

The professionalization of paid domestic work and its limits: Experiences of Latin American migrants in Brussels

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Abstract

In Belgium, a service voucher scheme – known as *Titres Services* – was launched in 2004 in order to create employment and regularize the labor conditions of domestic workers. The extent to which this scheme has represented an improvement in domestic workers' labor conditions, however, is still a matter of debate. This article explores the workers' experience of the changes introduced by this scheme. It focuses on Latin American migrants that are currently working under this scheme in Brussels, situating them in relation to their previous experiences and the experience of other migrants who currently work in the informal market. The authors distinguish two tropes in their informants' discourse, which describe their ambivalence regarding these changes. Using the *Titres Services* scheme's rhetoric, the first one seeks to increase the social status of this occupation by presenting it as a 'profession'. Contrarily, the second trope highlights the limits to professionalization.

Keywords

Domestic workers, labor regularization, migration, professional, servant, service voucher scheme

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Introduction

In the last few years, different European countries have developed diverse policies aimed both at the creation of employment and the professionalization of paid domestic work (Blackett, 2011).¹ These policies have gained strength under the impetus given by the International Labor Organization (ILO) to the setting of international standards to improve domestic workers' labor conditions globally. As noted by Manuela Tomei (2011), the policies developed in Europe include different strategies, from encouraging the use by households of paid domestic services – through simplified payment procedures, the supply of state incentives in some cases, and the introduction of standard contracts – to the 'industrialization' of domestic work, 'whereby domestic workers are employed by licensed enterprises rather than directly by households, which pay a fee to these enterprises for the work performed' (Tomei, 2011: 188–189).

In Belgium, public policies have made an effort in order to improve the labor conditions of paid domestic work within the last decade. A service voucher scheme, known as *Titres Services*, was launched in 2004 in order to create employment and regularize the labor conditions of domestic workers (Gerard et al., 2012). Under this scheme, the state subsidizes part of the labor cost giving licenses to agencies who act as intermediaries between employers and workers. In a context of rising unemployment and increased pressure on the welfare state, policies such as the *Titres Services* scheme include in their goals the creation of jobs for people who could not enter the labor market in other areas.

These policies have given a new relevance to the debate about the professionalization of domestic work. The identification of domestic work as a servile occupation has led some analysts to be skeptical about its possibilities to combat unemployment and social inequality (Gorz, 1998). Scholars have observed that, even under service voucher schemes, domestic service 'remain[s] one of the most degraded [occupations], and [is] therefore, dedicated to stigmatized populations' (Devetter, 2013: 82). In a similar vein, other authors have highlighted that attempts to professionalize paid domestic work implies treating it as any other work, underscoring its peculiarities (Anderson, 2000; Himmelweit, 2005).

From another perspective, various authors have made an attempt to evaluate the service voucher policies implemented in Europe (Bailly et al., 2013; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009; Renooy, 2007; Windebank, 2007). Most of them have focused on the quality of the jobs created by these policies by observing the type of labor contracts offered and the labor rights guaranteed by these schemes and highlighting the mechanisms that make the improvement of care and domestic work labor conditions difficult (Bailly et al., 2013; Henri et al., 2009; Tomei, 2011). Other analyses have addressed the users' view of these services, showing that one of the obstacles for the professionalization of domestic work is the persistence of its social perception as 'dirty work' (Devetter, 2013). However, the workers' view has received little attention in this literature. This article seeks to make a contribution to this body of work, by focusing on the way in which domestic workers describe their experiences with the *Titres Services* scheme in Belgium.

The Belgian context

As in other European countries (Lutz, 2008, Ozyegin and Hondagneu Sotelo, 2008), in Belgium paid domestic work is usually performed by immigrant women (ORCA, 2010;

Pasleau and Schopp, 2005a). In 2011, the *Titres Services* scheme had 834,959 users and 2754 registered agencies. Of its 149,827 workers, 73.4% were Belgian and 26.6% foreign. However, this proportion is reversed within the Brussels region, where 77% of the workers are foreign: 55.1% are from other European countries – mostly from Poland – and 21.9% are non-Europeans. Of the total number of workers in the scheme, 13.5% work in Brussels; 94.8% of them are women, 61.4% are between 30 and 49 years old, and 63.4% are low skilled (Gerard et al., 2012). The share of migrant workers in domestic service is more significant in the informal market (ORCA, 2010; Pasleau and Schopp, 2005a). Within the informal market, their labor conditions tend to be more precarious.² In fact, the legal status of paid domestic workers in Belgium remains extremely heterogeneous (Pasleau and Schopp, 2005a, 2005b).

In this article, we focus on Latin American migrants that are currently working under the *Titres Services* scheme in Brussels. Though Latin Americans are not the largest migrant community in Belgium, their experiences are particularly relevant to the problem under study. The main activity for these migrants is paid domestic work (Silver Quezada, 2010; Suárez Orozco, 1994). This is particularly true for women, but it is also increasingly true for men (Pérez and Stallaert, 2015). While research on Latin American domestic workers in Europe has concentrated on the experiences of undocumented migrants, particularly in relation to the racialization of paid domestic work (Anderson, 2000; Gil Araujo, 2008; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Herrera, 2005; Wagner, 2004), here we seek to analyze the experiences of those migrants currently employed under the *Titres Services* scheme and compare these experiences with migrants currently employed in the informal market, in order to assess the impact of such a program.

The case of Brussels is also significant to the problem under analysis. Brussels has a very diverse population in terms of its national origins. On one hand, Belgium is formed of two large linguistic communities, which form the two main regions into which the country is administratively divided: Wallonia and Flanders. Brussels is a third region that combines the two main official languages. Its population is also formed of a significant minority of African descendants, who originally came as migrants under the status of ‘guest worker’. Finally, being the Capital of Europe, Brussels is home to a large population of civil servants, who come from the different EU countries, but also from other regions (Stallaert, 2004). In this context, as we shall see, the racialization of paid domestic work acquires specific connotations.

In the following sections, we analyze our informants’ discourse on their working experience by focusing on two basic tropes: the ‘professional’ and the ‘servant’. Although our informants do not literally use these concepts in the interviews we refer to these discursive tropes as conceptual tools that allow us to identify two basic positionings concerning the changes experienced in their labor conditions. As we shall see, the alternation between both tropes reveal the migrants’ ambivalent perception of their labor status. While using the *Titres Services* scheme’s rhetoric, they seek to increase their social status as paid domestic workers by presenting it as a ‘profession’; the ‘servant’ trope, contrastingly, highlights the limits of these changes.

Latin American migrants in Brussels

Since the 1970s, migration from Latin America to Europe and the United States has grown without interruption. After the end of the Second World War, Latin America went

from being the recipient of immigration to becoming one of the regions with the highest levels of emigration. In recent decades, migration to Europe from Latin America has increased significantly, particularly to destinations such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Until the 1980s, this migration occurred mainly for political motives. However, economic migration has become dominant since the 1990s. The implementation of neoliberal policies in Latin America in this period involved cuts in social services and increasing job insecurity, which caused a growth in poverty and an intensification of social inequalities. In this context, migration to the global North was an 'alternative in the face of difficult living conditions, job uncertainty and disagreement with the results of the development pattern' (Gil Araujo, 2008: 193).

Latin American migration to Belgium was also marked by changes in immigration policies. Since 1974, the Belgian state has limited access to its territory to foreigners. Nevertheless, immigration has continued to increase in the past four decades, generating a growing population of undocumented migrants. In this period, migrants' possibilities to legalize their presence in the country were limited to either mass regularizations (as the one carried out in 1999) or to the exceptional procedure which was sanctioned in the 1980 Immigration Act. This procedure allowed a foreign person to ask the mayor of the municipality where he or she lived for a residence permit. The decision was taken on a case by case basis. However, both procedures were unusual, and, therefore, allowed only a limited number of Latin Americans to regularize their legal situation in the country. In 2007, it was estimated that two-thirds of the 30,000 Latin American migrants residing in Belgium were undocumented (Sáenz and Salazar, 2007).

Among Latin American migrants, the most common countries of origin include Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. Migration from the latter two countries increased sharply from late 1990 and during 2000, in tandem with the political and economic crises that prevailed in both countries. In 2007, it was estimated that the Latin American population in Belgium was relatively young, between 20 and 35 years old, predominantly female, and with at least a high school diploma. For the most part, women worked in domestic service and men in construction, painting, gardening, etc. (Sáenz and Salazar, 2007).

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Brussels from October 2012 to March 2013. We conducted in-depth interviews with 32 Latin American migrants who are currently employed or have been employed in the past few years in 'paid domestic work'. The demographic characteristics of our sample are as follows: (1) age: from 24 to 60 years old; (2) gender: 22 women and 10 men; (3) nationality: Ecuador (17), Colombia (4), El Salvador (4), Paraguay (4), Chile (1), Bolivia (1), and Argentina (1). Based on the assumption that gender identities are relational constructions, crossed by class and ethnic inequalities (Yuval-Davis, 1997), the narratives of male and female informants were analysed in order to discover the ways in which gendered boundaries are negotiated and (re)created in the experience of paid domestic workers within international migration. We also compared the experiences of those migrants currently working under the *Titres Services* scheme with those working in the informal market.

The working experiences of our informants are very heterogeneous. At the time of the interviews, 16 of them worked under the *Titres Services* scheme, 10 worked in the informal sector, two were not working due to health problems, and one worked in a different

area – though he had worked in this occupation before. From the 16 that worked under the *Titres Services* scheme, six combined it with another cleaning job in the informal sector. Among those who worked exclusively in the informal sector, six were undocumented migrants, two had worked for their employers for over 10 years and maintained their working arrangements, and two received economic aid from the state, which they would have lost if they had worked in a declared job. Despite their current working situation, all of them worked in paid domestic work in the informal sector when they arrived in Belgium. Only six had worked in this sector previously to their migration. Most of our informants (24) had experience in more qualified jobs (as industrial workers, administrative employees, nurses, teachers, etc.).

Professionalism

The policies aimed at the professionalization of domestic work have intended to transform the relations between workers and employers, from relations based on status to those based on rights. To achieve this transformation, such policies have focused on a variety of elements, including the demarcation of specific tasks, setting a minimum wage, delimitation of working hours, and recognition of the specific knowledge required for this work (Blackett, 2011). These initiatives have, however, met with some limitations in their implementation (Calleman, 2011; Mundlak and Shamir, 2011; Smith, 2011; Van Walsum, 2011; Vega Ruiz, 2011).

The *Titres Services* scheme has been able to circumvent many of the problems other attempts to professionalize domestic work have encountered, for example, the delimitation of working hours and the possibility of establishing protection for the workers' health (Mundlak and Shamir, 2011; Smith, 2011). This system only considers domestic work that is not 'live in' and which can be performed for one or more employers. In every case, there is a third party in the work relation: an office or agency that, among other tasks, handles payments, health and unemployment insurance, and retirement contributions, ensuring controls difficult to implement in other cases (Vega Ruiz, 2011). The agencies are also responsible for matching workers' and employers' needs, and of finding a new position to those workers who lose an employer. This triangular relationship increases workers' negotiating power and diminishes their dependence on particular employers.

For those of our informants who work under the *Titres Services* scheme, professionalism is a common characteristic that arises when talking about their current working experience. This trope condenses different elements, including equality and dignity of work, which are not specifically related to their experience under the *Titres Services* scheme. Its core, however, is the observation of labor rights after the employee enters the system. In fact, although many of our informants maintained the same employers they had before entering the scheme, the observation of labor rights – regarding working hours, overtime, sick leave, health and unemployment insurance, and the prospect of retirement – in most cases, was achieved only after their entry in the *Titres Services* system:

There are advantages [in working for agencies under the *Titres Services* scheme]. If you work in black [in the informal market] your employer may fire you and not pay you ... But with the

agencies if you lose your job, they help you find another one [and] you [have] unemployment insurance. (Interview with Libia, Colombian woman, Brussels, 6 December 2012)

For Belgians, four hours are four hours, especially if you work under the *Titres Services* [scheme] ... I come from Argentina where still working in a store ... even if you were supposed to work 8 hours, you had to work 10 [hours a day]. (Interview with Mabel, Argentinean woman, Brussels, 17 November 2012)

As we can see in these excerpts, when talking about their current labor conditions, those of our informants who currently work under the *Titres Services* scheme not only establish a contrast with other experiences in paid domestic work in Belgium, but with other working experiences in their home countries, and not only in paid domestic work but in other sectors as well. The majority of our respondents migrated to Europe between the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period characterized by the advance of neo-liberal policies in different Latin American countries, which deepened the already weak welfare state regimes in the region and contributed to the intensification of labor insecurity and unemployment growth (Flores Olea and Mariña Flores, 1999). Despite the current economic crisis in Europe and the pressure on the European welfare state regimes, many of our informants highlight the access to rights not guaranteed in their countries of origin, such as health and unemployment insurance, as part of the professional trope. For example:

... [health] insurance, there [in Ecuador] I had no such insurance. Here [in Belgium], if I go to a hospital I am well treated. Here I pay very little [money] for health insurance, but there [in Ecuador] I would have to pay a lot for it. They [the Belgians] don't play with people's health. (Interview with Liliana, Ecuadorian woman, Brussels, 13 November 2012)

As other studies have shown, the possibility of professionalizing domestic work is closely related to the workers' immigration status (Anderson, 2000). In the Belgian case, the access to social rights depends on this status on at least two levels. On the one hand, having legal residence is a precondition for joining the *Titres Services* scheme. On the other hand, for most of our informants, access to social rights depends less on having entered the system than on the possibility of regularizing their immigration status itself. In this sense, among our respondents, we found four cases of people receiving health pensions from the Belgian state, two of whom are currently employed in paid domestic work in the informal sector and have never been employed under the *Titres Services* scheme. Indeed, for them, entering this scheme would have meant the loss of that benefit.

In our informants' discourse, the professional trope does not refer to their experience under this scheme exclusively. Professionalism is not only related to working conditions, but also to the way in which workers perceive themselves. In this regard, our informants – both those who work under the system and those who work in the informal market – construct an ambivalent image of paid domestic work. While paid domestic work is seen as an unskilled job, our informants are also proud of their work, in that they know how the domestic tasks should be organized in order to increase efficiency, which products should be used in order to clean and protect different surfaces, or which techniques

should be implemented for ironing, etc. The possession of the specific knowledge required for this job is also an element of the professional image our informants constructed through their discourse.

However, men and women link this specific knowledge to different experiences. While women tend to highlight its relation to unpaid domestic work, men emphasize its connection with their previous working experience. This relation does not depend on our informants' previous working experience: most of them – both men and women – participated in the labor market in their home countries, but did not work in paid domestic work before migrating:

Mercedes: Thank God [my employers] are happy with my work.

Interviewer: And what do you attribute this to?

M: My mom. I thank my mom that she always taught us to be responsible. Then we've got to be responsible and do things well. (Interview with Mercedes, Colombian woman, 50 years old, Brussels, 12 December 2012)

They [the employers] asked me 'what can you do?', 'I can do everything, I wash, iron, cook, clean.' Because the work I had done before helped me. I worked in the hotels and, there, one had to go through all areas. (Interview with José Carlos, Salvadorian man, 42 years old, Brussels, 17 March 2013)

When she [the employer] asked me to iron [her husband's] shirts, I did it well, because back in the store in Ecuador, I learned to iron cuffs and everything, and they looked like new. (Interview with Yoder, Ecuadorian man, 44 years old, Brussels, 19 March 2013)

On the other hand, for our informants – both those who work under the *Titres Services* scheme and those who work in the informal market – the equal treatment received from their employers also represents the recognition of a professional status. An employer's invitation to share a meal with them is perhaps the practice most frequently recalled to symbolize equality, though, as we can see below, it is sometimes experienced with anxiety:

Here [in Belgium] they always treat you with respect There [in Ecuador], they make them [domestic employees] wear [a] uniform and everything. (Interview with Liliana, Ecuadorian woman, Brussels, 13 November 2012)

My Spanish employers used to say to me 'come, sit and eat with us'. I used to set the table, but I don't know, I was ashamed to eat with them. (Interview with Ivonne, Salvadorian woman, Brussels, 20 November 2012)

Although the intervention of the agencies implied in the *Titres Services* scheme favors the workers' possibility to confront their employers, or to look for another job when they do not feel comfortable, our informants relate this equal treatment to their employers' personal qualities rather than to the experience under the scheme. They highlight this treatment by establishing a contrast to the image of domestic work as a servile occupation.

In fact, despite the observation of their labor rights, the assertion of their specific knowledge, and the equal treatment received from their employers, our informants see domestic work in an ambivalent way. As we shall see in the following section, the experience of paid domestic work under the *Titres Services* scheme is not always valued positively.

The 'servant' trope

For most of our informants, even the highly educated ones, it was impossible to find a job outside domestic work. As documented in other studies, many of the migrants – both male and female – employed as domestic workers in the global North are highly qualified, and experience this job as a step down on the social ladder and a misrecognition of their abilities (Salazar Parreñas, 2001). This perception is intensified in the case of men. Even those who had previously been involved in feminine occupations, as in the case quoted below, experience the inability to find a job other than paid domestic work as a form of marginalization due to their national origin:

It is much more difficult for a man, but it varies according to one's professional area. Of course if one comes with a profession such as painting, or mason, it's easier to get into a company. But it's much more difficult in my case: I am a nurse. I have been here for seven years, and since I've arrived, I started trying to get my degree approved with no results to this date. I have some guys I work with in house cleaning, and they've told me 'if you do not have someone here [in Belgium], a Belgian aid, it's not easy to open doors'. There is this marginalization, especially for Latinos, although not only for Latinos. Even in this area of nursing, ... it is not easy to find employment. (Interview with José Carlos, Salvadorian man, 42 years old, 17 March 2013)

This is confirmed by other data. In 2011, 50% of the Ecuadorian women and 17% of the Ecuadorian men living in Belgium were employed in 'domestic' or 'cleaning' services (Embajada de Ecuador en Bruselas, 2012). This was, in fact, the main occupation among women and the second among men.³ In this regard, Latin American migrants perceive that their national origin places them in a worse position than other minorities, such as African descendants, who, due to the fact that they migrated under different legal conditions, encounter fewer difficulties entering the labor market in other sectors. Moreover, the inability to speak the official languages in the Brussels region, either French or Dutch, places migrants in a vulnerable position, which leads them to look for jobs with employers who speak Spanish or who accept workers who do not speak their language, deepening the migrants' dependence on these employers. In fact, most of our informants – both those who work under the *Titres Services* scheme and those who are employed in the informal market – work for non-Belgian employers.

Workers' nationality also influences their pay, even within the *Titres Services* scheme. In 2009, the average pay was €9.6 per hour, and most workers (59%) earned between €70 and €80 per day. However, this varied according to the workers' origin. Those who were non-European tended to have lower salaries than the rest: in 2009, while the daily income of 57% of the Belgian workers was €70 or more, this percentage reached 48% for non-Europeans. The comparison is also significant among the workers on the lowest incomes: while the daily income of only 7% of the Belgian workers was less than €60, this

percentage doubled (14%) among the non-Europeans (Devisscher et al., 2010). In the case of Latin American migrants, this may be related to their inability to speak the official languages of the region, leading them to accept poor working conditions in order to maintain their jobs.

This disparity is reflected in workers' satisfaction with the scheme. In general terms, foreign workers are less satisfied than Belgian ones, and this is especially true for the non-European workers. The aspects, which contribute to this relative dissatisfaction most significantly are how strenuous the work is, the work environment, the communication with the employer, and salaries (Gerard et al., 2012).

In fact, many informants told us they used to earn more money in the informal market than they do under the *Titres Services* scheme, and that is why many of them tried to keep some jobs outside the scheme. In that way, they were able to combine the advantages of each kind of employment. As we can see in the following excerpt, the difference in the money they were paid and the money the state paid the agencies was, in fact, perceived as a new form of exploitation:

Agencies are good, they do help, but they also exploit us. I do not know if you are aware of how the agencies work. It is the state who pays half our salary. And the state is paying the agencies €25 for each check, that is, for every hour we work. However, the agencies pay us €11 per hour. Then there are €14 that they are keeping. They have to pay vacation, social security, I know, but it [the money agencies are keeping] is far more than half [the money they are paid]. (Interview with Arsenia, Paraguayan woman, 14 December 2012)

In our informants' discourse, whether they were working under the *Titres Services* scheme or in the informal market, paid domestic work was identified as a demeaning job. For most of them who had not been employed in this occupation before migration, being employed in paid domestic work implied a decline in social and occupational hierarchy. This is particularly visible among highly educated and 'middle class' women who used to be employers of domestic workers back in their home countries, and male respondents employed in this feminized occupation:

It [being employed in paid domestic work] was very hard for me, because I had never been a 'maid'. And, to tell the truth, that made me feel [bad], I began to cry, because I had never received orders, 'give me this, get me that', I used to be the one who gave orders. (Interview with Edith, Ecuadorian woman, Brussels, 11 November 2012)

In Ecuador I was an independent man, I had my own business: I was a merchant. To me, [being employed in paid domestic work] was a bit hard, because I had never been an employee, I was the employer in the warehouse, and I had 10 ironers under my supervision. I rented an entire store, and the business was mine, I invested and sold. I never got to have a 'patron'. And of course when I came here [to Brussels] I was a little shocked, but I said 'who cares', here my goal was to pay my debts in Ecuador and to help my family. (Interview with Yoder, Ecuadorian man, 44 years old, Brussels, 19 March 2013)

The identification of paid domestic work as a demeaning occupation is anchored in its characterization as 'dirty'. The uncertainty of the tasks that can be legally required from

workers, which is linked to the presentation of domestic work as a servile occupation, results in tensions between workers and employers. As can be seen in the following excerpt, employers may request that workers perform tasks considered inappropriate and which they consider 'nasty', 'disgusting', or even 'extreme':

[Paid domestic work] is hyper difficult because you have to face many nasty things you would rather not do. For example, girls who leave their underwear on the floor, even condoms. That's an extreme situation. I do not pick them up, I use the vacuum cleaner. I work with a girl who is about 35 years old. And that girl has her dirty clothes mixed with the clean ones, panties and socks, and I do not know what's clean and what's not. That's disgusting. (Interview with Eugenia, Ecuadorian woman, Brussels, 1 December 2012)

The perception of domestic work as a 'dirty' and 'servile' occupation is a key element in its racialization: dirty tasks are degrading and, therefore, should be done by someone somehow 'different' (Anderson, 2000; Nakano Glenn, 1992). The policies addressed to improve the labor conditions of paid domestic work have not been able to change this. Domestic employment is a space of acculturation, where cultural difference is experienced as inequality (Sarti, 2005; Von Oertzen, 2005). The employers' customs, their cleaning criteria, and even the availability of household appliances, are also a source of tension when they differ markedly from those of the home countries. As we can see in the next excerpt, employers' particular demands about how to perform different tasks deny the workers' knowledge, underlining the inequality associated with the servile condition:

One cleans on one side and they [the employers] say 'no, clean that [other] side', as if you were a black slave ... So I said 'no, ma'am, let them [the agency] send you another person' ... She had the money, so she believed I had to bend. (Interview with Mercedes, Colombian woman, Brussels, 12 December 2012)

The indetermination of tasks to be fulfilled by workers creates additional difficulties, which are linked to the invisibility of (paid and unpaid) domestic work. Employers who use the service vouchers usually request paid domestic work to be performed when they are not home. Nobody sees the worker as she or he performs the assigned tasks, which are often not set out in detail by the employer, but rather depend on the workers' judgment. If this situation gives them more freedom, it also makes their work less visible. Domestic workers, particularly those employed under the *Titres Services* scheme, whose salary depends on the hours worked, develop strategies to make their work visible and to show they have needed all the hours for which they have been paid. Some workers spend unnecessary time in their workplace in order to be seen when the employers return home, often performing some extra work which afterwards becomes part of the activities required by employers.

Conclusion

In this article we have shown that public policies that are intended to improve domestic workers' labor conditions can meet serious obstacles under racialized and gendered

working conditions. We have explored how Latin American migrants in Brussels experience the changes promoted by the *Titres Services* scheme, focusing on two tropes – the ‘professional’ and the ‘servant’ – which have been derived from our informants’ discourse on their labor situation. We have focused on those informants who currently work under this scheme, and have established a counterpoint both to their previous experience and to the experience of other Latin American migrants currently working in the informal market. From this analysis, we have shown that although our informants value the support of labor rights under *Titres Services*, this scheme is unable to counter the inequalities they experience in paid domestic work.

Faced with the skepticism that has dominated current literature on the professionalization of domestic work, we can argue on the basis of our findings that policies such as the *Titres Services* scheme have improved domestic workers’ labor conditions. The limitation of the working hours, the access to unemployment and health insurance, and the prospect of retirement are elements especially valued by our informants. The intervention of the agencies in the work relation is also distinctly relevant. While these agencies may not always be able to improve workers’ labor conditions with individual employers, they can help them find other employers. In this regard, agencies improve workers’ negotiation power and limit their dependence on individual employers, which is stronger in the informal market, particularly for undocumented migrants.

However, these improvements are also limited. On one hand, the *Titres Services* scheme does not resolve the indeterminate nature of the tasks that can be legally required from domestic workers, something which leaves their determination to an employer’s discretion. The fact that domestic work is often done during the employer’s absence reinforces the invisibility of the work performed, a common threat to paid and unpaid domestic work. Finally, equal treatment, which is what professionalism means to many of our informants, does not depend on whether or not they work under the *Titres Services* scheme, but rather on whether they receive appreciation and good treatment from their employers.

Cultural differences may still be experienced as inequality under the *Titres Services* scheme. Many of our informants receive lower salaries under this scheme than what they used to earn in the informal market. In fact, non-European migrants’ salaries under the system are also lower than those received by Belgian citizens and intra-European migrants that work under this scheme. In the case of our informants, their inability to speak the official languages has forced many of them to accept worse working conditions, while limiting the number of employers they can work for.

Workers’ immigration status continues to play a central role in their access to labor and social rights. In the case under study it is difficult to address this specific issue, as long as the *Titres Services* scheme only allows the employment of migrants who have legal residency in Belgium. However, the analysis of our informants’ discourse is revealing. From their perspective, a central problem is the impossibility to access other types of employment, linked to the lack of recognition of the competences, skills, and work experience they acquired before migrating. In our informants’ view, this is significant because other minorities, such as African descendants who migrated under different legal conditions, find fewer obstacles when they attempt to find employment in other occupations.

In this regard, we can conclude that, although the *Titres Services* scheme has improved domestic workers' labor conditions, our informants' view of domestic work was not fundamentally changed by their experience under this scheme. The persistence of the identification of paid domestic work as a 'dirty' and 'servile' job from which migrants – particularly Latin Americans – cannot escape, no matter what their personal qualifications or previous job experience, hinders their attempts to improve the professional image and the labor conditions of this occupation. In a scenario in which domestic work is performed by migrant women – and, more recently, men – the attempts to professionalize it have only had limited effects on migrant domestic workers' experience of paid domestic work.

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Notes

1. We use the term 'paid domestic work' to discuss what could be identified as 'domestic service' or 'proximity services', that is domestic and care work performed in return for a wage. Each term has specific connotations, which we try to neutralize by using 'paid domestic work' as a generic concept.
2. A category difficult to classify but rather frequent in Brussels due to the international functions of the city are domestic workers under a 'diplomatic' regime. These migrants arrive in Belgium with a legal employment contract for a fixed term with a diplomatic agent. Their legal residence in the country depends on this contract, making them totally dependent on their employers, who in some cases even retain the workers' passports (Pasleau and Schopp, 2005b).
3. We obtained these figures by adding up the percentages for the occupational categories 'domestic employment' and 'cleaning' used in a report carried out by the Embassy of Ecuador in Belgium (Embajada de Ecuador, 2012: 16).

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