

# Examining the role of institutions in shaping migrant reproductive labour

*Merita Jokela*

## Introduction

This chapter deals with paid reproductive work, a sector that is strongly linked with the global movement of labour and the changing boundaries of work. The demand for migrant care work has grown rapidly in the past decades. According to the ILO (2018), 67 million people around the globe move inside and across borders to work in private households as nannies, maids and carers for the elderly and disabled, filling the gap between state and market in ensuring households' reproduction in the receiving countries. The emigration and migration of domestic and care workers is, in many countries, encouraged through different state-level agreements and programs specially targeted for recruitment into domestic and care related jobs.

Research on female migration and movement of labour has predominantly concentrated on the questions related to care givers' and care recipients' families and the "global care chains" (Hochschild 2000; Parreñas Salazar 2000) and recently also on the structures and policies that shape the demand and provision of reproductive labour (e.g. Bettio, Simonazzi, & Villa 2006; Carbonnier & Morel

2015; Kofman 2014; Kvist 2012; Van Hooren 2017; Williams & Gavanas 2008; Williams 2012). However, the impact of the policies on labour markets and migrant reproductive workers has received less attention. This chapter sheds light on the issue by reviewing the insights on studies that connect the politics of labour migration and migrant reproductive labour. Using primarily previous case studies as my sources, I explore the different rationales of migration policies related to paid reproductive labour and the intersecting ways in which these shape the position of migrant reproductive workers. The three rationales I study here are neoliberal ideologies, temporary migration and contradictory politics.

Being a female dominated sector, paid domestic and care work is strongly related to gender norms and the gendered division of social reproduction. Macro-level studies on domestic and care work mostly focus on the social, political and economic structures that shape the inequalities of the women in the sector (Jokela 2015; Kvist 2012; Williams 2012). While gender matters, it does not always matter in the same way. Transnational feminist theories suggest that intersectional identities including class, nationality, ethnicity and race are equally important when analysing ways that inequalities are reproduced (Crenshaw 1991; Mohanty 2003). Intersectional analysis has been applied not only to identify inequalities among migrant domestic workers but also to understand their agency and personal experiences and aspirations (e.g. Gibson, Law, & McKay 2001; Näre 2014). The main focus of this chapter is not on the micro but the macro-level, that is, the institutional mechanisms that enable millions of migrant women to move across borders and the interplay between migration policies and the inequalities related to the position of migrant domestic workers on a global scale. The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, I describe the social, demographic and economic structures of migrant reproductive labour. Secondly, I discuss the role of institutions and policies in shaping migrant reproductive labour

and thirdly, I present concluding remarks on the issue and discuss alternative policy choices.

## Female migration and paid reproductive labour

Migration of paid domestic labour is not a recent phenomenon. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was common in European cities to recruit migrants from rural areas to work as maids and nannies in urban households. This is still a current phenomenon in many less affluent countries where rural-urban migration continues to exist on a large scale (D'Souza 2010; Razavi 2007). However, the migration flows of present day increasingly move across borders, often following the historical colonial patterns and feeding the supply of paid domestic labour (Tronto 2006).

Migrant reproductive work has traditionally been analysed in the context of global movement of labour, gendered division of social reproduction and the global inequalities that are (re)produced in these processes. The “transnationalisation of care” (e.g. Yeates 2011) refers to a social process that connects people, institutions and places across borders and creates a mobile workforce for domestic services (Yeates 2011; see also Mahon & Robinson 2011; Parreñas Salazar 2001).

The literature on care migration usually highlights theories on push and pull effects to explain the movement of migrant care workers. The push effects of women's migration from East to West and from South to North are said to rise from economic reasons, such as low wages, unemployment and poverty, but also violence (see Triandafyllidou 2013). The pull factors consist of several social, demographic and economic developments. Previous studies suggest that both the increase in women's labour force participation and population ageing create demand for migrant labour (Anderson 2000; Estévez-Abe 2015; Lister et al. 2007). In addition, cuts in public provision of care

services have forced households to seek for other alternatives, such as private domestic and care services, thus contributing to the rising need for migrant reproductive workers. Furthermore, it has also been shown that paid domestic labour is still strongly related to economic inequalities within countries that create both demand and supply for private domestic and care services (Jokela 2015; Milkman, Reese, & Roth 1998).

While female migration is often linked with economic hardship, in reality, the individual decisions to migrate are often more complex than simply a sum of push and pull factors. Instead of seeing female migrant workers as passive victims, alternative feminist approaches emphasise the different situations of migrant women and the possible positive changes of migration, such as increasing autonomy, following individual aspirations and gaining international experience (Gibson, Law, & McKay 2001; Näre 2014; Pratt 2005a, 2005b).

## The role of institutions and policies in shaping migrant reproductive labour

A growing number of scholars in the social sciences examine the role of institutions and policies in shaping migrant reproductive labour, suggesting that the sector is shaped by different policy areas, including employment, care, gender and migration policies (Bettio et al. 2006; Hellgren 2015; Shutes & Chiatti 2012; Williams & Gavanas 2008; Williams 2011). In many affluent countries, paid domestic work is supported through specific policies to either attract foreign domestic workers, or to regulate the already existing migrant domestic labour force. While the policies seek to create new jobs and reduce unemployment, especially among marginalized groups, they are criticised for legitimising the commodification of care and emphasising families' responsibility (Kvist & Peterson 2010; Williams 2011; Carbonnier & Morel 2015). Furthermore, some studies highlight

the role of institutions in sustaining the precariousness of domestic workers through unequal policy measures (Hellgren 2015; Jokela 2017; van Hooren 2011; Williams 2012).

The politics of migration policies that are the focus of this chapter are complex, and there are a number of political and institutional dimensions that are viewed as contributing to the status of migrant workers. I concentrate here on three particular rationales (Figure 1): neoliberal ideologies, temporary migration and contradictory politics. These rationales are not separate categories but overlapping: neoliberal ideologies, such as flexibilisation of labour markets and privatisation of social and care services, create demand and opportunities for temporary migration. Contradictory politics may be derived from a situation where temporary movement of migrant workforce is encouraged through “no policy”, and contradictory politics may also be seen as outcome of neoliberal ideologies.

Neoliberal ideologies	Temporary migration	Contradictory politics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Global expansion of capital</li><li>• Decentralisation and flexibilisation of labour markets</li><li>• Privatisation of social and care services</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Circular migration</li><li>• Caregiver-programmes</li><li>• Tied visa -systems</li><li>• Regularisation of undocumented workers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No policy: demand for (migrant) workers but no regulation exists</li><li>• Work permit programmes only cover high status care work</li></ul>

*Figure 1. The role of institutions and policies in shaping migrant reproductive labour*

## Neoliberal ideologies and temporary migration

Neoliberal ideologies of receiving countries are seen as the main drivers of the labour migration of low-skilled workers, such as domestic workers. Neoliberal ideologies generally emphasise the market, financial liberalisation, deregulation, flexibilisation of

labour markets and privatisation of welfare services (Standing 2014; Kalleberg & Hewison 2012). Literature highlights the state's role in facilitating transnational capital accumulation, with irregular migration as an element of this process (De Genova 1998; McNevin 2006; Sassen 2008). Irregular migrants fit particularly well in the setting as they often accept lower wages and working conditions and are also easily deportable if market fluctuations change (McNevin 2006). According to Sassen (2008), globalisation together with national interests, has produced global markets at the top and bottom of the economic system: at the top is located the transnational market for high-level managerial and professional talent across economic sectors, while the bottom is occupied by a variety of (mostly) informal flows, including migrant domestic and care labour and the "global care chains" (Sassen 2008). At the national level, Bettio et al. (2006) point out that neoliberal policies also shape the care markets through deregularisation, marketisation and privatisation of social and care services. Thus, states shift the responsibility of reproduction back to families and facilitate the use of a cheap migrant workforce. In countries such as Italy and Spain that favour home-based care, the migrant-in-the-family model has become a preferred solution for households (Bettio et al. 2006).

The temporary movement of workforce is seen as a part of transnational labour processes that entail a variety of migratory flows, such as workers sent to the host country by their employers that are often international companies, seasonal workers (especially in agriculture) and migrants who commute between countries. One form of temporary movement is the concept of circular migration, which is used in migration research to refer to regular and systematic movement of migrants who move back and forth between countries to seek work (Skeldon 2012). In paid reproductive labour, a growing number of women circulate between their home and host country without permanently moving abroad. This is particularly the case

between the neighbouring countries of Eastern and Western Europe (Lutz & Palenga-Möllennebeck 2012; Marchetti 2013; Triandafyllidou 2013).

Due to the increasing movement of labour across borders, the concept of circular migration has gained attention in policy debates especially in Europe. This type of migration is often promoted as a “triple win” by the receiving and sending countries as well as the migrant workers themselves, who are able to circulate due to specific agreements such as free movement in the EU. This policy discourse emphasises the positive impact of circular migration because it can simultaneously act as a buffer during periods of economic volatility and provide employers with a flexible labour force. However, critics often warn that circular migration should not be integrated in the policy arena because it is difficult to separate from other forms of temporary migration (Skeldon 2012). Despite the regular demand for migrant reproductive labour, it is feared that states would emphasise the temporary nature of migration and push policies that limit the rights of migrant workers.

There are a number of policies targeted specifically to recruit migrant reproductive workers, often on a temporary basis. These programmes are most prevalent in South-East-Asia, Europe and Canada. Historically, migrant care worker programmes in Canada were initiated to respond to temporary demand for a foreign labour force (Michel & Peng 2012). The characteristics of the programmes vary. However, they all entail a number of rules and regulations that restrict the recruitment of migrant domestic and care labour. Canada continues to recruit migrant care workers through the Live-in Caregiver programme; however, domestic workers are not necessarily required to live in the employer’s household.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is

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<sup>1</sup> This requirement was partly removed from Canada’s Live-in Caregiver programme in 2014, see <http://www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/work/caregiver/index.asp>

currently possible for a domestic worker to apply for permanent residency after 24 months. Contrary to Canada, migrant domestic workers in other countries, such as Taiwan, are only allowed to live with their employer and to work in the domestic and care service sector.

This kind of “tied visa” system also exists in the UK, where domestic workers who enter the country with their employers (mostly from the Gulf countries) are not allowed to change the employer nor extend their six months visa while in the country (Anderson 2015). Japan and Korea have introduced migrant care worker programmes in recent years to attract workers from other Asian countries. However, the programmes are still modest in their size, especially in Japan where entry rules for migrant care workers are restricted (see Michel & Peng 2012). Similarly to other countries, migrant care workers in Japan and Korea are mainly seen as temporary workers who eventually will return to their home countries, not as a potential future labour force (Song 2015).

Another example of immigrant policies is Italy. With at least half a million foreign care workers, the country adopted an ex-post facto regularisation of undocumented workers to provide them access to formal labour markets. In 2009, asylum was granted to 200,000 paperless migrants working in the domestic and care sector (Finotelli & Arango 2011). Still, the regularisation campaigns have only covered part of the workers and many others remain undocumented and informal (Bettio et al. 2006; Shutes & Chiatti 2012). Parallel to the non-EU migrants, many Italian households employ women from Eastern-European countries who often work in Italy as circular migrants (Marchetti 2013).



## Contradictory politics

Despite the demand for migrant labour, states may not always directly promote the inflows of foreign workers due to contradictory political interests. As neoliberal markets profit from temporary and precarious migrant labour, policies may even deliberately be designed to not regularise migrant labour. For example, Castles (2004) argues that in order to balance the preferences of different interest groups, governments may even provide anti-immigration rhetoric, while at the same time supporting policies to encourage labour migration. These “hidden agendas”, as Castles suggests, explain the contradictory outcomes of some immigration policies, including migrant reproductive labour. Michel and Peng (2012) call this type of policy a policy of “demand and denial”: demand for paid domestic and care work is created mostly due to insufficient policies, but the entry to formal labour markets is denied through strict regulations (Michel & Peng 2012; see also Song 2015). The “no policy” approach has for years been a common way to respond to the growing demand for paid household services not only in the US but also in many countries that recently have introduced programmes to regulate the sector, such as Germany and Italy (see Jokela 2017). While regulation exists, welfare states are criticised for deliberately overlooking the existence of undeclared work performed by migrant care workers (Lutz 2012). May et al. (2007, 162), whose study concentrates on the UK, consider the state taking a direction in the immigration policy “in which migrant workers are treated less as potential citizens than units of labour, the supply of which can (in theory at least) be turned on and off”.

Most of the studies mentioned above highlight the precarious position of migrant reproductive workers and their status as partial citizens. Migrant workers in many countries often remain undocumented and perform their work without any access to legal benefits. Furthermore, paid domestic labour is viewed as low skilled

and “easily done by anyone”, which makes the status of migrant domestic workers particularly vulnerable and easily replaceable (Anderson 2015). Policies, such as the migration programmes presented earlier in this chapter, are generally viewed to enforce the precariousness of migrant reproductive workers.

It is often noted that while workers and their families benefit from higher salaries and better quality of life in the host country, restricted legal rights and lack of recognition still force migrant reproductive workers and their families to vulnerable situations (Parreñas Salazar 2001; Tronto 2011). For example, in the US, work permits offered for foreign workers of specific occupations only cover higher educated health and care workers but exclude low-skilled jobs, such as domestic and care workers (Song 2015). According to Dwyer (2013), the division of care labour into skilled and unskilled is intentional and strongly linked to ethnic inequalities: in the care sector, migrant workers are specifically recruited for low-skilled jobs while native workers usually occupy the care work jobs that require higher skills and are better paid (Dwyer 2013, see also Duffy, Albelda, & Hammonds 2013). It has been shown that workers in low-skilled care jobs and with migrant backgrounds are more likely to work under precarious working conditions and receive lower wages compared to other workers (Jokela 2019; Lightman 2019). Hence, the work permit system favouring high skilled care workers enforces the racial and ethnic division of reproductive labour (Glenn 1992) as it divides the sector in professional and skilled and nonprofessional unskilled jobs, the latter having less labour market power or opportunities to improve their wages. Furthermore, Geraldine Pratt underlines in her study (2005b) on the Canadian Caregiver programme Filipina women’s own experiences and the ways that social networks and familial obligations—not economic or individual factors related to occupational status or wages—shape migrant workers’ lives. She concludes that despite the financial and personal gains and the

permanent status provided for migrant reproductive workers after 24 months, the personal costs are often too high for many women. Here, Pratt mainly refers to the negative consequences of family dislocation in the lives of the migrant women living abroad.

## Discussion

This chapter has explored different rationales of migration policies and the ways these shape the status of migrant reproductive workers and particularly contribute to their unequal position in the labour markets and in society in general. As shown in the review of previous literature, a number of programmes are designed to regulate migrant reproductive labour in different countries. Due to limited space, it was not possible to present the programmes more thoroughly; however, general conclusions on global trends may be drawn based on previous studies. Firstly, neoliberal ideologies are commonly criticised on the macro-level for creating policies that are designed to benefit the households while migrant workers are only seen as replacements during temporary labour shortages. Secondly, country-level case studies show how strongly migrant care worker policies tend to emphasise the temporary position of migrant reproductive workers by practices such as the tied-visa system. Thirdly, the anti-immigration attitudes of different interest groups and citizens contribute to the precariousness of migrant workers as they make governments reluctant to officially promote labour migration. Still, due to high demand for a migrant labour force these practices of “no policy as policy” allow the inflow of migrant workers without regularisation processes.

As both micro and macro-level studies have shown, the inequalities and precariousness of migrant reproductive labour are multi-faceted phenomena. While this chapter concentrated on the role of institutions in shaping the situation of migrant reproductive

workers, I also acknowledge the complexities of migratory processes and consider the agency of migrant reproductive workers that is emphasised in transnational feminist approaches. Not all migrant workers are victims and not all of them are equally vulnerable. Policies that encourage migrant reproductive labour may be targeted to households, but it would be too simplistic to argue that on the individual level, households are the only ones who benefit from them: migrant care worker programmes, enable a change for many women who also view domestic and care work as a stepping stone into the labour market. In the absence of state support, many women rely on social networks that often also act as recruitment channels.

However, on the policy level, the question of inequality becomes crucial and as the discussion above shows, there exists a paradox related to the status of migrant reproductive labour that is difficult to overcome: improved conditions in the domestic work sector would require professionalisation, but migrant workers are specifically wanted for their “unskilled” labour and thus have to deal with limited rights and insecurity. This paradox raises questions not only on migrant women’s rights as citizens and workers but also, as noted in many studies before, on the quality of domestic and care work.

In this chapter, I only used a few examples to illustrate the nature of migration policies related to paid reproductive labour. Many other countries have introduced policies not necessarily targeted to the supply, but to the demand of paid domestic and care work. Recent policy reforms, particularly in Northern European countries, such as tax reductions or service vouchers for households purchasing domestic services, have been widely criticised for “bringing back” the traditional maids and for only benefiting wealthier households. However, I argue that especially in countries where direct and informal relationships are common, policies aimed at households, if well designed, could act as enforcement strategies for domestic and care workers’ labour rights. Widespread informality is described as

one of the greatest challenges in domestic services as migrant workers working in low-skilled occupations remain in informal jobs. Offering incentives for households to comply with the law could contribute to more formal job contracts and more security for domestic and care workers in general. This is only one example of how institutions may shape the position of migrant reproductive workers. I suggest that in future research, more attention should be paid on institutional strategies in order to reduce inequalities related to paid domestic and care work. Moreover, to promote the rights of migrant reproductive workers, researchers and policymakers should consider the diverse situations of migrant women in different social, economic and political contexts.

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