

Introduction

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1. A Starting Point: Who Care for Those Who Care?

Since the Communication to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee of 20 November 2017 containing the EU Action Plan 2017-2019, the European Commission included the care work sector among those sectors “key to the future of European society and economy”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made even more clear the centrality of care work in modern societies but it also made more visible many critical issues affecting the working conditions of care workers, such as: the lack of adequate economic resources, the workforce shortage, the pressure put on care workers, the risks for their well-being, the underfinancing of social care as a consequence of the reorganisation and partial retrenchment of the welfare state involving also privatisation and commodification of public services, the weaker bargaining power in these sectors than in many male-dominated sectors, the undervaluation of female-dominated jobs, the prevalence of undeclared work in domestic care work, patterns of discrimination in the sector on grounds of gender and nationality (and the intersectionality between these two factors).

Therefore, in her State of the Union address on 15 September 2021, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced a European Care Strategy, pointing out, among the others, the need for decent working conditions for all workers in the care sector. One year later the European Care Strategy was presented by the European Commission to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and improve the

situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them, professionally or informally.

All this brought a question to our minds: who cares for those who care?

The willingness to care for those who care was the starting point of the CARE4CARE project funded by the Horizon Europe program under GA. n. 101094603 for a three-year lifespan, the results of which are collected in the three volumes that inaugurate the series “Studi sul lavoro di cura - Studies on Care Work”.

2. Objectives and Goals of the Project

Care workers are mainly women and migrants, which makes the care sector an interesting field to verify the dynamics of segregation and exclusion that affect the labour market. At the same time, it is a challenging testing ground, which allows to design and verify new measures to counteract discrimination and promote social inclusion.

The CARE4CARE project investigated in a comparative and multidisciplinary perspective the working conditions of care workers and their perception of the working environment and dynamics in six EU Member States (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden) in order to develop suitable tools to improve job quality and counteract discrimination in the sector, such as: elaborating policy strategies to tackle the undervaluation of care work, with particular attention to the key role that trade unions, employers’ associations as well as equality and monitoring bodies can play both at national and EU level; designing training programs to empower trade unions, families’ and employers’ associations to improve job quality in the sector; setting up of a network on care work, which will implement a web platform accessible to care workers, in order to improve their rights’ awareness.

More precisely, the project aimed at highlighting the risks and conditions of vulnerability of the target, with a specific focus on discrimination and socio-economic undervaluation.

The ambition was, then, to create a model of analysis and regulation of the care sector that can be replicated in other European countries and can bring out new relevant strategies for intervention in order to elaborate legislative and policy proposals at the national and the EU level.

Lastly, the project aimed at giving voice to care workers and to their representatives in the design and delivery of policies and measures that affect their lives. To this end, it seemed necessary to raise awareness and consciousness among care workers and trade unions by making rights clear and usable for workers and enhancing collective bargaining strategies.

Target of the project were workers employed in the public and private sector, caring for people with disabilities, the elderly and sick people: home caregivers, basic healthcare workers, healthcare professionals with at most a Bachelor’s degree, such as nurses. Particular attention was also paid to undeclared work in the sector.

3. The Consortium

The CARE4CARE Consortium spanned the European Union from north to south and from east to west and comprises ten partners.

The Consortium has been led by a team of experts in labour law from the Department of Legal Sciences of the University of Florence (Italy). In addition to the University of Florence, six other Universities were involved: Lunds Universitet (Sweden), Universidad de Girona (Spain), Universidad de Sevilla (Spain), Europa - Universität Viadrina (Germany), Uniwersytet Rzeszowski (Poland), Université de Bordeaux - Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (France).

Tuscan Organisation of Universities and Research 4 Europe - Tour4UE (Belgium) oversaw communication and dissemination with great expertise.

Two associations from civil society, European Federation for Family Employment & Home Care and European Federation for Services to Individuals, acted as a bridge with stakeholders at European level.

The Consortium could also rely on the support of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI).

4. The Outputs of the Project

The outputs of this research project were twofold: research outputs and societal outputs.

Regarding the research outputs, firstly, the research provided a comparative analysis of the working conditions in the care sector; secondly, the research assessed the direct perception of working conditions and well-being at work, as well as awareness of rights; thirdly, the project investigated strategies and techniques of regulation of working conditions in the sector.

Regarding the societal outputs, the first outcome was represented by the drafting of the CARE4CARE Policy paper that includes: general policy objectives, possible measures in national laws, possible measures for national social partners and institutions, possible measures in European law and for European social partners and institutions.

The second outcome of CARE4CARE the design and delivery of training programmes to empower trade unions, employers and the representatives of families' associations who will be the target group of the training. The aim is to improve knowledge and skills to recognize vulnerabilities of care workers in order to improve job quality and counteract discriminations in the care sector.

The third outcome of CARE4CARE consists in the realisation of a web platform optimised for smartphones and tablets that is structured to provide user-friendly information on relevant national legislation to improve care worker's awareness of rights.

All partners have been heavily involved in the implementation of both research and societal outputs and in the communication and dissemination of the results, in order to maximize the impact of the project on the scientific community and civil society.

5. The Methodology

The main methodology adopted was legal research in a comparative and EU perspective.

A comparative analysis of legal aspects, labour market conditions and industrial relations aspects on job quality and working conditions for care workers was conducted, in order to get an assessment of the sector in the six EU Member States involved in the project and characterised by different models of welfare state.

A psycho-social survey was also conducted through focus groups, questionnaires and audits to outline a picture of the quality of work and awareness of workers' rights.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to shed light on psychosocial working conditions that can affect care workers' well-being across the six EU member states involved in the research. Specific attention was given to how structural variables—such as demographic variables, work-related variables, psychological and interpersonal variables—are related to care workers' mental health and well-being both in private and public sectors.

6. Presentation of the Publication

The three volumes that inaugurate the series “Studi sul lavoro di cura - Studies on care work” bring together the results of the research conducted between 2023 and 2025 by the Consortium that I had the great privilege of coordinating.

Volume I: *Care Work and Working Conditions: National Legal Frameworks and Comparative Insights*—brings together national reports drawn up by esteemed labour law scholars from the Universities of Bordeaux, Florence, Frankfurt (Oder), Girona, Lund and Rzeszowski. The reports outline the regulatory framework applicable to care professionals, both from a legal and collective bargaining perspective in the six countries involved in the project. University of Lund, leader of Work package 2, prepared the comparative report that formed the basis for the development of intervention strategies to improve working conditions in the sector.

Volume II: *Discriminations in the Care Sector: National Legal Frameworks and Comparative Insights*—collects reports on the mapping of discrimination based on gender and nationality in the sector elaborated through the study of case law, national reports and statistics in the six countries. The comparative report drafted by University of Girona, leader of Work package 3, summarises the national overview to identify similarities and differences in order to develop strategies to counteract discriminations.

Volume III: *Building Dignified Care Work in Europe: Critical Reflections, Political and Social Tools*—brings together critical contributions on the issues raised by the research, written by scholars who, with different sensibilities and points of view, contributed to the realisation of the project. The legal analysis is accompanied by a psychosocial reflection developed by researchers of the University of Seville, leader of Work package 4, who conducted an investigation on working

conditions and the perception of rights in the sector. The volume also includes the keynote lecture given by Professor Silvia Borelli during the project kick-off meeting held in Florence on 16th–17th March 2023.

The Policy Paper drafted by the German team of Europa - Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), leader of Work package 5, on the basis of the overall research findings, is included in the appendix to the third volume, together with the Training model for trade unions developed by the Polish team of the University of Rzeszowski, leader of Work package 6, and the description of the Web platform built by the Italian team of the University of Florence, leader of Work Package 7.

The success of this project is due to the great communication effort made by Tour4UE, which is not reflected in the volumes but was essential in bringing our research to the attention of European institutions and of National and European stakeholders.

Equally important was the contribution of EFFE and EFSI as bridges with civil society, representing the sector's needs to researchers and thus enabling the design of targeted and more effective intervention policies.

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I would like this to be a never-ending story.

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