techniques, interviews, and/or focus group discussions, without a long-term engagement of participants. The rapid assessment is carried out to gain a rapid understanding of a particular problem or situation in a relatively short time and as such allows for the research to be conducted despite temporal and financial constraints. The rapid assessment is particularly suitable for research conducted in smaller and clearly defined geographic areas (such as local rural/urban settlements). ILO (2005).

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C189](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189).

<sup>15</sup> Seiffarth, Bonnet, Hobden (2023).

## 2. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Domestic care work, which has been extensively explored globally, primarily by the International Labor Organization, has received insufficient attention in Serbia. There is a limited number of studies addressing the position, rights, and challenges of workers in this sector, especially in cleaning and caregiving. Existing literature on the position of women in the labor market demonstrates that women in Serbia face particular challenges, and even over 40% of women of working age are excluded from the labor market.<sup>16</sup> Also, research on the position of seasonal female workers in Serbia indicates that seasonal work is characterized by the socio-cultural conditioning of women to engage in these jobs, with a lack of employment rights.<sup>17</sup> A study<sup>18</sup> conducted in the period from 2019 to 2020, showed that in the realm of household and auxiliary tasks in Serbia, nearly half of individuals are informally engaged, with care work being the most common occupation (50%), encompassing babysitting, elderly care, and pet care. This is followed by small home repairs (29%) and cleaning and maintenance duties (21%). Gender plays a role in task distribution, with most women (92%) taking on childcare and elderly care responsibilities, while men are more frequently hired for household management roles (95.8%). This study aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the current way of engaging workers in seasonal jobs in Serbia (including domestic and auxiliary jobs, collection of secondary raw materials, as well as seasonal jobs in tourism, catering, and construction) in order to extend the provisions of the Law on Simplified Employment of Seasonal Workers to non-agricultural activities.

The landscape of domestic work, including both paid and unpaid engagements, is inextricably linked to the country's social and economic system.<sup>19</sup> The vast spectrum of responsibilities under domestic employment includes tasks beyond ordinary household upkeep, illustrating its complex relationship to the greater economy.<sup>20</sup> However, the social and economic context surrounding domestic work in Serbia is marked by various challenges, including issues related to informal employment, limited labor protections, and the need for comprehensive policies to address the rights and well-being of those contributing to this important sector.

Paid domestic work demonstrates a notable gendered dimension. It encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, including the care of children, older and sick persons, cleaning and maintaining household hygiene.<sup>21</sup> In many societies, these responsibilities

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<sup>16</sup> Pantović, Bradaš, Petovar (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Končar (2020).

<sup>18</sup> This quantitative survey of public opinion was conducted on a representative sample of 1038 citizens in 68 municipalities in Serbia, who gave their opinion on different types of work, including care work (babysitting, caring for the elderly, looking after pets) and maintenance household work (cleaning, ironing, minor repairs, and gardening), Đorđević (2020).

<sup>19</sup> <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/economic-value-of-the-unpaid-care-work-in-the-republic-of-serbia>.

<sup>20</sup> Seiffarth, Bonnet, Hobden (2023).

<sup>21</sup> The term domestic work implies a broader meaning, including cooking, washing laundry, gardening, driving, etc. However, in this research, it will be used only for two services: 1) paid household work that provides house cleaning and 2) paid care work that provides caregiving for children, older and sick persons or persons with disabilities.

have been traditionally attributed to women as a part of their unpaid domestic duties. However, as women's participation in the labor market has increased, and working hours have changed, the landscape of domestic work has undergone a significant transformation. This shift is particularly evident in households where both partners work long-hour professions, and have challenges in effectively balancing household chores and responsibilities. As a result, a growing number of households have turned to paid outsourced professionals for domestic tasks which contributed to the creation of jobs in the domestic service sector. Despite this shift towards professionalizing domestic work, it retains a distinct gendered character. It has remained in the domain of poorly paid "women's work" that is mostly performed by vulnerable categories - women and girls who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, migrants, Roma, single mothers, etc. According to ILO estimates, of the 75.6 million domestic workers worldwide, 76.2% are women.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, there exists occupational segregation between men and women in the realm of paid domestic work, with women predominantly engaged as cleaners and caregivers, while male domestic workers often find employment as drivers, security guards, gardeners, repair workers, and building maintenance technicians.<sup>23 24</sup>

Household and care workers stand out as one of the categories most susceptible to various forms of labor exploitation. Operating within the private sphere of homes, their labor often goes unnoticed and undervalued, which results in a lack of social acknowledgment as genuine work. With limited legal regulation, unclear employment conditions, and the absence of written contracts (or false contracts) with the employer, this employment represents a typical example of precarious work. These conditions further create an environment where workers in this sector often experience unsafe conditions, deceptions regarding earnings and payment dynamics, extended working hours (that are often unpaid), and a lack of protection for their fundamental labor and human rights. In Serbia, household and care work performed by women is the least recognized form of labor exploitation.<sup>25</sup> Household workers in Serbia commonly encounter a significant challenge related to excessively long working hours. This applies to both the number of working hours and the number of working days per week.<sup>26</sup> Whether workers are full-time engaged in this business or supplement their household budget by working only part-time, they are affected by a high degree of social vulnerability, and inequality.

People who work in households are considered particularly vulnerable because they are often simultaneously exposed to the risks of labor exploitation and the risks of human trafficking. A study on trafficking in human beings conducted in Serbia in 2022<sup>27</sup> revealed that individuals who travel abroad for work increase the vulnerability and likelihood of becoming victims of human trafficking even though most of them find jobs abroad through friends or family. The study also showed that respondents of Roma nationality are more willing to agree to work abroad without a

<sup>22</sup> Seiffarth, Bonnet, Hobden (2023).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Đorđević (2020).

<sup>25</sup> Babović, Obradović, Stević (2022), available at:

<https://secons.net/en/publikacija/human-trafficking-in-serbia-an-overview-of-the-situation-in-the-context-of-the-21st-century/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

prior screening of the employer and working conditions, which indicates their greater lack of information and therefore greater exposure to the risks of labor exploitation and human trafficking.

Even though cleaning and care workers constitute a substantial segment of the informal workforce, there is currently no official record providing the precise number of individuals engaged in these jobs in Serbia. This type of employment belongs to a large group of service activities, which in most cases are provided informally. According to the Labor Force Survey (LFS) for 2022, the rate of total informal employment in Serbia was 13.6%.<sup>28</sup> The industries that employ informal workers the most are agriculture, services, construction, and industry. In 2022, the service sector accounted for 23.6% of all informal employment, making it the most represented after agriculture.<sup>29</sup> The service sector includes a wide range of occupations, and the Labor Force Survey does not provide data on the share of formally and informally employed in specific activities, such as cleaning and caregiving. In addition, agencies that provide cleaning and care services in Serbia are often registered under various activity codes in the Agency for Business Registers, making it difficult to obtain reliable data on the number of such agencies and their other business characteristics.

The rise of the gig economy<sup>30</sup>, facilitated by digital labor platforms<sup>31</sup>, has broadened avenues for accessing domestic work opportunities. Beyond the conventional channels of finding household and care jobs, such as through recommendations, advertisements, or through agencies (as intermediaries between clients and workers), there has been a notable surge in the growth of digital labor platforms in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred the growth of food delivery and transportation platforms first, and subsequently other services related to domestic work – cleaning and caregiving.<sup>32</sup> In Serbia, more people are turning to digital platforms for work because the traditional job market has high barriers and the platforms offer good pay and flexibility, making them appealing alternatives.<sup>33</sup> However, in most national jurisdictions, including Serbia, these platforms are not registered as employers. As a result, all responsibility for social protection is placed on the shoulders of the workers, who persisting as informal employees are unable to enter into contracts or form employment relationships that would allow them to exercise their rights. The EU is continuously working on updating and adapting its regulations to respond to the challenges brought by the digital economy, including the regulation of online employment platforms,<sup>34</sup> while in Serbia there are still no attempts to legally frame online job search platforms.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Informal employment is work in unregistered companies, work in registered companies without an employment contract, as well as the work of unpaid family workers. On the other hand, the informal employment rate is the percentage share of informally employed in total employment. SORS (2023).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> A gig economy is characterized by its flexible operational structure, where the exchange of labor and resources occurs through digital platforms that facilitate the matching of buyers and sellers. In this economic model, organizations choose to engage independent contractors and freelancers rather than maintaining a workforce of full-time employees. Available at: <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/economics/gig-economy/>.

<sup>31</sup> Digital labor platforms play a key role in facilitating work by utilizing digital technologies to act as intermediaries between individual suppliers, including platform workers and clients. Alternatively, these platforms may directly engage workers to provide various labor services. The tasks performed through these platforms are often collectively known as "platform work" or "gig work." ILO (2021), available at: [https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2021/WCMS\\_771749/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2021/WCMS_771749/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Anđelković, Jakobi, Kovač, et al. (2021), available at: <https://publicpolicy.rs/publications/studije>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> For example, EU Directive 2019/1152. More about this is available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1313>.

<sup>35</sup> Anđelković, Šapić, Skočajić (2019).

As a form of informal employment, household and care work often comes with a lack of job security and benefits. While it may provide a degree of flexibility, this work leaves a significant portion of individuals without access to fundamental labor rights such as paid sick leave, health insurance, unemployment insurance, and pension and disability coverage. In addition, despite the predominantly female composition of the domestic workforce, they continue to face exclusion from maternity leave and protection against dismissal based on pregnancy. This absence of fundamental employment safeguards not only compromises their present financial security but also leaves them exposed to the challenges of navigating uncertainties related to the future (regarding their health and retirement).

## 3. INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTS

Several international conventions and agreements are relevant, which highlight fair and equitable working conditions in the field of domestic work, but only one directly applies to domestic workers. Among them, the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189)<sup>36</sup> stands out as a landmark convention that outlines principles for decent work in domestic settings. It addresses issues such as working hours, wages, social security, and protection against abuse. Also, article 13 of this convention asserts the universal right of all domestic workers to a safe and healthy working environment. Consequently, it emphasizes the necessity of implementing effective measures, tailored to the distinct features of domestic work, to safeguard and promote the well-being of domestic workers. Recommendation 201 concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (R201)<sup>37</sup> is a companion document to Convention 189 that offers practical legal steps that lead to the implementation of the rights and principles stated in C189. So far, Convention No. 189 has been ratified by 36 countries globally, with the majority in Latin America, while only 11 of these countries are in Europe.

Although ILO Convention No. 177 on Working at Home<sup>38</sup> does not refer directly and exclusively to working at home, it is relevant because it deals with the rights and conditions of those who work from home, which might also include many domestic workers. Also, ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labor<sup>39</sup> contains recommendations to states on the measures that must be taken to eradicate forced labor. It also contains the first definition of forced labor in international instruments that implies all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.

Human rights declarations such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)<sup>40</sup> and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>41</sup> are also relevant for household and care work. CEDAW is important particularly as the majority of domestic workers are women. It emphasizes the need to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas, including employment. On the other hand, the UDHR in Article 23 emphasizes the right to work, just and favorable work conditions, and the right to protection against unemployment. These principles are fundamental to ensuring fair treatment for domestic workers. Additionally, international documents designed to combat

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<sup>36</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C189](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189).

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:2551502](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551502).

<sup>38</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312322#:-:text=National%20laws%20and%20regulations%20on,reasons%20of%20safety%20and%20health](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312322#:-:text=National%20laws%20and%20regulations%20on,reasons%20of%20safety%20and%20health).

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C029](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029).

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

human trafficking are also important in safeguarding the rights of domestic care workers, particularly women who travel abroad for work. For instance, the Directive on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting the Victims (Directive 2011/36/EU)<sup>42</sup>, recognizes the specific position of children and women who are at risk of human trafficking.

International conventions and declarations collectively form a framework to advocate domestic workers' rights, dignity, and fair treatment worldwide. Nevertheless, the extent of their adoption and enforcement varies across different countries. For example, the ratification of the ILO Convention No. 189 in some countries of Latin America encouraged legal reforms that significantly improved the level of labor protection for women domestic workers, regulated working hours with mandatory breaks, introduced mandatory overtime pay, and equaled the minimum wage with the national minimum wage.<sup>43</sup> Governments that have recognized domestic work employment legally did so by their general labor law, specific labor laws and subordinate regulations, or a combination of the two.<sup>44</sup> Finally, it should be mentioned that at the international level, there is the Domestic Workers Federation (IDWFED)<sup>45</sup>, as well as various unions and associations that advocate for domestic care workers, and have an impact on the development of laws and policies that enhance their access to labor rights and employment opportunities.<sup>46</sup>

Among the mentioned relevant documents, the Republic of Serbia has ratified the following relevant international documents – ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labor, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

### 3.2 DOMESTIC LAWS AND POLICIES

In Serbia, there is a lack of explicit regulations that would ensure access to the formal economy and social security rights for women engaged in household and care work. The primary legislation governing employment is the Labor Law<sup>47</sup>. It outlines the rights and obligations of both employees and employers following ratified international conventions. This law includes entitlements such as limited working hours, breaks, leaves, the right to receive compensation, wages, and other forms of income, etc. In terms of domestic work, Article 45 deals with household support activities. It permits the creation of an employment arrangement for tasks related to household help, and this may include non-monetary compensation as part of the salary. However, this Article is insufficiently precise in defining the concept of household work and its regulation.

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<sup>42</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036>.

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.cepal.org/en/news/precarious-situation-domestic-workers-latin-america-and-caribbean-accentuated-covid-19-crisis>.

<sup>44</sup> ILO (2023), available at: [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/publications/WCMS\\_802551/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/publications/WCMS_802551/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>45</sup> <https://idwfed.org/>.

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms\\_214499.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_214499.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 24/2005, 61/2005, 54/2009, 32/2013, 75/2014, 13/2017 - decision of the Constitutional Court, 113/2017 and 95/2018 - authentic interpretation.

In 2018, the Law on Simplified Work Engagement on Seasonal Jobs in Certain Activities<sup>48</sup> was adopted aiming to facilitate the employment of seasonal workers, enabling them to exercise all labor rights. However, that law included seasonal workers in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, leaving seasonal workers in other service areas (e.g., in construction, hospitality, tourism, as well as in households) in the shadow economy. For this reason, amendments were made to this law, which should include the household jobs, which are of limited duration (several days a month), to be introduced into legal processes and to simplify the payment of taxes and contributions, as well as the way of engagement, while ensuring the rights of workers following international standards. The draft of the law<sup>49</sup>, includes house cleaning, babysitting, and care for older persons, as a separate category of seasonal work, and allows workers in these jobs to work only 15 days a month, a maximum of 90 days a year.<sup>50</sup> According to experts, the professional public, and trade unions, this draft did not provide a solution to many issues concerning work in these areas. They believe that the draft still does not regulate all the labor rights of these workers (e.g., increased compensation for overtime work, annual leave, the possibility of union organization, etc.). In addition, seasonal work remains outside the employment relationship, which is contrary to the recommendation of the International Labor Organization (ILO). Finally, the monitoring of the application of this law when it comes to jobs performed in private homes (for natural persons) is still not entirely clear.<sup>51</sup>

The Republic of Serbia has adopted a National Employment Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2026<sup>52</sup>, which improved the measures of active employment policy and the mechanisms for implementing the measures, with a special emphasis on improving the position of several vulnerable groups such as women, young people, and Roma women (measure 2.4 - 2.7). Also, there is an adopted Program for Suppression of the Gray Economy for the period 2023-2025<sup>53</sup> together with the Action Plan for Program implementation.

Beyond labor laws, there exist regulations and policies formulated in accordance with international conventions that, among other things, protect individuals from forced labor and human trafficking - the Ratification Law on the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crimes<sup>54</sup> (and the Protocols), the Ratification Law on the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Being<sup>55</sup>, the National Strategy to prevent and suppress human trafficking, especially trafficking in women and children, and victims protection (2017-2022)<sup>56</sup>, as well as the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Article 26 - Prohibition of slavery, servitude and forced labor)<sup>57</sup>, the Criminal Code (Article 388 - Human Trafficking)<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 50/2018.

<sup>49</sup> The name has been modified to the Law on Work Engagement due to Increased Workload in Certain Activities.

<sup>50</sup> Reljanović (2022), available at: <https://pescanik.net/povampireni-zakon-o-sezonskim-poslovima/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Official Gazette of RS", No. 18/21 and 36/21 - correction.

<sup>53</sup> "Official Gazette of RS", No. 21/2023.

<sup>54</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" - International agreements, No. 6/2001.

<sup>55</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" - International agreements, No. 19/2009.

<sup>56</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 77/2017.

<sup>57</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 98/2006 and 115/2021.

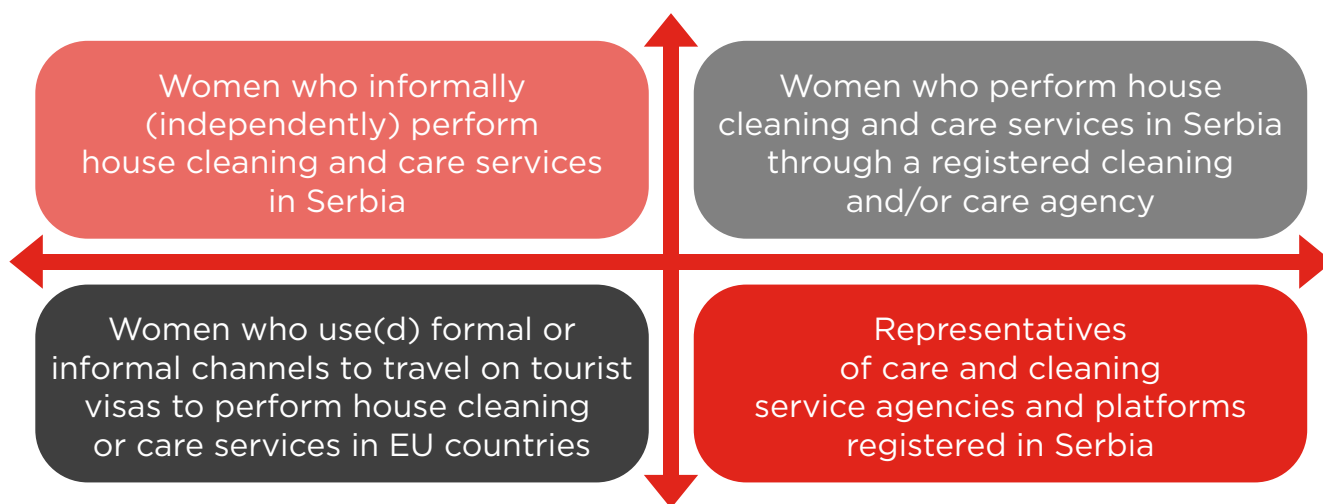
<sup>58</sup> "Official Gazette of the RS" No. 85/2005, 88/2005 - corrected, 107/2005 - corrected, 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016 and 3).



## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was based on the rapid assessment. This methodology is often used in qualitative research and tends to quickly formulate an initial comprehension of a situation, drawing insights from an insider’s perspective. Relying on this method, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten respondents grouped into four groups. The first three groups were based on places and the channels through which these workers seek and find a job – women who seek a job informally through advertisements or recommendations, women who seek a job formally through an agency, and women who seek a job abroad (whether informally or through an agency). The fourth group consisted of agency representatives, including digital platforms, who mediate the provision of cleaning and care services. It was extremely important to gain insight into their perspective on the main risks to which women who perform care and cleaning services are exposed. Respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique, and some of them were approached with the support of ASTRA through its internal channels. On the other hand, our selection of agencies and platforms was arbitrary, relying on internet searches as the primary channel through which they typically promote themselves.

**Figure 1:** Four groups of respondents based on the places and channels through which they seek and find a job



As for the profile of the interviewed participants who provide cleaning and caregiving services, they were all women, from Serbia (mostly coming from small towns). The youngest was 21 and the oldest was 70, but most of them fall within the age bracket of over 50. Although they are all working as informal employees in this industry, for some of them it is a supplement to their income, while for others it is their sole source of revenue. Three of them are retired, one is formally employed (in her principal job), one is a student, and the rest work only cleaning or caregiving (Table 1).

**Table 1: Sample**

RESPONDENTS WHO PERFORM CLEANING AND CAREGIVING SERVICES							
Name*	Age	Gender	Place of birth	Place of work	Level of education	Description and place of work	Job channel
Ana	27	Female	Outside Belgrade	Belgrade	MA	Care service in Serbia - Babysitting	Website
Daca	54	Female	Outside Belgrade	Belgrade	High school	Cleaning service in Serbia	Recommendation
Mira	53	Female	Belgrade	Belgrade	High school	Care service in Serbia - Older people	Recommendation
Jaki	59	Female	Outside Belgrade	Belgrade	High school	Cleaning service in Serbia	Agency
Marija	21	Female	Outside Belgrade	Belgrade	Student	Care service in Serbia - Babysitting	Agency
Ljiljana	64	Female	Outside Belgrade	Croatia	High school	Cleaning service abroad	Agency
Sofija	70	Female	Outside Belgrade	Germany	High school	Care service abroad - Older people	Recommendation

RESPONDENTS WHO REPRESENT AGENCIES AND PLATFORMS FOR PROVIDING CLEANING AND CAREGIVING SERVICES							
Name*	Age	Gender	Place of providing service	Level of education	Description of service	Type of business	
Mirna	57	Female	Belgrade	University	Care service in Serbia (babysitting and care for older persons)	Agency (licensed)	
Beba	40	Female	Belgrade	University	Care service in Serbia (babysitting)	Agency (licensed)	
Marina	32	Female	Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac	University	Cleaning service in Serbia	Website Platform (currently not active)	

\* The names of the respondents are not real; they have been altered with pseudonyms

The research unfolded in various phases. In the first (preparatory) phase, all relevant documents and available data were reviewed to enhance the research team's understanding of the current situation. Then, building on the results of the desk review, the second phase involved a detailed mapping of respondents who will be involved in the research. In this phase, the research team also developed specific research instruments (in-depth interview guides) for each group of respondents (Figure 2) and prepared informed consent forms. The third phase was dedicated to data collection in the fieldwork. Two SeConS researchers conducted eight

interviews face-to-face and two interviews online (through Whatsapp and Zoom platforms). The last phase of the research included a qualitative analysis of selected cases accompanied by the formulation of recommendations for further research and exploration.

**Figure 2:** Key dimensions of research instruments



All interviews were carried out following the highest ethical standards. They were conducted by researchers from SeConS who have extensive experience in researching sensitive topics. Using their comprehensive prior knowledge and experience, they conducted in-depth interviews, adhering rigorously to relevant research ethical standards and principles. Before each interview, each respondent gave their informed consent to participate in the interview. The team provided strong measures to ensure the absolute anonymity of all respondents and the confidentiality of data shared during the interview, mitigating any risk of inadvertent disclosure of personal information about respondents. In order to preserve the anonymity of respondents, as well as that of their clients, their names were changed. Participants were explicitly informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without facing any consequences.

## Limitations

Our data collection focused exclusively on the insights of cleaning and care workers, as well as agency owners or directors who mediate between clients (customers) and service providers (workers). We haven't consulted the perspective of clients who pay for these services. Besides, the data derived from 10 in-depth interviews cannot be deemed representative, nor can generalizations be made based on them. However, despite these limitations, the study gives a unique glimpse into the perspectives of women and agencies actively involved in providing these services to the market.

## 5. ANALYSIS OF THE KEY FINDINGS

In this examination of household cleaning and care work in Serbia, the analysis stems from a rapid assessment conducted through ten in-depth interviews. The analysis aimed to delve into all experiences, patterns, and themes that emerged in the data, transcending individual narratives. The complexity of the data allowed for a flexible thematic approach, enabling a comprehensive exploration of nuanced insights. Consequently, four key themes emerged – motivation and process of finding a job, working conditions and job satisfaction, support networks, and security, potential risks and exploitation. Despite the small sample size of this qualitative research, the thematic approach enhanced the transparency of the study, aiding in the synthesis of findings and the formulation of broader implications extending beyond the specific cases examined. The following chapter shows the analysis with the most significant findings.

### 5.1 MOTIVATION AND PROCESS OF FINDING A JOB

**Individuals providing cleaning and caregiving services employ a diverse range of methods in their job-seeking endeavors but they predominantly rely on recommendations and personal contacts as crucial channels for job acquisition.** Leveraging existing networks, which include friends, family, coworkers, acquaintances, and neighbors, is helpful not just in identifying possible job prospects, but also in avoiding potentially hazardous situations. The respondents' emphasis on the importance of recommendations underscores the pivotal role of interpersonal networks and mutual support in this particular domain of work. Furthermore, the findings assert the essential connection between gender and the value placed on recommendations as a reliable method of finding trustworthy employers. Namely, all respondents showed a distinctly female perspective, highlighting their shared emphasis on safety and reliability – two qualities that recommendations inherently possess. This shared view demonstrates the powerful role that recommendations play in shaping these women's perceptions of their safety at work.

*“You can't get into this business if you don't have referrals.”*

*“I don't rush if it hasn't been checked.”*

Daca, cleaning service

**The respondents presented different experiences in finding a job through an agency.** Some of them see the agency as a safe channel for finding work, which is why they primarily use it. However, distrustful attitudes towards the agencies could also be heard in the interviews. Namely, some respondents said that employment through agencies is also based on verbal agreements, so there is no significant difference

compared to informal work. For them there are similar challenges among women who find work themselves and those who find jobs through agency mediation (e.g., uncertainty regarding working conditions, payment, etc.).

***“I know it happened that they [managers in agencies] took the employment booklet and put it in a drawer. One woman was burned, she worked for three years and nothing was recorded, and the woman earned the right to retire. It happens a lot in agencies that they set something up... that something is missing... so they all make something up and then the women are, to say so, dumped.... there are a lot of broken deals through agencies.”***

Jaki, cleaning service

Younger respondents favor online platforms, attracted by their wide availability and diverse range of opportunities, making them a compelling tool for quick and efficient job research. The use of digital tools in the job search is directly in line with the modernization of the market and the acceptance of developing technological trends. This particularly responds to the preferences and tech-savvy inclinations of younger generations. Additionally, embracing new channels of job search reflects these women’s ability to adapt in the face of labor market challenges, demonstrating their resilience and ingenuity in navigating the employment landscape.

As research results show, **economic imperatives are important motivators for women to search for jobs in domestic and care work sectors.** Most of the respondents cite economic need as the primary factor for their decision to work in this sector. They emphasize that such occupations provide an opportunity to earn additional income, which is especially crucial for those who have been in financial difficulties such as loan repayment, low pensions insufficient to live on, or raising a child alone. Notably, women with firsthand work experience in foreign countries emphatically highlight that the earnings derived from working abroad have been pivotal in resolving their financial challenges. Besides, this employment is frequently the sole source of earnings available to women who, due to lack of educational qualifications, are limited in terms of professional alternatives.

***“I have a very small pension, it’s just ridiculous to tell you how much I have. I also worked non-stop with my pension... and then when I was offered this, I saw for what I have been working, and then I went to Germany.”***

Sofija, caregiving service abroad

***“I often think that it would have been much better if I had looked for something else in time... but now what can I do, considering my age, lack of education... because so much has changed over time, what does it mean to finish high school nowadays... In the meantime, I didn’t do anything, I didn’t progress, I didn’t try, so I could do anything else... I’m not ambitious actually, that’s the biggest problem.”***

Daca, caregiving service

In addition to economic reasons, **the need for flexibility also affects women choosing these jobs.** Cleaning and care work often offers flexible working hours (how many days and hours they will work in a week), which is important for women who have additional responsibilities. Flexible arrangements allow them to have more clients or coordinate more jobs, if necessary. On the other hand, this type of adaptability allows them to balance their work duties with their private commitments (personal and family life), which is also a significant factor in choosing a job and staying in this sector.

Finally, **socio-cultural factors play a prominent role in choosing a job, highlighting the complexity and multidimensionality of these choices.** Some respondents see jobs in this sector as a natural extension of their traditional roles in the family and community, further underscoring the importance of these jobs. Women who work as caregivers, in particular, point out the significance of their work. Moreover, their occupations yield not only financial benefits but also a deep sense of social fulfillment by fostering connections, both with their clients and other women engaged in providing these services (e.g., babysitters who met at the park and continued to socialize and exchange experiences).

*“This is what I do best. Sometimes I wonder what I would even do. I love people, it’s not difficult for me to do this.”*

Daca, caregiving service

*“When choosing a babysitter, it is important what kind of role model she will be for the child.”*

Ana, babysitting service

*“They all call me the Red Cross. Sometimes I don’t charge. I’m not raising the price because these are people I’ve become friends with.”*

Mira, caregiving service

**Professional experience and educational background play a significant role when seeking a job or recruiting workers.** This particularly applies to care services. Representatives of the agencies emphasized the significance of the educational background and experience of the workers in the recruitment process, particularly in babysitting and caring for older persons. A respondent from one agency said that they offer specialized training programs for caregivers, though these require workers to cover the associated costs personally.

*“Women don’t tend to stay for long periods in these roles. The tenure usually lasts for about one to two years. They are often enlisted with multiple agencies, choosing the ones that place them in better families... The longest-tenured are typically nurses, who have been with us for three years, and for them, this role is an additional job.”*

Beba, owner of the babysitting agency

## 5.2 WORKING CONDITIONS AND JOB SATISFACTION

Working conditions and job satisfaction in the cleaning and care work sector vary depending on several factors – specifics of the job, type of contract, interpersonal relationships, etc. **The absence of an employment contract that would regulate the relationship between the client and the worker, and allow workers in this sector to enjoy labor rights and benefits, is the most common cause of their dissatisfaction.** Job agreements are mostly verbal which increases uncertainty about worker's rights and working conditions. The respondents who are not in a pension or formally employed somewhere else are aware that due to their informal work status, **they do not have health, pension and disability insurance.** The representatives of the agencies state that their associates often pay contributions themselves or sometimes clients register them as employees in their private companies. On the other hand, through the interviews, we could hear that women are not interested in signed contracts, because in that way they would lose some other welfare benefits they have as unemployed (or informally employed) persons (e.g., financial assistance). In addition to unregulated insurance, **these workers have neither paid sick or annual leave.** Depending on their earnings during the year (or their savings), some of them can afford not to work when they are sick, when have to take care of sick family members, or when go on vacation. In any case, their earnings that month will be lower by several thousand dinars (even up to 10,000 dinars) which is a significant amount for those whose salary is the only source of income in the household.

***“It suits them that a woman works all the time... to die like a dog, as to say, but I don't give myself, I've been through a few bad agencies...”***

Jaki, cleaning service

***“The most important for me was not to lose my husband's pension if I went to work in another country. I checked that...”***

Ljiljana, cleaning service abroad

**Payments are regular, and the method of payment depends on how the service is provided.** The participants reported that they always initially verbally agreed with clients regarding pay, responsibilities, tasks, and working hours. Earnings are usually calculated by the hour or upon arrival and are paid to the workers at the end of the work done, at the end of the working week, or at the end of the month. All respondents who provide the service independently or through an agency said that they receive money in their hands. When it comes to the platform, the client pays online in advance for the service, and the worker is paid after the work is finished. Some respondents stated that they occasionally receive bonuses from clients or agencies in the form of a gift, increased wages, and other material opportunities (such as a paid vacation with a family where they look after a child or a one-time non-refundable financial aid during the COVID-19 pandemic).



**Most of the respondents noted that clients (and agencies) mostly uphold the terms of the verbal agreement but there are exceptions when they ask for tasks that were not initially agreed upon.** Clients provide the worker with means of work and protective equipment (if needed) so that the worker does not have to buy it herself. However, in the narratives one could hear that clients sometimes ask cleaning and care workers to do something more than they were initially hired for, for example, to cook something quickly or to iron clothes. Some of the respondents said that they do not agree to it, and those who do agree, do not always charge for that additional service because they do not mind doing it for free.

**Each of the interviewed agencies adopts distinct approaches to agreements, emphasizing respect and clarity in their respective operational models.** In the home assistance agency, clients, caregivers, and the agency sign a tripartite contract that specifies work hours, compensation for weekends and holidays, and plans for caregiver replacement during absences. In the babysitting agency, babysitters and families directly negotiate work and payment conditions, typically with monthly contracts.

**Representatives of the agencies emphasize the importance of transparency of work and the conditions of work.** They note that there are clear protocols and written conditions that define the service provided to the client, with which both clients and workers are familiar. These protocols explicitly mention conditions such as hand washing, no phone use, work dynamics, overtime rates, etc.

***“We maintain a blacklist of unsuitable candidates [clients] who are sloppy, careless, or have been dishonest about habits like smoking.”***

Beba, owner of the babysitting agency

**A signed contract is not always a guarantee that the agreed working conditions will be fully respected.** One respondent’s experience illustrates that, despite having a signed contract, a residency application, a consistent salary, and health insurance while working abroad, she encountered a change in working conditions and responsibilities from the initially agreed-upon terms. For example, her accommodation was far away from the place where she worked and she had no transportation provided, so she had to manage. In addition, her superiors controlled her work and, as she says, set traps for her.

***“They told me over the phone that it was all close by, but it took me half an hour to get to work. Afterward, I found a bicycle near the container, so I used it to come to work.”***

***“It was very difficult for me. I would never go back there again. They asked me to recommend someone to them, but I don’t want to have enemies in my life. This kind of work is not worth the money, but I needed the money for that loan and I knew I would save while I was there. I never thought of giving up. I solved my problem and that’s the most important thing.”***

Ljiljana, cleaning service abroad

**Working conditions differ in Serbia and abroad.** Respondents' experiences abroad show that there is a higher level of formalization in employment, which includes written contracts, registration of residence, insurance, and other essential components. However, despite this advantage, the length of employment of Serbian citizens in EU countries makes continuous work impossible. The respondents were either granted a work visa a limited number of times or, in the case of informal work, they worked only during the period in which they were allowed to stay in EU countries (90 days), and then return to Serbia.

*“The babysitter is very well paid, has benefits... By law, your working week must be 40 hours. Everything is regulated by law, you are protected. If someone raises their voice, I automatically call the service that deals with harassment and they punish that person with both fines and prison terms. You are so protected...They strictly respected my working hours.”*

Ana, babysitting service

**Autonomy is a key aspect that significantly affects the job satisfaction of cleaning and care workers.** This suggests that the degree of independence and self-direction they enjoy in their work influences their ability to adjust their working hours according to their personal needs. Although they emphasize that they work a lot, they still manage to find time for themselves and their families.

Also, **the level of earnings greatly affects their well-being.** Almost all respondents said that they can earn enough to live decently. Women who had the opportunity to work as caregivers abroad are particularly satisfied with the level of earnings, but also with other opportunities provided by this job, such as traveling, learning another language, getting to know another culture, etc.

*“I’m over satisfied... if I knew to go earlier... I couldn’t afford to go the seaside or anything... and now I can afford to go to the seaside and go to the beautician and the pedicure because I can simply do it now... and there [in Serbia] I couldn’t do anything... unfortunately.”*

Sofija, caregiving service abroad

**Long-term commitment to the profession is also influenced by the quality of workers' relationships with clients, as well as their perception of the value of their work.** Respondents emphasize positive relations with clients as a very important factor in their satisfaction at work. Moreover, the establishment of trust and openness in communication emerges as crucial in keeping them doing the same work for the same clientele for years. Respondents who worked as caregivers abroad pointed out that, unlike in Serbia, their work abroad, in addition to a good salary, also ensures a certain status and recognition both among clients and in society.

***“We are more respected here than there [in Serbia].”***

Sofija, caregiving service abroad

***“Most people do not take our work seriously. It’s serious business there [abroad].”***

Ana, babysitting service

### **5.3 SUPPORT NETWORKS**

**The research highlights the nuanced interplay between autonomy and the perceived benefits of professional association.** Although they work independently, it turns out that support networks play an important role in the professional and personal lives of women involved in household and care work. Namely, respondents shared in interviews that they practice relying on the support and help of their female colleagues. As a result, informal support networks appear, which are used to exchange experiences and practical tips, to forward work to colleagues due to illness, help in finding new clients, etc. Also, informal networking is vital for sharing information about job opportunities, negotiating working conditions, and managing workplace challenges. These contacts are maintained sporadically, mainly online through Facebook and Viber groups or informal occasional gatherings.

***“I currently have two Viber groups. Since we often change the locations of the parks [when they look after children] then we meet the other babysitters... and when someone needs a job, I know someone from the family where I work that their friends need a babysitter. That’s how referrals happen most often.”***

Ana, babysitting service

***“I have a couple of women who are my friends, let’s say colleagues [from previous work]. We worked together a couple of times and then when I need anything... to replace me, I call them personally.”***

Daca, cleaning service

**Support networks are not only professional resources but also play a key role in building a sense of community and solidarity among these female workers.** Based on the perspectives shared by respondents, these support networks serve as a platform for the exchange of general life experiences, emotional support, and a shared understanding of personal concerns. It is especially useful for women who work abroad, who are trying to navigate the challenges of working in unfamiliar environments while being far away from their families. However, this networking does not provide formal protection mechanisms and social recognition of women workers in this sector.

**There is an expressed need for the formalization of the networks that would come from the outside (through institutions) and that would additionally protect their rights and work opportunities.** Recognizing the strength of these networks, some respondents expressed both the need and desire to formalize these connections and establish structured associations, clubs, and unions as they exist in some other countries. Formalizing these networks would provide the necessary legal assistance and recognition of cleaning and care workers even if they continue to work without a signed contract. Also, such organizations would facilitate access to training, legal advice, and other important resources, as well as raise awareness of the rights and needs of women workers in this sector.

***“Babysitters still do not have any status [in Serbia] to be protected. There is a small number of families that actually take care of the people who work for them.”***

***“We talked about it for a long time, that we would like to create a club of babysitters where we could, like the children we look after grow up, so that they could see each other’s children, to have our own rituals, as it exists in most Western countries. So, it would be an exchange of experiences, opinions...”***

Ana, babysitting service

**The representatives of the agencies also see the need for professional associations that would strengthen the rights of female workers in the market.** The owner of the babysitting agency accentuates the need for an increase in hourly rates and greater societal recognition for babysitters. She underscores the disparity between the responsibilities borne by babysitters and their remuneration, in contrast to other analogous professions. This call for higher payments and greater social recognition reflects the need for wider advocacy for decent work and better positions for these workers.

***“I advocate for the formation of a babysitters’ association that could have a say in pricing. A significant majority, about ninety percent, of professionals in this sector are highly educated. We’ve come to a point where less educated individuals are engaged in less demanding tasks yet are paid more. Babysitters not only clean but also bear the greater responsibility of childcare. This imbalance is increasingly recognized and contested by the babysitters themselves. Many of them, being educators or involved in educational work, find this occupation more financially rewarding than their primary vocation... This growing discontent among babysitters is a topic that needs more public discourse. Personal experiences in the industry have shown me the value of this profession.”***

Beba, owner of the babysitting agency

## 5.4 SECURITY, POTENTIAL RISKS AND EXPLOITATION

**The lack of written contracts, as well as formal safety protocols at work, potentially increase safety risks and reduce the privacy of workers in these occupations.**

Although experiences of a direct threat to safety in the workplace are not often present, sporadic instances of various forms of risk persist. Most respondents expressed satisfaction with their relationships with clients, emphasizing the presence of trust. However, there are situations that suggest a potential violation of privacy and a lack of transparency on the part of employers. Namely, some of them said that they are familiar with the fact that cameras are often in the places where they work. While some respondents seem to be accepting of this reality, one individual expresses discomfort and surprise at the discovery of cameras in the house where she works. The respondent's expectation of being informed about the presence of cameras underlines the importance of clear communication and respect for the privacy of workers in domestic work.

***“You have to look carefully. You have to be able to judge a person through some things. It's not just a job. You have more things to consider. The most important thing is the relationship between spouses. To me, it's the first thing I look at.”***

Ana, babysitting service

**There is a nuanced perspective on the experiences of individuals working abroad, particularly concerning the potential risks of exploitation.** Among research respondents, one woman working a cleaning job abroad has encountered challenges related to exploitation while others with experiences in caregiving abroad have more positive or neutral experiences. This difference could be due to personal circumstances or location, but it could also be because caregiving is more valued than cleaning jobs. The interviewee in cleaning jobs stated that she was aware of the exploitation, but that she had no one to turn to. Also, she did not want to complain because she believed that it would jeopardize her position at work and that she would have to return to Serbia before the end of her contract. Although she signed a contract for 5 months, which also provided health insurance, the respondent says that she had to adapt to the employers' demands all the time she worked because her obligations changed unpredictably. Her salary was regularly paid, but all overtime hours and additional duties were not additionally paid. The work was exhausting for her, so she was very tired after finishing work, and often went to the accommodation, skipping dinner. She stated that when she came back home, after five months of living and working abroad, she lost 15 kilograms.

***“After a month, the hygienist asked me to clean the houses outside the camp as well. I went there three to four days a week after lunch. They promised to pay me extra for it, but they didn't. Who should you complain to? To no one.”***

***“I had no choice. I had to stay. What else should I do? I could have gone to Germany or Austria to look after elderly women, but my friend went and she was lied to about the health of the woman she was looking after and she only***

*suffered on that job. I knew my goal and why I came, and I came to save money and solve the loan issue.”*

Ljiljana, cleaning service abroad

**Cleaning and caregiving often entail physically demanding tasks, taking a toll on the health and well-being of female workers with potential long-term effects.**

The respondents acknowledge the inherent difficulty of their work, recognizing the physically demanding nature of their responsibilities but stated that they can still physically bear the burden that involves prolonged periods of standing, lifting heavy objects, lifting heavy individuals (in the case of caring for the sick and older persons), etc. This acknowledgment reflects resilience and a willingness to undertake physically hard tasks as part of their working duties. Their statements suggest a commitment to the role and a dedication to providing quality care despite the physical strain involved. However, in the event of a serious injury or illness, the lack of health insurance, which is common among these workers, compounds their difficulties and vulnerability, leaving them without adequate resources to address the potential long-term health issues. Additionally, the physical demands of this work reduce the likelihood that women will be engaged in these jobs for a long time. However, due to a small pension or even its complete absence, research shows that women are forced to work even in later years (over 65).

*“My hands hurt a bit, sometimes they want to tingle when I work a lot. I used to work all day... I leave in the morning at 7 and come back at 7.”*

Jaki, cleaning service

*“I’m 70 years old... but my soul is young, so I guess it can handle it... so I started [to work abroad] at around 67... [...] Thank God, knock on wood, I’m fine, as soon as I can travel 20 hours every 8 weeks...”*

Sofija, caregiving service abroad

**Agencies are somewhat perceived as the primary resource for assistance when workers face conflicts or encounter problems in the workplace.** Representatives of agencies see their role in protecting their associates. They emphasize that they take a proactive approach to protecting employees and foster an open and respectful work environment, diligently addressing issues such as neglect, violence, or problematic behavior. They follow a clear problem-solving protocol that includes mediation, talking with clients and workers, and in some cases even terminating cooperation. Respondents who work through an agency said they would probably approach the owner or manager of the agency if they had a problem at work.

***“We have a solid protocol that’s evolved over time. We monitor field situations and continually learn... sometimes it’s hard to assess workers.”***

***“We have empowered women enough to shed a certain servility and recognize their professionalism... We protect them significantly and ensure new hires adhere to these standards.”***

Mirna, owner of the home assistance agency

However, **most of the respondents said that they would resolve the conflict themselves, without any help.** Women who work informally also share this attitude. One of the younger interviewees said that because of her good earnings, she endured unpleasant treatment by the woman whose children she was looking after but after two months she decided to quit. These narratives collectively underscore the challenges faced by respondents in navigating support and seeking assistance in critical situations at work.

***“I have never had any misunderstandings with him [the person she takes care of] but if there was any short circuit, I would try to solve it myself, just as I would solve it at home... that’s the kind of person I am.”***

Sofija, caregiving service abroad

**There is a noticeable lack of information about which institutions workers can be turned to for help in cases of violence, labor exploitation, or human trafficking.** The findings reveal a concerning lack of awareness among respondents regarding their rights, coupled with a limited capacity to advocate for them, thereby leaving them susceptible to potential exploitation. Even in a hypothetical scenario, participants struggled to identify institutions to turn to for help. One respondent, after considerable reflection, mentioned contacting the police.

***“Honestly, I have no idea who I would turn to [in case she is exposed to violence at work], I don’t think anyone in this country.”***

Mira, caregiving service

**Although the potential security risks can be multiplied for women working abroad, these respondents do not perceive their work as risky or unsafe.** Potential risks lie behind language or cultural barriers, ignorance of local laws and practices, and the inability to properly verify working conditions. There is also an increased risk of isolation and exploitation due to a lack of limited access to support. However, respondents with working experience abroad said they felt safe because they found their jobs through the recommendations of their close friends. One respondent said that she was not afraid to go to work abroad even though her family (son, mother, father, brothers, and sisters-in-law) were against her decision and that they considered this job risky and hard. The interviews revealed that the respondents did not feel the need to inform themselves about the potential risks of exploitation

and human trafficking before they went to work abroad and who they could turn to for support and help if such situations emerged. A highlighted statement from one respondent further emphasizes the reliance on family ties and trust in seeking advice from informal networks when navigating unfamiliar and potentially risky situations rather than through formal or designated channels of support. Namely, she said that she did not know who to turn to for help, but she would have tried to contact and consult her family members.

***“At the beginning, the controllers told me that no one is allowed to touch me, there is no physical contact with the guests, there is no excessive talking and holding back. If someone touches you, come and report it. They told me that those problematic people would be kicked out of the camp, but that didn’t happen while I was working there. Everyone was nice.”***

Ljiljana, cleaning service abroad



## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the critical issue of labor exploitation, particularly in the domain of household and care work in Serbia, calls for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. In Serbia, like in many countries, women engaged in these sectors often face challenges including inadequate legal protection, exploitation, and lack of recognition. The following recommendations provide a structured framework for addressing these challenges through legislative, social, and political strategies, ensuring enhanced protection and equitable treatment of workers in these frequently marginalized sectors. Furthermore, these recommendations create an avenue for future research, facilitating a deeper exploration of this phenomenon to enhance our understanding.

- **Normative framework for regulating working conditions:** It is essential to conceive and adopt legislative acts that define minimum standards of wages, working hours, and working conditions for workers engaged in the household and caregiving sector. These laws should also encompass arrangements currently considered informal, thereby ensuring legal protection against possible exploitation.
- **Strengthening policy and legislation to protect workers' rights:** Ensuring political support and will for reforms directly addressing the improvement of working conditions and rights of workers in the household and caregiving sector. This includes collaboration with unions, non-governmental organizations, and international labor rights bodies to create effective legal solutions.
- **Rights to social security and health care:** Implementing legislation that guarantees compulsory social and health insurance for workers in this sector is crucial. This includes access to basic health services and pension insurance, thus ensuring their social security and protection from economic risks.
- **Educational programs and campaigns to change social norms:** Implementing educational programs and campaigns aimed at changing social norms and perceptions related to the work household and caregiving labor sector. These activities should be focused on empowering workers, raising awareness of their contributions to the community, and promoting their rights.
- **Media campaigns to increase social awareness:** Creating and conducting media campaigns that highlight the importance and value of work in this sector, as well as the need for better social valorization and recognition. The goal of these campaigns should be to increase social awareness and recognition of the importance of this sector.
- **Educational prevention from potential risks of labor exploitation:** Implement targeted awareness-raising and education programs aimed at women at risk,

ensuring that they acquire comprehensive knowledge of the dimensions and risks associated with human trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation. Efforts should be directed towards informing them about prevention strategies, the rights of victims of labor exploitation, and support services that are available both through institutional frameworks and through civil society organizations.

- **Further research:** A more comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon is imperative to enhance our understanding, shedding light on its prevalence, the nature of work, associated risks, and the overall work conditions faced by providers of cleaning and caregiving services. The deeper examination is crucial for informed policymaking and interventions aimed at improving the working conditions and socio-economic status of these (often marginalized) workers.
- **Establishment of an effective phenomenon monitoring mechanism:** It is recommended to establish a practice of monitoring and tracking this phenomenon. Currently, there is a significant lack of data and official records from statistical agencies like the National Statistical Office. Implementing a system for better data collection and analysis will enable a more accurate understanding and effective resolution of the challenges faced by these workers.

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