

“This big shadow we need to turn into light”

How labour intermediaries moralise commodified domestic care work



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Hausangestellte geraten in Nöte

Putzfrauen sind in Privathaushalten begehrt. Trotzdem arbeiten sie in steter Unsicherheit und müssen gerade während der Corona-Krise plötzliche Lohnausfälle verkraften.

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Zehntausende von Putzfrauen arbeiten in Schweizer Haushalten.

Topi Ylä-Mononen / Plainpicture



Les travailleurs et travailleuses domestiques laissés à eux-mêmes et à plus de précarité

La réalité de ce secteur transparaît dans cette situation de crise sanitaire extraordinaire: ces métiers ont lieu à des heures irrégulières, dépendent de multiples employeurs et sont parfois peu ou pas déclarés. Autant d'éléments qui entraînent ces employés dans la précarité



Une employée du service municipal de soins à domicile rend visite à une femme âgée à son domicile à Bienne, en Suisse, le 10 juillet 2012.



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Picture source: batmaid.ch/en/



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Picture source: babysits.com

Labour intermediaries in the domestic care sector

Doing good — for yourself and others



Are you looking for someone to help you with your chores?



Cleaning



Textile cleaning



Sewing



Pet sitting



Recycling



Holiday service



Errands

Picture source: valeriana.ch/en

Labour intermediaries as moral entrepreneurs?

‘Market moralisation’: emergence of “particular kinds of markets where explicit morality is the key principle of market interaction” (Balsiger, 2021: 59)

Feel-good entrepreneurialism that in fact does nothing towards underlying societal issues (Kelpin, 2020) and follows a neoliberal logic (Dey, 2010)?

Domestic care work in Switzerland



Methodology

14 interviews & 1 podcast with
CEO's /founders of labour
market intermediaries

Discourse-analytical perspective

Waitt, G. (2005). Doing Discourse Analysis.

Waitt, G. (2010). Doing Foucauldian Discourse Analysis: Revealing Social Realities.

Findings

4 Moralising Narratives

«bring more justice to the world of cleaning by making the fight against undeclared work our priority»

1. Formalising domestic care work



*«Clean employment,
clean cleaning »*

2. Increasing recognition for domestic care work

«put the employee in the focus»

«a little more value to childcare»

«the appreciation and the lack of money, so to speak, to improve the conditions is actually down to [...] the willingness to pay for it»

3. Emancipating female workers



Picture: Presentation of a worker on a company's website.
Badge whitened by the authors for the sake of anonymization.

«We also try to make it easier to combine work and family life.»

«intention to (mainly) help other women [and] empower women to achieve financial independence»

4. Integrating migrant workers



Picture: Picture of workers on on a company's website. Faces blurred by the authors for the sake of anonymization.

«Our main goal is to bring society closer together. We achieve this through integration through domestic work.»

«free German courses»

«workshops: How does Switzerland work? How can I use apps better on my cell phone?»

Discussion

What are the effects of these narratives on domestic care work?

Ambivalences in the moralized domestic care market

Discussion I

Greater societal visibility of domestic care workers

- Care workers become subject of public debate
- This can lead to growing societal sensitization for decent working conditions in domestic care

Commodified domestic care work remains feminized, migrantised and neoliberalised.

The narratives

- reinforce stereotypical representations of domestic care workers as women and migrants
- reproduce social hierarchies along the axes of gender, migration and class
- foster a neoliberal discourse that wrongly assumes moralised markets will fix the problem of precarious working conditions in the domestic care sector

Conclusion

Moralising discourses serve to draw public attention to domestic care workers and their working conditions.

Yet, they do not guarantee positive change.

It is important to hold the state responsible for creating decent working conditions in the domestic care sector.