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Francesca Degiuli

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A Job with No Boundaries

Home Eldercare Work in Italy

Francesca Degiuli

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

ABSTRACT In recent years a number of important studies have explored the new international division of reproductive labor, but those works have concentrated, for the most part, on one end of the life cycle: nannies and childcare. This article focuses on the other end of it, *home eldercare work*. Jobs falling under this label encompass a variety of work situations but the title suggests a job that is more homogeneous than the occupation actually is. This article explores, through the narratives of the workers and the exploration of this 24-hour job, what it means to work as a home eldercare assistant.

KEY WORDS domestic work ♦ emotional labor ♦ globalization ♦ home eldercare work ♦ immigration ♦ women

In recent years, it has become more and more common to encounter in parks, crowded street markets and grocery stores, odd looking couples who were, until a few years ago, unfamiliar to Italian eyes. They most often comprise migrant¹ women, often of color, and frail Italian elders, sometimes self-sufficient, sometimes confined to wheelchairs. These couples are becoming an everyday reality in many societies as the need for eldercare assistance is growing and migrant women increasingly fill these positions. The picture I describe is one I have seen all over Italy, but could be just as easily present in many other post-industrial societies. The combination of increased women's participation in the labor force, a dramatic aging of the population and the deconstruction of extended and even nuclear families has left a great number of countries with what Hochschild (1997) has defined as a 'care-deficit'. This deficit is worsened by an overhaul of welfare states that are increasingly pushing care work out of hospitals and institutions and handing it back to families, more specifically to the women within these families (Aronson and Neysmith, 1996; Ungerson, 2000). In wealthier countries, where women have access to paid jobs and

relatively more disposable income, this means that caregiving jobs, and particularly eldercare, end up being subcontracted to marginalized sections of the population, namely migrant women (Andall, 2000; Anderson, 2000; Chang, 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2001; Pyle and Ward, 2003).

My research concentrates on Italy because this country, with its long-standing negative growth rate and inadequate state policies to respond to a progressively older population, provides an important case study for understanding the complexities of eldercare. As of today approximately 25 percent of the population of Italy is over 60 years old. This means that 14.7 million people, of whom an estimated 8.4 million are female and 6.3 million are male, are likely to require care at some stage of their lives because of chronic illness or the effects of aging (ISTAT, 2005).

In addition, the availability of carers is decreasing. Several dynamics contribute to this development, among them: a reduction in family size and thus of the number of daughters available to provide care for elderly relatives; changing family structures and the progressive reduction of kin networks of support (Zanatta, 2005; Glucksmann and Lyon, 2006). At the same time, the increase in women's paid employment has been very significant. In 2006, 46.7 percent of Italian women were participating in the labor market (ISTAT, 2007).

Furthermore, changes in the Italian national health service have led to shorter hospital stays and early discharge, so that elderly people may be sent home from the hospital before they are completely healed (Palese et al., 2004). Responsibility for their care, therefore, falls almost exclusively upon their families and, more specifically, on the women of the family. Regardless of women's increased participation in the labor market, in Italy the domestic world still remains 'a woman's domain' (Alemani, 2004; Polverini et al., 2004: 32).

Increasingly, Italian women are no longer capable or willing to offer assistance to the elderly, yet they are reluctant or unable, due to limited space in public institutions and the high costs of the private ones, to institutionalize them. To provide individualized care for their elders they hire home eldercare assistants (commonly known as *badanti*²) and these positions are almost exclusively filled by migrant women, less often men,³ of various nationalities, including Peruvians, Filipinas, Moldavians, Romanians, Moroccans and many others – frequently under illegal conditions. The presence of, often undocumented, migrant workers is, therefore, key to sustaining the lives of a great number of Italian women who, otherwise, would collapse under the weight of productive and reproductive work. The relative low cost of employing migrant workers – wages vary greatly from €1500 per month for a live-in worker with a residence permit to €450 per month for a live-in worker who has just entered the country illegally (pers. comm.) – puts this kind of private arrangement in reach of even lower middle-class families (Glucksmann and Lyon, 2006).

While in recent years a number of studies (Alemani, 2004; Andall, 2000; Anderson, 2000; Morini, 2001; Parreñas, 2001; Sarti, 2004) have explored domestic and care work in Italy, the general tendency is to conflate these jobs in a single category. Not much attention has been paid to the different requirements entailed in each occupation in terms of tasks, skills, hours and, above all, emotional labor and how these in turn alternatively affect and/or empower the workers. To fill this gap, this article presents, through the workers' narratives and the exploration of this round-the-clock job, a detailed look at what it means to work as a home eldercare assistant.

To do this, I analyze 35 interviews with migrant women of different nationalities working in Turin, Italy as well as drawing on notes taken during a year-long participant observation at Alma Mater, a feminist organization composed of migrant and Italian women, which among other services, facilitates the encounter between families in need and migrant women looking for work.

THE JOB

The simple label 'home eldercare work' encompasses a variety of work situations, yet suggests a job more homogeneous than the occupation actually is. In order to better understand the requirements of this occupation it is important to define what the label actually means. The first division runs between *live-in* eldercare work, which requires cohabiting with the elders 24 hours a day, usually for a minimum of five to a maximum of seven days a week, and *live-out* eldercare work, which is usually defined by a shift of eight hours a day five days a week. The other distinction is related to the physical and mental conditions of the elders. Some care workers tend non-self-sufficient elders with various kinds of physical or mental disabilities ranging from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's to complete paralysis, while others simply provide companionship to frail elders, who, while self-sufficient, do not feel safe left alone. These different jobs generate different relationships, needs and conflicts but also share many similarities.

WAKING UP . . .

Viviana,⁴ a Peruvian in her early forties caring for Lidia, 84 years old affected by Alzheimer's, explains:

Yes, my day starts every day around six in the morning, some times a bit earlier. At that time I usually wanted to keep sleeping but I couldn't because Lidia wanted her breakfast. The problem was that she didn't want the break-

fast I could prepare for her. No, no, she wanted it from the neighborhood coffee shop. She wanted a latte and a croissant every morning, otherwise she wouldn't eat. So every morning from 6:00 to 7:15, the time the coffee shop would actually open, I had to find ways to entertain her, talk to her, cajole her into being quiet. When the clock hit 7:15, I would run out of the house making sure to lock the door otherwise she would escape, and hurry to the store to get her breakfast. At the coffee shop they already knew me, and as soon as they would see me they would prepare the latte. They knew that I was in a rush because if it took me too long to get back Lidia would begin to act crazy, she would scream, kick the door, and in order to get back into the house I would have to calm her down and convince her that I wasn't a burglar but that it was me, Viviana, with her breakfast. After she had breakfast she would calm down and would go back to sleep, usually until 11:30 a.m. At that point, however, I was wide awake and I would begin to do my daily chores.

Viviana outlines how her workday begins as soon as she opens her eyes and it is immediately defined by the needs of the elder in her care. For most live-in workers the job begins right away, without the possibility of a personal daily routine: drinking a coffee, having breakfast, or showering. As soon as they open their eyes they become available.

For live-out eldercare assistants, instead, the workday is usually less hectic and it begins only when they walk into the house and the elders wake up. Afina, a Romanian woman in her early forties, tells us quite a different story:

The morning for us starts when Nora, the wife, wakes up, looks at me and says 'oh my dear, you're here'. She is usually so happy to see me. . . . I mean, it wasn't like that at the beginning, I had to win her trust, but now when she sees me, she knows that it is going to be a good day for her. After that I go to the kitchen and prepare the coffee, Antuan, the husband joins me, we sit down and chat, drinking our coffee.

For both groups of workers, breakfast is also the time when the medications are administered and the medical needs such as cleaning bedsores, starting infusions, or giving injections are tended to. After that the morning routine continues and usually involves sharing the most intimate aspects of everyday life with the elders. Luzviminda, a 40-year-old Filipina, had to train Olga in a new bathroom routine:

Right after breakfast is the time when I make sure that grandma didn't make any 'mess' because she has intestinal problems. The first two years I slept in the same room with her because she needed to talk, and she would talk all night, then she stopped, and I moved to my own room. . . . [During that time] I didn't sleep for eight months in order to teach her how to go to the bathroom and now we finally developed a routine. Every morning after breakfast we go to the bathroom, I put on gloves and manually stimulate her anus. She suffers from severe constipation and at times I actually have to grab her poop with my hands. We even have a special language for it. We

call the poop 'princess'. After that we shower, and then I brush her teeth, comb her hair, put on some make-up. We also choose the dress that she wants to wear for the day.

Taking care of intestinal problems, changing diapers and cleaning intimate parts is an integral part of eldercare assistance because most of the seniors are no longer able to perform these actions by themselves. None of the women I interviewed ever complained about these tasks. Most women talked about them as a matter of fact, and they listed them among the many duties inherent in the job like mopping the floor or washing the dishes.

Once the elder is clean and dressed for the day, and the medications have been administered, the rest of the morning is usually spent cleaning the house and buying groceries for the day. Afina describes her routine:

While we drink the coffee in the morning, Antuan, and I write down the list of the things that they want to eat for the day. Antuan gives me the money and I go out. I buy everything fresh every day. They eat well, they eat good things, and I hope that they will always have enough money to eat like this, but at the moment they are well, really well.

After the groceries are done, it is usually time for the domestic chores. Afrodita, a 38-year-old Albanian woman, who used to work as a live-in eldercare assistant, together with her three-year-old son, describes her routine as follows:

Once back home, after I left my child in daycare I would begin to clean the house while Gina was still in bed. She was such a lazy one (*laughs*). Every day I would dust, sweep and mop all the floors, clean the bathroom, the kitchen, do the laundry and iron all of our clothes. It was only a two-bedroom apartment, but I tell you, it was enough to keep me busy.

Domestic work is an integral part of the job. While most of the women are hired as eldercare assistants and not as maids, the notion that they will keep both the house and the elder clean is often an unspoken part of the agreement. If the worker doesn't immediately comply, the families tend to mention it in the first few weeks of work, as Elvire, a 33-year-old woman from the Ivory Coast recalls:

It's always like that when they hire you they ask you to do only certain things, for example just to look after grandma, make sure that she is clean and feed her. After a week they also ask you to clean the house and buy groceries. It never ends.

The lack of a written contract, the vulnerable position of most of these workers and the vague job description allow employers to constantly reframe the terms of the work relationship. The workers, afraid of losing

their jobs and consequently their residence permits in the country,⁵ often comply without saying anything. But what seems to hurt the workers the most is the inability of the employers, the family, to understand that the 'time of care' is very different from the 'time of production' and that care work requires very different skills from domestic work. Elvire points out:

The worst part of these jobs is not the elders or their needs. It's the family. They tend to disrespect you because they think that you're not really working, not really earning your money. It doesn't matter that you are locked inside the house with the elder 24 hours a day for five or seven days a week. They want to see you doing something all the time, that is why they keep giving you stuff to do. They don't understand that care work is not necessarily about being active all the time, but consists above all in being patient, listening, and trying to understand the elder's needs.

Time of care and *time of production*, as most of the eldercare assistants underline, are very different. The first is a time that in most post-industrial societies has completely lost value. It is a time that does not require constant measurable outputs, but one geared to create a sense of well-being for the person cared for. It is a time that may involve less cleaning and more listening, less cooking and more singing, less ironing and more laughing. Time of production, instead, is concerned with productivity – with the constant output of tangible services. Eldercare work, according to the women who do it, requires both, but for the job to be effective, the former has to be given priority over the latter. The families, while being well aware of the value of both 'times', cannot control and regulate the *time of care*, cannot quantify its cost and therefore tend to exert their control through the *time of production*.

The description of the daily routines, while hinting at it, does not reveal in its real intensity the amount of emotional labor that is performed in these jobs. Luminita, a 51-year-old Romanian woman, describes her job:

With them [the elders] one needs to be patient, sometimes they scold you, then they want to kiss you, and then they ask you to leave again, one never knows what they really need. I do everything I can for them: I sing, I dance . . . I try to entertain them.

Aside from performing practical tasks, what most of these women do in these jobs is to give the elders a part of themselves, of their desire to be alive, of their personal histories, of their future, of their dreams. They share with the elders a large part of their private selves and, sometimes, even their children, but while doing all this in exchange for wages, they do not consider this aspect of their occupation as exploitative (Hochschild, 2003). On the contrary, for the most part, they consider performing this 'love work' a redeeming aspect of the job, what makes it worthy and irreplaceable. Lais, a Brazilian woman in her mid-thirties, explains:

When I began to do this job years ago it felt as if I had found myself, as if I had always done it and I was good at it. I like this job because it rewards me, every time I walk into their house [the elder couple she works for] and notice that they are happy to see me, I become happy too. Aside from the salary, which obviously I need, these things give me satisfaction. Working with the elders is satisfying because no matter how little you give them, they enjoy it, because they feel lonely and instead I like to chat and laugh, I keep them company. Even when I'm tired, at the end of the day, to see them happy because of my presence gives me a jolt of energy.

LUNCHTIME

Lunchtime and the activities involved in it like cooking and sharing meals are a very important part of the daily routine. For some women the time spent preparing the meal is a pleasant part of the day because it helps them to bond with the elders and to learn how to cook new dishes. For others, instead, the meals are a very difficult time because they often bring to the fore cultural differences that are frequently disrespected by the Italian elders.

Carmen, 28, from Ecuador, explains:

When I began to work for this lady, I didn't know how to cook Italian food, and it was a big deal because she was Sicilian and food was really important to her. She would get angry about it, I had to learn to cook all her favorite dishes and that was fine, I like to cook. . . . The main problem was that she didn't let me either buy or cook the food I liked. And it was hard, because, aside from missing my family and my son, I wasn't even able to eat the food I was used to. It was as if I had lost another part of myself.

Finding families capable of understanding other people's culture is such a lucky occurrence that workers who do find them are unwilling to give up their job even if they are unhappy with it. Rahxma, a 32-year-old Somalian, for example, while tired of working as a live-in eldercare assistant, as she has for eight years with the same person, is unwilling to give up her current job for fear of losing her employers:

If it was up to me I would change everything about this job, I would try to find something more interesting or at least work only half a day. But I have never said these things to the family I work for, not because I'm afraid, but because I'm used to working here, and above all because they respect different cultures, they respect my food, my way of cooking. They never ask me to buy things that I cannot touch according to my religion, they never asked me to buy wine, ham or pork. I can pray here, practice my religion. That's why I like to work here. It's not easy to find people that respect one's culture.

Sharing the meals is very important for the elders and the task is often perceived by the workers as part of their job requirements. While for some elders this activity is considered a convivial gesture and an attempt to break the barriers between employers and employees, for others it becomes a way to control and determine what the employee can eat and when. Workers, particularly those in their first job, often complained of not being fed enough, having to eat food that didn't belong to their culture or that they simply didn't like.

Sharing meals for some elders means that they no longer consider the worker simply a 'worker' but also a member of the family. Therefore they try to maintain this ritual even when the job doesn't require it any longer. Lucha, a 51-year-old Peruvian woman, recounts:

I worked for the same family for seven years, mostly to take care of the wife, but she passed away. The husband keeps reducing my hours because he feels that he doesn't need me as much, but the thing I really don't like is the fact that he keeps insisting that we eat together at lunch, but he doesn't pay me for that time and I don't think it's right. . . . I loved to work for his wife, because she treated me so well, she treated me like a relative, more as if she was my mother, but with the husband it's not the same.

This quote highlights how the boundaries between work and daily life are often blurred in these work relations and how some employers tend to misunderstand the relationship that links them to the worker.

THE AFTERNOON

The early afternoon is usually a time when the daily activities slow down. After a busy morning the majority of the elders need time to rest: some watch TV, some nap, some talk on the phone with friends and relatives. This is the time when live-in workers usually take advantage of some time-off. For most of them it simply involves going to their rooms to read a newspaper, to call home, to take care of themselves, or to go out for a walk. The time-off is when the different coping strategies to combat the difficulties of the job, the sense of loneliness and the hope for improvement are displayed. Some women use this time to call their friends or family on the phone in order to feel less lonely. They talk with their children, husbands and relatives or call other women doing the same job to give vent about difficult days, elders or employers in general.

Others, instead, use this time to improve their education, to learn new skills or to apply for more satisfactory jobs. And finally, for a few others it means being able to go to their own home. Some of the workers choose to maintain a room or an apartment shared with others even when working full-time. This decision is often considered a survival strategy and even if

it is a difficult choice because of the huge toll it has on their wages and consequently on their remittances, the money spent on this is considered money well spent.

Once the rest time is over for both the elders and the workers, the work-day resumes and the tasks are very similar to the ones performed in the morning. The disabled elders need to be changed and cleaned again, and a second round of medication often needs to be administered. After that, the late afternoon is usually spent in social activities. The most disabled elders who cannot go out are often condemned to be passive spectators but even for them the workers try to find some solution in order to let them participate in social life. Afrodita mentions:

In the afternoon I would always make sure to push grandma to make an effort and move from the bed to the wheelchair. She wasn't able to go out anymore but at least on the chair I was able to carry her out on the balcony. I would then leave her there, at least for an hour, so that she could look at people, and see what was going on in the neighborhood.

For those elders less physically ill or only affected by mental pathologies, but still able to move on their own, the afternoon can be the high point of the day, the time in which they can fulfill their need for social contact. It usually involves walking around the neighborhood, going for coffee at the corner coffee shop or, for some, going to church. It is an important part of the elder's day and it is experienced as a very special moment. It is an important moment also for the worker because when outside she is no longer responsible for entertaining the elder. She too can become an observer, she sheds the domestic/nurse role to adopt one of lady-companion/nurse. The burden of live-in work is alleviated when the physical conditions of the elders allow for some social 'time-off'.

EARLY EVENING

Usually the time when the workday ends for most of the live-out workers is 6:30 or 7:00. It is the moment of the day when family members return home from work or when other workers take on the night shift. Most live-out workers enjoy this time of the day, not only because it is the end of work duties, but, above all, because it allows them to 'emotionally close the door on the job' as Maria, a 38-year-old Peruvian woman explains and, at the same time, to resume their own lives. Aline, a Brazilian worker in her mid-thirties explains:

To go to work and come back home I take the train, it is usually a 30-minute ride. I love that time because it allows me to remove myself from the elder's life and to come back to mine. I enjoy that separation . . . what is difficult with these jobs is the constant sharing . . . the forced cohabitation.

Now that I have a life of my own, a life separate from the job, it is completely different. The job becomes a job like any other, I even like it.

Unfortunately, however, for the majority of eldercare assistants the job does not end here but continues, in some cases, late into the night. The evening routine, for the most part, is very similar to the lunchtime one. When the physical conditions allow for it the elders usually participate in the preparation of the meal and if feeling well enough also in sharing the meal with the rest of their own or their adopted families. For the most part, though, the meals are shared only between the elders and their assistants, their respective families are absent for very different reasons. The workers' families have been left behind either in the country of origin, or at their new home in Italy to allow the worker to do her job. The elders' families, instead, are absent for various reasons: some live in other cities, some feel that their lives are already difficult enough to manage without the burden of an ailing relative, some have their own families to take care of, while others actually fear witnessing their parent's decay and are unable to face it first hand. In all these cases, the elders and the workers end up sharing their different solitude, one stemming from old age in industrial societies and the other from the need to provide remittances in a globalized economy.

EVENING/NIGHT

The time after dinner is dedicated, once again, to cleaning: first the kitchen and then, if the elder is disabled, the elder him-/herself. The evening is also a time when the eldercare assistants try to prepare the elders for the night, not only by tending to their physical needs but also by attempting to create a serene and calm atmosphere, in which to take care of the spiritual needs of the elders: assuage their fears, dull their emotional pain, relieve their loneliness. Luzviminda talks about what she and Olga do at this time of the day:

Olga has Alzheimer's but she understands everything. For example I don't let her watch the news because it agitates her. So in the evening if we don't go to church, I make her listen to 'Radio Maria' a Catholic radio station, because I think that, even if she doesn't believe in God, listening to their programmes helps her to relax. I often tell her: 'Guga, your life may be almost over, but your duty as a human being is not over, you have to pray for other people.'

Furthermore, creating such an atmosphere is the only hope that the worker has to be able to sleep. Otherwise the workday may continue late into the night, as Viviana describes:

Lidia couldn't sleep. Every night after watching TV, around 11:30 or 12:00 I would give her a sleeping pill and put her in bed. I would wish her a good

night, turn off the light and leave the room. After only an hour though she would call me and would say 'Viviana, please, turn on the light, I don't want to be in the dark.' Then she wanted to tell me about her mother, her father, and many other things of her life and I would sit there and listen. . . . Then around 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. she would fall asleep and I would do the same on my chair. She usually would sleep from 3:30, 4:00 a.m. to 6:00, and at that time the breakfast routine would start all over again.

As we can see from these descriptions the day of work for a live-in assistant can be never ending. Women like Viviana, Rahxma, Luzviminda, Afrodita, Elvire and many others work 24 hours a day without boundaries either of space or time. Constantly being in the workplace also means that they are constantly available for the elders, day and night. Even if, in some cases, the work is not hard because the elders are in good physical condition and sleep through the night, the lack of freedom makes this job difficult to bear. Teresa, a 38-year-old from Ecuador who helps place migrant women in care jobs in her position at Caritas, explains:

I've done a number of jobs since I came here. I worked in a restaurant, I worked as a domestic, as chef's assistant, as a manager in the same restaurant and in a factory. I worked with elders only twice, but it was the best job because if one is lucky it can even be relaxing, and one doesn't spend any money. Instead working in a factory is much more alienating. The real problem in working with the elders is the lack of freedom. The fact of not being able to go out was terrible. I honestly felt like a sparrow in a golden cage where one has everything for one's well-being, but freedom. The job is all right if the elder is in relatively good shape and you can go out together, otherwise it becomes suffocating.

Not all women paint such a positive picture of their living arrangements or of their employers, but they agree on how difficult it is to be locked in all day. Work ends up filling every moment of these women's lives, leaving little or no space for anything else. Live-in migrant women, in a way, become hostage to their employers. In time most of these workers learn to defend their rights and their privacy, but, for the most part, it is a difficult process that first necessitates acquiring a certain proficiency in the language and second, a certain amount of bargaining power usually acquired by either becoming 'irreplaceable' or by obtaining a residence permit.

In any case, it is not by chance that, as soon as it becomes feasible, migrant women workers try to move away from live-in work and they go back to it only when in need of a place to stay or when they cannot find other employment.

For some, however, live-in work is not merely the best alternative among very limited options but may become an active choice. Some women choose live-in work because they have short-term migratory projects and live-in jobs allow them to save as much money as possible and

consequently to send larger remittances home. Others, like Luzviminda, decide to make live-in eldercare work their profession. Here she outlines the different reasons that convinced her to keep doing this job:

I did this job for 16 years, I worked as a live-in for the entire time and I assure you it's not easy. One needs to be very strong mentally. I like to work with the elders for three reasons: because I hate the cold and I don't want to be running all over town from one job to another, because I was a nurse obstetrician in the Philippines and I know what it means to take care of people. For us in the Philippines the elders are like precious artifacts in a museum. We need to take good care of them. I was used to taking care of my grandmother and I grew up valuing elders. And, finally, because I like it, I call it a vocation. I can do this job even with my eyes closed.

Live-out eldercare work does not have the same negative connotations as live-in work. On the contrary, it is considered by many as 'a job as good as any other' and one that can actually be very satisfactory from an emotional point of view. Afrodita explains:

I like to help, I like to spend time with the elders . . . even if . . . I mean we all are unbearable when we don't feel well, when we have a headache we become obnoxious, therefore the elders too, poor souls, their bodies are breaking down, but in any case I like to work with them. Seriously, I really like the job, but certainly not 24 hours a day and with a kid on top of that as I did for 18 months. That – never again, but eight hours a day, or half a day – sure no problem, with all my heart.

However, even when confined to eight hours a day, the job is often unsatisfactory because of the relatively low wages and the low social status attached to it.

CONCLUSIONS

The description of the daily routines of both live-in and live-out migrant women workers reveals that home eldercare assistance is a labor-intensive occupation both in terms of productive and emotional labor. During a typical 24-hour day home eldercare assistants perform a great number of practical tasks including cooking, cleaning, administering medications, cleaning wounds and helping the elders with the most intimate daily routines, while at the same time performing a great deal of emotional labor that ranges from the simple yet demanding need to always display appropriate body and facial expressions to the more complicated need to devise strategies geared toward providing spiritual comfort.

While other scholars have pointed out that working conditions for domestic and care workers vary greatly depending on the workers' relationship to

the employers (live-in or live-out working arrangements) or on their relationship to the state (whether they have papers or not), I argue that an equally important variable in home eldercare assistance is the physical and mental condition of the elder assisted. The amount of both productive and emotional labor increases greatly when the elders are completely disabled or affected by complex pathologies such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's.

According to my interviews, some workers are on the job 24 hours a day for five or seven days a week while others work only a day or night shift. Some workers care for perfectly self-sufficient elders while others take care of those who are bed-ridden. Some simply need to provide companionship while others have to learn to deal with complex pathologies like senile dementia or Parkinson's. These different elements have huge consequences on the daily experiences of the eldercare assistants and their ability to actively respond to the overwhelming demands of these jobs. A live-in worker in charge of a bed-ridden patient is locked into a claustrophobic relationship that is hard to break out of while a worker in charge of a physically able elder has more opportunities for distraction and for enacting coping strategies.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal that while, in general, workers prefer live-out jobs, and they will actively seek them as soon as they obtain residence permits, there are some cases in which they continue to prefer live-in arrangements independent of their migrant status. These exceptions include workers who have short-term migratory projects, have troubled relationships, conceive of the job as a vocation, but also workers who, due to their race and religious belief, do not have easy access to other jobs or who, due to the great emotional attachment that these work relationships generate, tie their lives to those of the elders in their care.

In this article I have simply offered a glance at what this occupation entails because my main goal was to render visible an occupation that, while growing, is still invisible to many. However, more work needs to be done to fully understand all the different dimensions of this occupation. Among the most important aspects that require further exploration are the emotional bonds that develop between the workers and the elders during these intense relationships and their effect on workers' migratory trajectories.

Furthermore, a fuller examination of the occupation needs to include an analysis of the hierarchy of race and ethnicity in the occupation. How do processes of racialization impact wages, working conditions and prospects for mobility in the labor market? A better understanding of the specifics of home eldercare assistance as opposed to domestic and childcare work will allow for socially just policy measures with respect to these emerging forms of employment.

NOTES

1. Some of these workers – particularly those from nearby Eastern European countries such as Romania and Moldavia, who have the advantage of geographical proximity – travel back and forth from their home countries to Italy, with no intention of settling. Others, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines and Latin America, are more interested in a long-term immigration project. In other words, some are best thought of as migrants, others as immigrants – roles that can change for an individual over time. In this article I use the term ‘migrant’ to capture both groups.
2. The term *badante* was first adopted by the center-right government in Law No. 189 Art. 33, 30 July 2002 to define a ‘migrant person from a non-EEC country, who offers assistance to a person whose self-sufficiency is limited by pathologies or handicaps’. Since its adoption the term has been contested by many because it was originally used to define, in the 1900s, people who would take care of animals. The term is deemed to be offensive both for the ‘carer’ and the ‘cared for’ and many different political organizations and individuals, ranging from non-profit organizations and elders’ and migrants’ associations to left and center politicians, have been actively working to change it to ‘home eldercare assistant’.
3. While Andall and Sarti (2004) highlight the growing presence of men in a sector that was previously considered women’s domain, during my participant observation at the three different non-profit organizations that act as placement agencies for families and migrant workers (Caritas, Api-Colf and Alma Mater), the people looking for eldercare jobs were exclusively women.
4. To respect the privacy of the interviewees pseudonyms have been used throughout.
5. The residence permit granted to migrant workers either through quotas or through amnesty lasts at most two years. After that workers need to renew it and to do that, among other requirements, they have to demonstrate they are employed. For this reason, even legal workers remain at the mercy of their employers (eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2002/09/feature/it0209103f.html)

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Francesca Degiuli is a PhD candidate in sociology with an interdisciplinary emphasis on global studies, at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She studied history in Turin, Italy, historical documentary film-making at George Washington University and worked in the film industry before returning to university to complete her doctorate. Her research interests lie at the intersections of gender, globalization, immigration and work, and are driven by broad questions about the theoretical linkages between political economy and culture. She is presently completing her doctoral dissertation, 'Laboring Lives: The Case of Eldercare Work in Italy', an ethnographic study that expands on these interests by examining the job of home eldercare assistance in Italy. Address: Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara CA 93106, USA. [email: frandudette@yahoo.com]

