

1) Author and affiliation

Dr. Helen Schwenken
University of Kassel
Faculty of Social Sciences, FB05
„Globalization & Politics“
Nora-Platiel-Str. 1
34127 Kassel
Germany
Helena.Schwenken@uni-kassel.de

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Scandalising and changing working conditions in domestic and care work:

The case of the European Union

All over the world domestic work is one of the labour market sectors in which a disproportionately high number of internal and international female migrants work. A considerable part of these workers faces poor living and exploitative working conditions and in case the work is performed by migrant women, they often do not have a legal work or residency permit. The difficult employment situation of migrant domestic workers is characterised by three factors: First, facing gender-related problems as women workers; second, often being in an undocumented legal status; and third, belonging to a category of workers who works in isolated private households in which neither monitoring of the working conditions nor organising by trade unions takes place.

In order to improve these living and working conditions, migrant domestic workers themselves, support groups and advocacy organizations in many countries have developed multi-level strategies. In the presentation I focus on the situation in the European Union because in ageing societies the issues of domestic work and care work are currently gaining in importance on the political agenda.

I identify and analyze different ways and sometimes contradicting strategies of how the European network of migrant domestic workers, RESPECT, trade unions and other state and non-state actors mobilize and advocate for female migrant workers rights on the European Union's level. I identify three main strategies which have been deployed in the field of migrant domestic workers: A first strategy of highlighting the exploitative and deceiving practices in the sector, a second one framing it in the rights language of international advocacy arenas, and a third one pointing at organising efforts and linking it to the international trade union movement.

I argue that the resonance the network achieved was ambivalent and encompassed unintended consequences: On the one hand it allowed structural access to EU arenas; on the other hand it narrowed down the political opportunities due to a fusion of migration policies and security policies. A combination of a rights-based framework which includes strategies of organising and empowerment and which takes the particularities of the feminized sector into account seems to be the most comprehensive approach. However, due to the characteristics of the sector, the expectations – for example from trade unions supporting domestic workers – shall not be too high. The contribution closes in discussing the current developments in the ILO for a Convention on domestic work to be decided on at the International Labour Conference in 2010.

3) Methods

The case study has been part of a larger research project on political mobilizations in the policy field of irregular migration in the European Union. The data contains documentary analysis and forty two expert interviews with relevant actors of who most are active in migrant groups and NGOs. Most of the data has been collected between 2000 and 2002. The documents, mainly grey material and publications of social movement organizations and policy documents of EU institutions, originate from the early 1990ies to 2008. Further more, participatory observation of meetings and conferences of the RESPECT-network and related events has been carried out between 2000 and 2008.