

Switching from informal to formal labor market in Brussels: What changes for live-out domestic workers?

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Bio Note

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Abstract

This paper¹ investigates changes in the domestic work sector when passing from the informal to the formal labor market. The issue is explored within the context of the housework voucher policy (*titres-services*), which allows households to officially purchase weekly housework services from an authorized agency, through vouchers. This contribution has therefore a twofold focus: observing changes in labor market dynamics and investigating workers' perception of this change. In order to discuss these issues, I will firstly look at the step from informal to formal labor market through two aspects: ethnic niches and individual labor dynamics – two bedrocks of Brussels domestic work market. Then, I will analyze workers' personal experiences when acquiring a declared job in the voucher system.

Analyzing objective and subjective changes, a central question of this article is to which extent the switch to the housework voucher system can bring empowerment to domestic workers. The sector work quality, in objective and subjective terms, has improved mainly by the setting of rules and by allowing workers to enjoy labor rights and a work status. The formal market dynamics of the housework voucher system remain, however, profoundly ethicized and marked by women's presence, as was/is the shadow market.

¹ This contribution is a chapter of my thesis (in French), to which I added an introduction on the Belgian housework voucher system and some methodological clarifications. In the original chapter, there is a discussion of the role of authorized companies' contributions to the quality of work, which is not reproduced here due to the lack of space.

The article shows that workers' understanding of the transition from an informal to a formal sector is largely a result of their previous experiences and social position, mainly regarding migration status. This change will be thus much more assertive for workers who had their migrant status regularization and work formalization processes concomitantly, demonstrating that the most empowering shift is the one of acquiring *papers*, and not of entering declared work.

Introduction

This paper investigates changes in the domestic work sector when passing from the informal to the formal labor market². The issue is explored within the context of the housework voucher policy (*titres-services*), which allows households to officially purchase weekly housework services from an authorized agency, through vouchers. This contribution has therefore a twofold focus: observing changes in labor market dynamics and investigating workers' perception of this change.

The implementation of the housework voucher policy in 2004 in the Brussels region brought significant increase in the job quality comparing to the informal sector, mainly owing to the recognition of labor rights and a work status, and the introduction of an intermediary actor. The underlying structure of this 'new' labor market is, though, largely borrowed from the existing historical informal market.

On the migrant workers' side, the understanding of the transition from an informal to a formal sector is largely a result of their previous experiences and social position, mainly regarding migration status. Analyzing objective and subjective changes, a central question of this article is to which extent the switch to the housework voucher system can bring empowerment to domestic workers. It appears that the group of workers who experienced a long period as undocumented migrant sees the transition to regular status as empowering, and will recognize transition to formal work as a part of this major change. In opposition, those whose experience in stepping into declared work is 'alone' are attached to practical benefits, but without necessarily experiencing change in their identity.

In order to discuss these issues, I will first briefly explain my methodology, introduce the functioning of the housework voucher policy and demonstrate the specificity of the policy in the Brussels Region, by resorting to concrete research findings and relevant available data. Thereafter, I will look at the step from informal to formal labor market,

² Many authors have criticized the use of the words 'informal'/'formal' because of its artificiality (inasmuch as some sectors run into each other and are hardly separable) and its imprecision – 'informal' meaning precisely 'lack of form' (Rosenfeld, 2013:64). Considering the absence of a better term determining a socio-economic sector such as domestic work which is historically not controlled by the state (mainly concerning labor taxes), considered as a private issue and has its origin in the non-paid work, I will adopt the word 'informal'/'formal' as well as 'undeclared' or shadow/'declared' for the domestic work (labor) market. I employ 'informal'/'formal' in opposition to 'regular'/'irregular' migrant status, the last referring to the lack of an authorization to stay and work in a due country (in this case, Belgium), following other authors (more recently, Schwenken and Heimeshoff, 2013).

through two aspects: ethnic niches and individual labor dynamics – two bedrocks of Brussels domestic work market. Finally, I will analyze workers' personal experiences when acquiring a declared job and to which extent they can be a source of empowerment.

Methodology

This contribution is part of a broader PhD, initiated in 2011, investigating Brussels domestic work sector. This qualitative research is based on in-depth or semi-structured interviews with domestic workers (30), domestic work purchasers (28) and authorized companies (16), besides other stakeholders and social actors. The interviews were held in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese (translated by the author when quoted). Statistical data from the more recent housework voucher system annual assessment (Idea, 2011-2013) gives an overview of the sector and complements the findings.

Most of the 30 workers participating in the research are foreign, or, in three cases, Belgian nationals with foreign background. All of them are first generation migrants, 21 of whom from non-EU countries: Argentina, Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Macedonia, Pakistan and The Philippines. Other 9 participants came from Poland, Portugal and Romania, sometimes years before their countries became EU Member States.

The Belgian housework voucher system

Since early 2000s, the Belgian government was successful in fostering a formal housework market, mainly by providing subsidies to former employers aimed at encouraging them to switch to the voucher service. Ex-employers become then clients and authorized agencies are henceforth the ones employing the workers.³ The price of the voucher is subsidized, reaching €9/hour (2015⁴), and households benefit from a tax deduction of 30% or a tax credit on the voucher value, up to the limit of €1,380 per

³ To avoid vocabulary mixing with the word 'employer', I will use 'clients' for households purchasing voucher services and 'employers' for direct employers, in formal or informal arrangements. I will often refer to all purchasers as 'employers/clients'.

⁴ Price from January 2014 (above 400 vouchers purchased, price will increase to €10). The most recent assessment published, however, is from 2012, when the hourly voucher cost €7.50. For each voucher, government currently pays €13.04.

person/year (lowering the price to €6.30/hour after the tax deduction)⁵. With a view to creating (new) formal jobs and supporting work/life balance, the State delegates this services to the ‘more efficient’ private market, but subsidizes them through significant tax reductions, which clearly benefits middle and upper classes (Devetter and Rousseau, 2011).

The policy is thus conceived for domestic workers paid on an hourly basis. For full-time employees, there is a domestic servant status under Belgian law, which is rarely chosen by employers because it is considered ‘bureaucratic’ and expensive (in terms of tax and social charges), while the employer is legally responsible for the worker. Additionally, the domestic servant status provides less protection and advantages or benefits to workers (Michielsen et al., 2013). Besides formal arrangements, informal labor might persist as well, in all types of domestic work in Brussels and mostly in *live-in* arrangements. It is nevertheless hard to show a reliable figure on how broad the shadow market is (Gutiérrez and Craenen, 2010; Michielsen et al., 2013).

In the Brussels region, the profile of workers, clients and authorized agencies is *suis generis* comparing to the rest of the country. This particularity may be understood under the light of the global cities literature, first addressed by Sassen (2007).⁶ Available data on clients of the voucher system indicates that they are younger, wealthier and more educated in Brussels than the clients’ national average.⁷

Similarly, only 22.3% of the 21,179 of the housework voucher workers in Brussels are nationals, *versus* 71.7% of Belgians in the national average. Europeans from the EU-27 (except Belgium) represent 56.4% of the workforce, and non-EU account for 21.3% all together (Idea, 2013:35). These data do not take into account Belgians with foreign background, which could further increase the sector’s ‘ethnicisation’.⁸ As to gender

⁵ Authorized tasks are: cleaning, laundry, ironing, meal preparation and occasional sewing. Outdoor services include small errands, ironing performed in an ironing center (if the company has one) and transport for disabled people.

⁶ According to Sassen (2007:109), globalized financial centers need both highly qualified and specialized professionals and a great number of manual and low-paid-jobs. At the same time, there is a demand for (all kinds of) domestic services to guarantee the lifestyle of these highly qualified and well paid professionals (Parreñas, 2001:26).

⁷ My interviews with clients/employers confirm the presence of highly qualified workers attracted to the global city: most part are Belgian or migrants enjoying a comfortable living environment. They are mainly women and, often, they or their partners are working within EU institutions or multinational companies.

⁸ The “Socio-Economic Monitoring report” (2013:309) indicated the overrepresentation of migrants and nationals with a foreign background in low paid positions such as the Belgian voucher system.

aspects, field work and statistics confirm that workers are mainly women.⁹ It is worth noting that only nationals or migrants with regular stay can join the housework voucher system. Besides, there is no possibility for non-Europeans to immigrate to Belgium under the voucher policy.

When it comes to authorized agencies, their range includes individuals, non-profit organizations, temporary work agencies, private companies and local public organizations. This heterogenous setting creates disparities *a priori* in the policy application, since the authorized companies do not necessarily have a converging interest (Henry et al., 2009). In Brussels, there is a majority of profit-making structures among authorized companies, whether private, temporary work agency or individual, and competition is high (Henry et al., 2009; Idea, 2012).

Moving towards the formal... but keeping the informal

Practices of the previous and still existing informal labor market are to a great extent reproduced within the voucher system. This process is led by, on the one hand, the embedded structure of the informal market, fueled by (ethnic) networks and, on the other hand, the very essential characteristic of the domestic work: an individual job where the employment is supported by the relationship between worker and householder. These questions will be discussed below.

Ethnic niches and networking

Housework voucher agencies in Brussels reflect the stratification of the sector into ethnic niches, or the concentration of nationals, ethnic, linguistic or religious groups in certain sectors or activities, as defined by Waldinger (1994, 2005). Indeed, many agency owners are non-Belgians or nationals with foreign background.¹⁰ Agency staff (human resources role) also reflects the significant presence of ethnic niches in Brussels: 57.74% of Belgians, 34% of EU-27 nationals and 8.3% of non-EU nationals; while at the national level they were, respectively, 90.6%, 8.1% and 1.3% (Idea, 2013:120).

⁹ Brussels counts, however, with more men workers: 4.9% versus 2.6% nationally (Idea, 2013:35). I interviewed four migrant men in my fieldwork: two voucher workers and two (undocumented) informal domestic workers.

¹⁰ Sixteen managers or owners of authorized agencies were interviewed, seven of whom were non-Belgians or nationals with a foreign background (Brazilian, Moroccan, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish and Turkish).

Similarly, recruitment practices are mostly informal (word of mouth) and based on ethnic networks, with some companies making use of their own ethnic belonging or proximity (Camargo and Rea, 2013), or using staff from ethnic minorities to attract specific groups. This is especially the case, according to my field work, for Polish, Latin-American, and Filipino workers, three groups well established in the informal market of the domestic work enjoying good reputation. Authorized agencies use small ads as well, in local or ethnic newspapers.¹¹

Within a market dominated by ethnic niches, workers will move towards better opportunities or improve their job conditions thanks to their agency or social capital, mixing strong ties (family/friends, often in the ethnic group) and weak ties (employers/clients/school, etc.) (Granovetter, 1983). Therefore, similar to other authors' findings (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Waldinger, 2005), workers often find their first position in the domestic work market thanks to strong ties. Church networks are also very useful, as people exchange information and job opportunities, and communitarian solidarity acts in favor of helping the newly arrived. Diego¹², a 32-years-old Ecuadorian, found all his jobs via the church. He is a non-believer, but strategically accompanied his aunt to Sunday worships, willing to enter the Latin-American community's network.

Interestingly, if Diego's experience refers to a moment where he was undocumented, workers in the voucher system continue to rely on individual networks to find one or more positions, mostly because they do not want to depend on the authorized agency. If they decide to change employer, they can do it by moving with their clientele, thereby transforming their social capital in economic capital: having its 'own' clients is very valued by authorized companies and can bring bonus and other advantages.

Once they 'have' at least one household, workers are less dependent of strong ties, as they begin to access the employer's/client's network (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Lutz, 2011). Purchasers' networks allow workers to achieve better positions: instead of accessing a position left by another worker, which often means, according to the 'exit strategy' (Michielsen et al., 2013:43), that the job is not that great, the worker is the 'first option' of the employer/client and can try to negotiate its own conditions. At least,

¹¹ 'Ethnic newspapers' designate ethnic or migrant minorities' publications. In the Polish *Gazetka* (2012) I found 21 ads for authorized companies.

¹² Participants' names were changed to preserve their identity.

the worker would have the same conditions as offered at the current job. Then, a good employer/client can bring another good employer/client. This situation not only applies for the voucher system, but has the advantage that payment and rules are pre-established (but not always respected, as many households perform non-allowed tasks). Accordingly, Gabrielle explains how she got into the employer's network:

“I have a friend who wanted me to come with her, to help her. So when the employer saw me, she said: ‘If you want to, if you need some work, I know some people looking for someone’. I said: ‘Yeah that’s a good idea. I’m looking for a job’. So I found this one employer. And then this employer, you know, asked her friend, and then friend, friend, friend. So I work now full time.” (Gabrielle, Filipina, 35, arrived in 2001, voucher worker since her regularization in 2011).

‘Self-employed’ salaried workers

Live-out domestic work is more often characterized by working weekly a few hours at many different employers, which can bring more liberty and less dependency of a specific employer (Anderson, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). As Lutz (2011:32) has explored, the absence of social protection and contract in the work relationship, as well as partial liberty in setting a schedule or in accomplishing tasks, can lead to the idea that hourly cleaners are ‘self-employed’ offering a service to households. On the other side, employers do not like to be considered as employers and prefer to define themselves as consumers of a service. Even though this ‘liberty’ in the informal market is often coupled with a lack of job security or labor rights, an important aspect of the auto-definition of ‘self-employed’ is the construction of a positive professional identity, as autonomous, active and free, *"instead of presenting themselves as victims of circumstance and pawns of fate"*, as noted by Lutz (2011:76).

When the hourly paid domestic work enters the formal market with the voucher policy, with mainly the same actors as in the previous situation, work dynamics tend to be preserved from changes. The possibilities for workers to build their own schedule and to choose their clients, even if to a certain limit, are some of the elements contributing to the maintenance of practices. For instance, Mia, Filipina, 34 years of age, works in the voucher system since her regularization in 2011 and likes it mostly because she can set her own schedule. Her husband is working full time in a hotel and earns better wages, but she prefers to have flexible hours and she is the one responsible for dropping and

picking their child at school, since paying the after-school center (*garderie*) would be too expensive for them.

We argue that the structure of the housework voucher policy favors the vision of workers as self-employed or ‘autonomous wage earners’, for many reasons. Firstly, clients in the system have no other obligations with workers than to give them the vouchers due, in spite of the fact that work is performed at their place. There is therefore no guarantee of work stability for employees of the voucher policy, as clients can leave the system (or change workers) whenever they want, without a notice.

Secondly, the system functions on the basis of the voucher reimbursement, which implies that the monthly salary can never be precisely previewed: it will be the addition of all worked hours, independently of the employee’s work contract. This situation is very close to the current ‘*no work, no pay*’ in the informal market. It is important to consider that the workers are now covered in case of accident or illness and enjoy public holidays and access social rights, which is not insignificant. However, appointments cancelled at the last minute or clients’ summer vacation make employees lose salary, as the agency is not always capable to give them a replacement or claim ‘technical unemployment’ (*chômage technique*). Juggling with a full agenda of clients and, more importantly, having a personal relationship with them, are means to secure employment, in a way similar to what happens in the informal market.

The situation of workers regularized through the 2009 campaign under work permit B¹³ is even more unstable: to renew this permit for one more year, they have to prove they have honored their contract hours all. Some workers live in anxiety fearing to lose a client or not having sufficient hours for the permit renewing.

Workers’ experience in the switch to formal work

When workers decide to change towards a declared employment in the housework voucher system, several factors influence the perception of their new work status.

¹³ The work permit ‘B’ is a work authorization made by the employer that allows a stay for a one-year-period based on the work contract (it is a ‘work visa’). The permit B is hardly given for domestic work, but there was an exception for the Regularization campaign: workers introducing a contract with an authorized agency (among other requirements such as local integration) could be given an annual stay through a work permit B based on the work contract. Scholars and NGOs dealing with migrants’ rights claim that Belgian permit B leaves workers vulnerable as they depend on employers to renew their stay and can hardly change employer or sector (Gutiérrez and Craenen, 2010:24).

Participants working in the housework voucher policy which were previously in the informal sector consider the switch to a formal job as positive: they have henceforth access to a written contract, to a more or less regular wage and to several labor rights such as seek leave, maternal leave, paid vacations and retirement benefits. Participating in the formal labor market equally opens the possibility of being unionized.¹⁴ Even though workers do lose financially when quitting informality – confirmed by almost all the participants –, in a long-term rationale, most of them prefer their current situation in the formal market. Moreover, their daily work remains largely unchanged (Camargo, Freitas, and Godin, forthcoming), even if some households have adapted to the voucher services rules.

My field work demonstrates that domestic workers' experience, when joining formal work, will vary according to their previous experiences, expectations and social position. Their social position is first and foremost defined by their migration status, according to their nationality and moment of arrival in Belgium. I have therefore identified two groups: participants who have experienced the passage from irregular to regular migration status at the same time as the switch throughout a formal labor market; and participants who stepped in the formal sector when they enjoyed already a regular migrant status (or had Belgian nationality).

In the first group, which concerns 18 current employees of the voucher system, most part of participants were regularized at the Regularization campaign in 2009, and a few by their country entrance in the EU. These workers often spent many years as undocumented migrants, working as domestic workers in the shadow market. Some of them started as live-in workers and gradually built a clientele for weekly cleanings, a path described by other authors (Anderson, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007).

This group is positively attached to changes arising in the passage towards the voucher system. Silvana, who lived 12 years as an irregular migrant before being regularized in 2009, does not manage separating work formalization and migrant status regularization processes:

¹⁴ Even though it is possible to be unionized being undocumented, relations between trade unions and migrants workers remain often tensed by the idea that these workers are in unfair competition with nationals (Schwenken, 2011:118).

- What changed in your life when you first started working in the voucher company?
- *What changed,...Today I have no fears of leaving my job [laughs], because I trust myself and know I will find another one, because, by the fact of having documents, you have more...More rights. Because when you don't have documents, it's not everyone that employs someone in the shadow market. Mostly, you have more self-confidence, I have more confidence to face situations.(...) Since I'm documented, I'm braver to face things.*
- But which part in the change is coming from the voucher agency? Because this is about having documents, isn't it?
- *Hum, yeah... At the agency, one, because girls are super nice! And then, how to say it, we feel secured. Like, if something happens, I know that the agency is there to help us... That's for me the main change with the agency: if I need them, they're there to help me.* (Silvana, Brazilian, 35, arrived in 1997, voucher worker since regularization in 2009).

The barrier of rights that Silvana crossed with the regularization of her migrant status seems to be crucial to all subsequent changings. She no more lives in fear of not finding a job as undocumented and can '*face things*' because she now has self-confidence of being entitled to her rights. Silvana works since 2000 for one same household and, at the time of the interview, would like to drop it, because she was growing weary of the exigency level of her client and of doing 'everything' in the house, including not-allowed-tasks in the voucher system, such as car-washing. The social aspect of being a voucher worker (meeting weekly staff members, '*the girls*'), is highly valued by Silvana, perhaps because all these years she lived quite isolated between work and family obligations. Her divorce of a possessive husband in 2009 and having a new stable partner can also be cited as factors helping her gain self-confidence.

Márcia, another Brazilian, who was regularized under a work permit B in 2009, has no choice than to work into the housework voucher as for her migrant status. She is convinced, nevertheless, of the advantages of her current situation:

“[Now] I also have access to the law, I have rights and duties, that's what has changed. You don't have to live hidden anymore, be illegal. Because people come here, this is a country that gives opportunities for everybody. But if you're illegal, you have nothing. You have the money you earn, but if you get sick, for example, you won't earn anything, neither from your work nor from the government. For me, that's what has evolved”. (Márcia, Brazilian, 42, arrived in 2003, voucher worker since regularization in 2010).

Within the first group, individual perceptions and previous experiences can influence the weight workers give to their situation or, in other words, the level of stress they accord to 'being illegal' (Lutz, 2011:154). Ester, for instance, evokes that she was terrified with the idea of being subjected to an identity control, as she was conducted each two weeks to Brussels by car by her employer, for whom she worked as live-in domestic worker, just after arriving in Belgium.

“People told me that there could be identity controls in the car, on the road, and all that... So I always felt as I was risking my life [when traveling]”. (Ester, Bolivian, about 47, arrived in 2005, voucher worker since regularization in 2011).

With the introduction of tourist visa requirement for the Schengen Area for Bolivian nationals, in 2007, Ester could not visit her six children in Bolivia and, if she was expelled, she would no longer be able to come back to Belgium. She lives with her eldest, Renata, who came to Belgium in 2006. Both are today regularized under the work permit B, which allows Ester to visit her family but makes her permanently anguished for the renewal.

Workers of the second group share the distinction between the regularity of stay and the formality of work. Their migration status was no longer a concern at the moment they stepped into the formal market, and their decision is globally more rational, linked to employment opportunities, benefits and job security. Workers in this group come from two main backgrounds: migrants arriving in Belgium with a regular stay (or that were quickly regularized) through family reunification; or Europeans coming under the scope of the EU-circulation.

Most of participants in this group were working previously in the shadow market. My findings show that some of them express satisfaction of having an ‘official’ job and no longer being part of the ‘underground economy’. Further, they appreciate being recognized ‘as a worker’. Many of them entered into the voucher policy in its beginnings or at their arrival, if after 2004, attracted by social protection and the work status. Others did it later, by clients’ pressure or friends’ advices.

For instance, Anya, a 55-years-old Polish worker, married to a Belgian almost since her arrival in the 1990’s. She started just after to work as a housecleaner, but decided to enter the voucher system only in 2008, after a health problem that confined her to bed for several months, without any earnings. For Europeans arriving in Belgium using EU circulation, entering in the voucher system was at the same time the opportunity to have a declared work and to earn a higher salary than at the country of origin. Mainly Portuguese and Polish participants were in this case.

Other factors not directly related to work can also be at play. Ewa, another Polish woman, 32 years of age, arrived in Belgium in 2006 as ‘au pair’ and worked two years for a family, which eventually hired her informally at the end of her visa as a live-out

domestic worker. When transitional period for Polish nationals had finished in 2009¹⁵, her choice to work formally was mainly to be able to give her Moldavian partner a stay permit:

"I was already with him but we couldn't marry at the town hall because I was working on the side. We married in the church, actually, but it changed nothing [for the papers], we had to do it at the town hall. So we waited until I had a declared work, it was in 2010, no already in 2009". (Ewa, Polish, 32 years of age, arrived in 2006, voucher worker since 2009).

Indeed, Ewa would not be able to officially settle, and therefore to initiate a family reunification process, without presenting at the administration a formal work contract justifying her stay in Belgium.

For an educated woman that was trying to integrate the Belgian labor market, entering the voucher service sector was an alternative face to the difficulty of acquiring diploma equivalences and recognition of previous professional experience. Amandine's story testifies Belgian society discrimination:

"As I was going along sending my CVs, I realized, I didn't see it right away, I realized that the only moment that one could accept me without talking about diploma, without talking about I don't know what, was... Because I said to myself that it's the thing the most, well, you don't have to have a diploma to do cleaning. So I fell back on this sector, saying to myself: 'Well perhaps here I can at least start'. People kept telling me, for no matter what job: 'Yeah, but you never worked in Belgium' (...) Well, someone should accept me once, for me to start somewhere. But everyone told me: 'No, you have never worked in Belgium, so this is a problem for us'." (Amandine, Beninese, 33 years of age, arrived in 2011, voucher worker since 2012)

After a year looking for a job in her domain (administrative work in a NGO), she finally got a job in the voucher system through a contact of her partner's aunt, that knew an authorized agency owner. If working formally is generally valued, it loses significance for those participants, as Amandine, which experience downward mobility while being a regular migrant, a process explored by many authors (among others, Parreñas, 2001; Solé, Parella, and Alarcón, 2009).

Above stories show that the second group is more heterogenic than the first one concerning motivations when switching to formal domestic work. Participants'

¹⁵ In Belgium, 'transitional period' covered from 2007 to 2009 for Polish nationals and from 2009 to 2014 for Romanians and Bulgarians. During this period, national of these countries should introduce a work permit B demand to work as an employee, under conditions made more relax considering the 'traditional' procedure: there was no exclusivity for sectors under labor shortage or national labor market analysis were not done. From the adhesion of the countries to EU in 2004, nevertheless, services could circulate freely.

educational level and their motivations to immigrate¹⁶ have more influence than the value that they give to formal employment in the voucher system. Unlike the first group, they are not – or much less – impacted by a period as undocumented migrant and, for those who have been a live-out domestic worker in shadow market for many years, going towards declared economy means to weigh up the pros and cons in a more rational though still very subjective judgment.

Inquiring on the possibility of empowerment of these two observed groups, it appears that the step towards regularization has more impact in workers' life than the one towards formal work, even though for the first group these moments are difficult to separate. The empowerment brought by a migrant status means an identity change (*no longer 'illegal'* as said Márcia) and opens the scope of new life possibilities (having *more rights*). It also means gaining self-confidence (*I have no fears of leaving my job, because I trust myself and know I will find another one*, according to Silvana).

Following the definition of empowerment of Adjmagbo and Calvès on three dimensions of power¹⁷ (2012:10), the regularization process is empowering precisely because it gives the opportunity for workers to act and stand up for their rights. There is also a 'power from within' dimension, as workers have the opportunity to rebuild their own identity and see themselves as citizens. These findings are relayed by scholar review on undocumented migrant domestic workers, in Belgium and Europe (Lutz, 2011; Michielsen et al., 2013; Schwenken and Heimeshoff, 2013).

In the words of a trade unionist which has coordinated a group of (irregular and regular) migrant domestic workers, language and formal work are important factors, but the most empowering path for migrant domestic workers is the one of regularization: "*The ID card, the entrance in regularity, is the door that opens all others*". The change in the migrant status allows workers to quit the survival level and start to contemplate the future.

In a research on possibilities of empowerment through paid employment, Kabeer (2011:11) argues that paid employment does not bring collective and political power

¹⁶ Among many other possible aspirations: build a family and/or continue a professional career initiated in the country of origin, save money in the short or long term, pursue one's studies, etc.

¹⁷ The authors define empowerment in three dimensions: 'power to' (creative power, to realization); 'power with' (collective and political power, as in grassroots organizations); 'power from within' (self-confidence and getting rid of interiorized oppression) (Adjmagbo and Calvès, 2012:10).

(‘power with’), but is the first step in the way of building conditions that favor collective organization and group bargaining. According to the author, when these conditions are realized, they can bring changes that go beyond work conditions to promote workers’ ability to claim for rights and recognition as citizens.

Kabeer’s considerations can be useful to look at the second group. For participants whom already have a regular status but are part of a poor valued and poor paid sector, the question of working declared seems specifically linked to securing work life and acquiring/reinforcing recognition and self-confidence. Our analysis shows that workers enjoy being part of a broader collective of work, especially in such an individual job as domestic work. There is in the this case, yet in a lesser extent than for the first group, an empowerment dimension in the personal and internal sense of ‘power from within’, expressed in workers satisfaction with their current situation.

However, when referring on highly qualified migrants, regular or irregular, it is important to acknowledge that they often had to fall back to domestic work whether because of their irregular migrant status, because of the lack of knowledge on the national language, or due to the lack of recognition of diploma or of previous professional experience. The experience of downward mobility when participants enter the Belgian labor market through the voucher service sector reinforces a negative perception on their social position and does not contribute to increase self-esteem or recognition, as Amandine’s story shows.

In the first group, many among the 18 participants were professionals in their countries of origin and experienced the same deskilling. Nevertheless, the period spent as ‘sans-papiers’ made them value their upward mobility back to a regular migrant status and all that it signifies, as proven above.

Concluding remarks

The housework voucher policy achieved unquestionable success in bringing to formality a significant proportion of live-out domestic workers. Work quality, in objective and subjective terms, has equally improved, mainly by the setting of rules and by allowing labor rights and a work status.

The formal market dynamics of the housework voucher system remains, however, profoundly ethnicized and marked by women's presence, as was/is the shadow market. Moreover, practices structuring the informal labor market persist in the formal one. Ethnic niches continue to support the market organization and are fuelled by managers' or agency staff's belonging or proximity to ethnic/national groups. On the workers' side, the way towards better job quality continue to be led by individual choices, in a dynamic combining ethnic or client's networks and the 'exit strategy'. This individual professional path prevents a structural labor improvement¹⁸, as has observed Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007:132).

Paradoxically, one of the repercussions of domestic work stepping in formal employment is the shrinking offer of jobs in the shadow market, creating a 'trifle market' (Camargo, Freitas and Godin, forthcoming). Workers who did not succeed to cross towards the declared sector, mainly because of their irregular migrant status, lost their employers attracted to the voucher system. Those who have kept their positions count on loyal working relationships¹⁹. All the others have to content themselves with live-in positions, which continue to be an important niche for irregular migrant workers, and the 'most-lousy' live-out jobs: too far away, too much work, poorly paid, with maniac employers, etc. As to the pay, workers can indeed hardly expect to receive more than the hourly voucher price.

Entering in workers' subjective evaluation of the informal/formal switch, this contribution demonstrates that the stepping in this 'new-old' labor market is differently perceived according to workers' previous experience or, more precisely, their migrant status at the moment of the switch. The comparison between two groups enjoying different opportunities and constraints structure points that the same moment can be lived differently, mainly concerning the empowering aspect: access to rights, identity changes, feelings of freedom and self-confidence.

This change will be thus much more assertive for workers who had their regularization and formalization processes concomitantly, demonstrating that the most important shift

¹⁸ Structural changes are, among others, sector valorization and clients' 'education'. On this last point, it is worth to say that agencies claim to interfere in situations considered as abusive. They depend, though, on the claims on the part of the worker. Commonly, workers will drop a client only if they have another one in replacement.

¹⁹ In some cases, workers might accept vouchers from employers and sell them afterwards (to voucher workers or agencies).

is the one of the migrant status, and not of declared work, unlike discourses of government and authorized agencies when promoting the voucher policy. Still, my findings reveal that there is some empowering effect for the group entering formal work with a regular migration status, mainly in the sense of reinforcing workers' social recognition and, hence, self-confidence.

Finally, if the switch from undeclared to declared work, with or without migrant status regularization, brings some empowering and opens the 'possibility door' for claiming more rights, many issues remain unsolved in the path towards a true valorization, which would make domestic work closer to a 'normal job' and allow migrant women get out of the trap of deskilling. A profound society mindset change towards valorization of domestic work as a profession is still to be thought about. Practically, urgent goals to be achieved are gender issues in work/life balance for voucher workers and poor wages. In other words, if flexibility of working hours are seen as an asset, unequal share in familiar and household chores lead to part-time jobs and, thus, to very poor earnings. To have a reasonable salary, workers often have to work full time. In brief, stepping out of the shadow economy in Brussels domestic labor market still signifies entering a precarious formal domestic work sector.

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