

# Working and Living Conditions of Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Istanbul during the COVID-19 Pandemic\*

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of increasing international migration, the destructive force of the pandemic has been evident in the closure of borders and disruptions to travel plans, affecting millions of migrants worldwide. The economic and social consequences have deeply impacted vulnerable social groups such as women, migrants and precarious workers, further intensifying the 'care crisis'. Women migrant domestic workers, constituting a significant proportion of international migrant workers, have found themselves particularly vulnerable while grappling with challenges such as health risks and economic and social impacts. In this context, this study explores the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on the working and living conditions of women migrant domestic workers. The methodology employed a qualitative approach, with insights derived from in-depth interviews with 12 migrant domestic workers in Istanbul. The findings confirm precarious conditions and highlight deepening issues related to COVID-19. This reveals that their already precarious situation, characterized by low wages, job insecurity and inadequate access to protective equipment and health services, has been exacerbated by the pandemic. This article emphasizes the need to address the broader care crisis intensified by the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Crisis of Care, COVID-19, Migrant Domestic Workers, Pandemic, Women

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## 1. Introduction

Migration movements have various effects on countries of origin and destinations of migrants. Movements that contribute to both communities must be supported by appropriate policies, have positive consequences for migrants and their families, and contribute to the development and growth of countries of origin and destination. When supported by well-designed policies and decent living and working conditions, migrants contribute to countries' economies in the care economy, agriculture, construction, and similar areas. However, deficiencies in migration governance systems, discrimination, stigmatization, and xenophobia in receiving countries affect the working and living conditions of precarious migrants (Ohndorf, 1989; Papademetriou, 1978). In addition to these adverse conditions, the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic deeply affected vulnerable social groups such as women, migrants and precarious workers on the one hand and increased gender-based inequalities on the other. Throughout the pandemic, especially with the implementation of closures and curfews, women migrant domestic workers have been subjected to multiple forms of discrimination (Kabeer et al., 2021; Sumalatha et al., 2021). From this general perspective, this study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the working and living conditions of women migrant domestic workers. The study asks how these conditions have changed for women migrant domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the number of international migrants worldwide was 173 million in 2000, it reached 281 million globally in 2020, with nearly two-thirds being labor migrants (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022, p. 40). The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the growth of international migrants by around two million people in mid-2020. One significant reason was the closure of national borders and the severe disruption of international travel. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of people voluntarily or compulsorily canceled their plans to move abroad (United Nations [UN], 2020, p. 5). In this case, some migrants could not return to their countries, while others had to return to their countries earlier than planned when job opportunities were exhausted and schools were closed. However, migrants who have completed their migration movements have been among the vulnerable groups most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as personal, social, or structural factors make them more susceptible to crises.

Furthermore, they have been particularly vulnerable to the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19, as in many other crises. In this context, changes have occurred in the working and living conditions of migrants around the world, including difficulties in avoiding infection, "receiving adequate health care, coping with the economic, social, and psychological impacts of the pandemic, and a lack of consideration of their cultural and linguistic diversity in service delivery", limited access to rights and participation in host communities in narrow local information networks and often concerning migration situations (Kluge et al., 2020). In addition, the pattern of migrants' exclusion from the host country's welfare systems has had an impact during COVID-19, and their ability to travel between their origin countries and destination countries has been significantly affected by border closures (Guadagno, 2020).

Women domestic workers are generally vulnerable to informality, insecurity, unrecognition, and the invisible nature of domestic labor. Informal contracts, irregular work, exploitative and undefined wages, working conditions, and legal loopholes make working conditions precarious. In addition, through the lens of intersectionality, factors such as age, immigrant identity, and ethnicity reinforce the structural problems that women face as domestic workers and create a situation of multiple discrimination. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) data, there have been 169 million international migrant workers worldwide as of 2019, 58.5 percent of whom are women (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2021a, p. 11-12). In the distribution of male and female migrant workers by economic activity category, it is seen that 79.9% of female migrant workers work in the service sector, 14.2% in industry, and 5.9% in agriculture (ILO, 2021a, p. 24). Among the reasons that migrant women predominantly work in the service sector is the increasing demand for labor in the care economy, including health and housework (ILO, 2018, p. 16). The ILO estimates the number of domestic workers at 67 million worldwide and adds that 75% of this number is informal (ILO, 2020a, p. 1). However, it should be noted that the intensity of informality, the lack of a clear job description for domestic work, and the unpaid and invisible structure of domestic labor, which are closely related to gender inequality, are significant obstacles to accessing reliable data. Although gender inequality and informality are among the leading causes of the problems experienced by migrant domestic workers, these problems have deepened in the context of COVID-19 (Fong & Yeoh, 2020; Lui et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, increased needs for children, the elderly, and sick care, and constraints on access to commercially procured consumer goods and services have led to an unprecedented increase in demand for care work (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2020a). In this case, essential workers have played a crucial role, and the importance of this role in the fight against COVID-19 has been underlined, even described as heroes by the public (Pandey et al., 2021). In this process, the fundamental contradiction between the necessity of domestic workers' labor and their precarious working and living conditions has become more

acute (Acciari et al., 2021). Therefore, it is appropriate to describe domestic workers as “expendable essential workers” whose work is demanded but not paid fairly (Pandey et al., 2021, p. 1287).

From a broader perspective, one could argue that the peak of the crisis of care, which has been ongoing for many years, has been reached with the COVID-19 pandemic. Chatzidakis et al. (2020) highlighted the crisis of care, the absence of care (less care delivery and less care received), and the urgency of a policy that focuses on care because of the wrong policies pursued on the axis of neoliberalism. Equitable distribution of care and prevention of the identification of paid care for women, the poor, and immigrants are the first steps of a radical transformation to get out of the care crisis. In the near future, the importance of social policies for care workers is expected to continue to increase with population growth worldwide, aging societies, and strengthening women’s position in the labor market. Global inequality is expected to increase the supply of women in care work in low-income countries (Toksöz, 2021, p. 104-105). These future projections require a review of the working and living conditions of migrant domestic workers in the context of the feminization of migration and the global care chain. From this perspective, the study was conducted in a specific context to shed light on the experiences and challenges faced by migrant domestic workers living in Istanbul during COVID-19.

The next section presents the concepts of feminization of migration and global care chains, which brings together studies on the experiences of women migrant domestic workers and forms the conceptual framework of the study.

## 2. Feminization of Migration and Global Care Chains

Studies on the feminization of migration, which emerged in the 1980s, have become part of migration literature for many years. However, the migration movement of these women was much older than in the 1980s, and the number of women who migrated did not increase significantly in the 1980s; for instance, there was no significant increase in the percentage of women migrants between 1960 and 2005 (Donato & Gabaccia, 2015). Therefore, the concept of feminization of migration should not lead to the perception that women have not participated in the migration movement. From this perspective, Christou and Koffman (2022, p. 4) emphasize “the need to distinguish the feminization of migration and the feminization of the migratory discourse” in which women are conceptualized as actors of migration. However, it is possible to state that economic policies mainly affected the migration movement of women in the 1980s.

In the 1980s, neoliberal policies transformed the Global South into economies dominated by high poverty levels, social inequalities, unemployment, and informality. With this transformation, global wage disparities have led women to migrate because of economic problems. The rise of production based on flexible and cheap labor has been another factor driving migration; this has increased the demand for migrant women’s work. This demand has led to the employment of migrant domestic workers in low-wage economic sectors, often without legal protection, in adverse working conditions.

Saskia Sassen (2000) underscored the increasing dependence of societies, governments, and states on the active participation of women in the workforce through a phenomenon she defined as the “feminization of survival.” As a result, the burden of conditions necessary for both work and survival increasingly falls on the shoulders of migrant women who suffer from low wages, deprivation, and exploitation.

In addition to these economic changes, gender inequalities and discrimination in countries of origin are critical driving forces of women’s migration. With the weakening of the welfare state, changes in the traditional family-based care models of countries in the Global North have accelerated the feminization of migration. The aging population and the increasing participation of women in the workforce in certain countries necessitate the procurement of services for the care of children, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled. In other words, another effect of the dissolution of the welfare state was the commodification and commercialization of care work (Ünlütürk Ulutaş, 2009, p. 281). As a result of the gender-based division of labor, the burden of care services has shifted from upper-middle-class women to lower-class immigrant women in certain countries (Toksöz & Ünlütürk Ulutaş, 2012, p. 90). This process in which the responsibility of care work is passed from one woman to another is defined as the ‘global care chain/network’ (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003).

The manner in which families delegate caregiving responsibilities differs based on their position within global care chains. In less affluent households in their origin countries, the approach involves mothers migrating abroad to engage in care work, necessitating a restructuring of domestic arrangements. Conversely, wealthier families in target countries prefer imported labor (Yeates, 2005). From this perspective, care chains are dependent on inequalities rather than correcting the unequal distribution of labor, which perpetuates these inequalities.

Care work is delegated to women of another social class, immigrant status, or ethnicity. In this case, the employment of migrant domestic workers in precarious and low-paid jobs reproduces gender dynamics (Maulik & Petrozziello,

2016) and gender, race, and class inequalities (Rodriguez, 2010; Onuki, 2011; Romero, 2018). From this perspective, this study documents the experiences of migrant domestic workers, the main actors in care chains that reproduce structural inequalities, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3. Methodology

This study has a qualitative research design that deals with the impact of COVID-19 on the working and living conditions of women migrant domestic workers in Istanbul. The data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 12 women migrant domestic workers. An interview guide was developed, which included sociodemographic characteristics (age, place of residence, marital status, number of children, education level, length of stay in Türkiye) and focused on the subjects of migration experiences (living conditions before arriving in Türkiye, why and how she decided to migrate, what she experienced during the migration, her expectations from Türkiye), working and living conditions before COVID-19 and during COVID-19. Interviews took place between February and May 2022 through face-to-face and online meetings. They lasted for approximately 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Ethics approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Istanbul University. The thematic analysis used in the analysis of the research data was carried out in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis approach. In this context, the initial stage of the thematic analysis involved familiarization with the data collected during the transcription process. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, the search for themes, and the review, definition, and naming of the themes. Finally, the research findings were written. Transcription, literal reading, and thematic analysis were conducted using MAXQDA (2020-VERBI Software).

**Table 1.** General Characteristics of Participants

	Nationality	National Origin	Age	Education	Marital Status	Number of Children	Length of Stay in Türkiye (Years)
<b>Participant 1</b>	Philippine	Philippine	38	Bachelor	Married	2	2
<b>Participant 2</b>	Philippine	Philippine	38	Bachelor	Married	3	9
<b>Participant 3</b>	Philippine	Philippine	38	High School	Single	-	6
<b>Participant 4</b>	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	30	High School	Single	-	10
<b>Participant 5</b>	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	50	High School	Widowed	2	3
<b>Participant 6</b>	Philippine	Philippine	55	Bachelor	Divorced	3	29
<b>Participant 7</b>	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	55	Bachelor	Widowed	2	5
<b>Participant 8</b>	Russian	Daghestani	52	Bachelor	Single	1	23
<b>Participant 9</b>	Turkish	Turkmenistan	49	Bachelor	Divorced	1	18
<b>Participant 10</b>	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	39	High School	Married	3	8
<b>Participant 11</b>	Uzbekistani	Uzbekistani	39	Secondary School	Divorced	1	7
<b>Participant 12</b>	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	27	Bachelor	Married	2	4

The size of the research population could not be determined because it needs to be clarified due to the prevalence of informal work in domestic work. In the ILO (2021b) calculation using data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) data, it was revealed that there are 221,751 domestic workers in Türkiye. However, the EVID-SEN (2020) report differs from this calculation and estimates that more than one million domestic workers live in Türkiye. Therefore, the total number of domestic workers is unknown, and the proportions of various international workers, such as migrants, are also unknown.

The sample consisted of 12 migrant women aged 27–55 who lived in Istanbul at the time of the interviews. The purposive sampling method was employed with the following inclusion criteria: (1) born in a country other than Türkiye, (2) residing in Istanbul, and (3) working in domestic services (child care, elderly care, cleaning, and other housework). The extent to which migrants are employed in care work differs by city and region. Migrants are likely to contribute more to domestic labor in large cities (Chritou & Koffman, 2022, p. 39). Therefore, the sample comprises migrant domestic workers living and working in Istanbul. Half of the participants (n = 6) were originally from Turkmenistan,

four from the Philippines, one from Dagestan, and one from Uzbekistan. A woman of Dagestan origin is a Russian citizen, and one Turkmenistan woman is a Turkish citizen by marriage. There is a wide variety of length of stay in Türkiye, from 2 years to 29 years. Most women (n = 10) had children. More than half of the women (n = 7) had bachelor's degrees, four high school graduates, and one secondary school graduate.

#### 4. Findings

Women migrant domestic workers have faced unique challenges in their work and private lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following sections, these difficulties are included within the scope of the themes that emerged specifically for women migrant domestic workers living in Istanbul during the pandemic.

##### 4.1. Working and Living Conditions before COVID-19

It is essential to understand the working and living conditions of participants before COVID-19 to examine the impact of the pandemic. From this perspective, the participants provided information about their work experiences before arriving in Türkiye, the migration process, and their relations with their families.

Most of the participants had work experience before their work in Türkiye. Three Filipino women have previously worked in care work in countries such as Hong Kong, Qatar, Kuwait, and Cyprus. Although two participants did not have any work experience before the care work in Türkiye, the remaining participants worked in jobs other than care work (such as farming, teaching, sales, and marketing) in their hometowns.

All participants stated that they came to Türkiye for economic reasons. Friends, relatives, or acquaintances living in Türkiye influenced their migration decisions. Filipino women said that European countries were their first choice because working conditions were better in Europe, and they came to Türkiye because they could not travel to those countries. Another factor affecting migration decisions is the lack of job opportunities in their hometowns, especially for Turkmen women. Two Turkmen women said that after their husbands died, they decided to migrate to pay off their debts and have their children educated. Again, Turkmen women stated that they had to choose between Istanbul and Moscow but preferred Istanbul because they thought it was better than Moscow. However, the limited job opportunities of migrant women in their hometowns and economic reasons are only one dimension of the feminization of migration, as are gender norms based on various social forces that encourage women to migrate (Akalin, 2007). In addition, social networks have been revealed to play a prominent role in migration decisions, provide immigrants "access to information, for instance, about jobs and conditions at their destination, and act as a safety net for migrants by providing financial or social support" (Blumenstock et al., 2022). This study also revealed that women's friends, relatives, and acquaintances living in Istanbul influenced their migration decisions. However, these networks cannot prevent them from experiencing certain difficulties during the early stages of migration. These difficulties included the cost of visa procedures, language problems, problems with intermediary companies, exposure to violence by the employer's family, and seizure of passports. Participant 4 was exposed to violence for three years: "the bosses constantly threatened me for three years, I was constantly insulted" (Participant 4). Another participant stated that the biggest problem she faced was language: "I could not understand what the employer was saying. I was constantly going out on the balcony and crying" (Participant 9). Participant 11, who stated that she could not get paid for a month, used the following expression while describing the other difficulties she faced: "Employers are taking away the passport. You cannot apply anywhere; even if you do, they will send you back" (Participant 11). Except for the Turkmenistan participant with Turkish citizenship by marriage, the participants stated that they did not have a work permit in Türkiye and provided vague information about their residence permits. This situation peculiar to migrant domestic workers has caused them to feel insecure, continue working despite difficulties in their working and living conditions, and develop various coping strategies. Nevertheless, most participants stated that their migration experiences strengthened them: "Now, I think about how I got on the plane and got there without fear. Now I manage my family, and they all listen to me. I also act as the head of the family. Even though I am younger than my siblings, they consult me" (Participant 4).

The families and children of most of the women interviewed were in their hometowns, and the children were taken care of by their spouses, mothers, sisters, mother-in-law, and father-in-law. The children of women who had been working in Türkiye for many years passed in their hometowns until they reached adulthood, and after a certain age, the children came to Türkiye. The spouses of two of the four married participants are in their hometowns, and two are in Türkiye. Women with children send a significant portion of their income to their children and family members who care for them. Most of them stated that they came to Türkiye to provide better living for their children and siblings. Participant 4 said that she was sent to Türkiye based on his brother's decision because there was no job in Turkmenistan, and while talking about her future plans, she stated the following:

*I could not save anything. When I say I could not save, there are many things that I can help my family. If I work for him for five more years, I can come back. . . I always say that after working for ten years, nothing I get is nothing. Because bosses give you clothes, you wear them. They buy gifts, for example, on holidays. I have never taken anything of my own (Participant 4).*

Participant 12, whose children were with her, stated that she sent half of her income to her family to build a house in her hometown. In this respect, all women in Türkiye send a large part of their income to their families and state that their purpose is to achieve this. Therefore, living conditions in Türkiye are arranged so that residents can save as much as possible. For example, most women live in shared houses. Two women whose families are in Türkiye live with their family members. Women working for and living with their employers share the expenses of their place on their leave days with their friends. Moreover, a woman stays with her employer's family 24/7, without a home of her own.

The migration experiences of the participants and their working and living conditions before COVID-19 reveal the insecurity of migrant domestic workers. What they conveyed during the COVID-19 period revealed three themes: reduction in income, financial hardship, increased workload, mental/physical health problems, and access to appropriate care.

#### **4.2. Reduction in Income and Financial Hardship**

During the interviews, most women stated that they had financial problems due to COVID-19. COVID-19 and Türkiye-specific economic problems caused women's income to decrease and delay salary payments. It should be noted that there was a differentiation between the incomes of migrant domestic workers according to nationality. For instance, while the average income of Filipino women was 1000 dollars and above, that of Turkmen, Uzbek, and Dagestan women was 300 dollars. Filipino women explain their higher wages than women of different nationalities because they speak English and are prone to childcare. However, most participants performed cleaning and cooking in addition to cleaning and cooking as well as taking care of children and the elderly.

On the other hand, Filipino women stated that they only cared for their children, and if necessary, they cooked for their children. In this case, Filipino women have lower work intensity and a higher income. However, the economic effects of COVID-19 and rising living costs affected all women. Filipino domestic workers stated that because they receive their salaries in foreign currency, they are adversely affected by the economic problems experienced by COVID-19 as a result of their employers being affected, and even delays in their payments occur (Participant 1). A Filipino woman (Participant 6) who expressed her economic hardship stated that she could not visit the Philippines and visit her family because of the pandemic. The main reason for this is that the price of plane tickets has significantly increased.

A Turkmen woman who previously worked in more than one place stated that 'she had to work at a house in one place due to COVID-19 and that she worked only for the rent and bill of the house where she did not live for six months' and she mentioned that many women went to different countries, such as Poland and Russia when the borders opened due to Türkiye's increasing living costs (Participant 4). Women whose working conditions were adversely affected sought ways to cope with their deteriorating living conditions, as they had nowhere to go since. For instance, Turkmenistan implemented one of the most striking examples of border policies. Although Turkmenistan has not reported any COVID-19 cases, it has closed its borders for two years without government permission. Many Turkmen migrants abroad could not return to their homes and also could not work in their home countries because their visas expired. This situation has also had consequences for families of Turkmen migrants living in Turkmenistan. This border policy has had significant effects on migrant workers working abroad. These people have not been able to return to their countries, and at the same time, their visas have expired. However, it has also affected households in Turkmenistan, as family members working abroad experienced job losses and financial difficulties due to COVID-19 (Schweitzer, 2022).

*People got into debt, got sick, and even died. . . we tried to help each other. Sometimes they send money from home. So they sent back the money I had sent home before. I could not send money to my children (Participant 11).*

Another country where policies to combat COVID-19 caused a decrease in remittances was Uzbekistan (ILO, 2020b). The Uzbek participant in this study also stated that she had difficulties meeting basic needs with her other Uzbek friends during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, there were interruptions in remittances to their families. The same participant stated that she had to share the same house with seven people in this process; she tried to cover the food expenses of all the people in the place with what she earned through daily work when possible and that they sometimes survived these bad days by fasting.

In the case of migrant domestic workers, the reduction in income and job loss affected the remittances that many families survive (ILO, 2022). For instance, the decline in remittances in Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, including Uzbekistan, where remittances represent 15% of GDP, has significantly impacted the households of the sending countries (UNDP, 2020b). Confirming the work of the UNDP and ILO, this study also shows that the

pandemic has affected women migrant domestic workers' working and living conditions and transnational families in terms of remittances. After these difficulties and in this economic context, the participants, whose primary purpose was to transfer their income to their families, stated that they were planning to return to their countries soon or to work in countries with higher income opportunities. In other words, their COVID-19 experiences in Türkiye affected their future plans and caused them to look for better opportunities.

### 4.3. Increased Workload

As a result of the increase in the severity of the pandemic, the mobility of people has been restricted by government measures. This situation has had two different consequences on domestic workers' working conditions. Daily domestic workers were at risk of losing their jobs. Domestic workers living with their employers have been prohibited from leaving their homes on their days off. This change in working conditions has led to an increase in the workload of employees. Women living with their employers during the COVID-19 pandemic stated that their workload increased.

*It was very difficult. The family I worked for did not allow me to go out. The children were also always at home; I was very tired (Participant 6).*

The lack of leave days and the obligation to stay at the employer's home have profoundly affected the social lives of employees. Participants emphasized the stress created by not being able to socialize.

*It was so stressful with COVID-19; we could not go out. We did not have a day off, which made me very stressed. Because I go to church every day; it takes my stress away. I can go to Church and pray, etc. But when COVID-19 arrived, even though the Church was closed, there was no place to go. The hardest part was that you had to stay; sometimes there were guests, and it was tiring and stressful (Participant 2).*

*He makes me work until 1 am because he is paying for it. It is 01:30 when you go to bed and 07:30 when you wake up (Participant 11).*

The statements of the participants regarding the increased workload confirmed previous studies on migrant domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Diego-Cordero et al. (2022), in their study with migrant caregivers living in Spain, revealed that domestic workers who perform care work are not limited to this job alone; they can be responsible for the entire house, which increases their workload. In this study, too, the participants mentioned the increase in workload, and moreover, they defined this situation as stress-inducing due to continuous work without any personal leisure time or socialization.

### 4.4. Mental/Physical Health and Access to Appropriate Care

Another consequence of being banned from leaving the house on days off is that migrant domestic workers feel stressed, tired, depressed, and exhausted. Compared with other international migrants (for example, international students), international migrant workers face more barriers to accessing healthcare in host countries, mainly domestic workers. They usually have more mental problems and a lower quality of life than the local population, and it was predicted that with the pandemic, this could worsen (Liem et al., 2020). One of the early studies showed that the pandemic significantly contributed to the anxiety symptoms of female migrant domestic workers (Yeung et al., 2020). Documenting the mental health narratives of migrant domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kaur-Gill et al. also (2021) noted how mental health is negotiated amid conflicts in the performance of precarious labor and found that with COVID-19, the mental health and well-being of migrant workers are disabled.

The psychological impact of COVID-19 on migrant domestic workers can be considered in two dimensions. The first is the direct effect of disease and disease risk on individuals. The second category is the indirect effects caused by changes in employees' relations with their employers, working conditions, and private lives. One of the issues raised by most participants was that they were perceived by their employers as potential carriers of COVID-19. A few participants stated that their families kept information regarding their COVID-19 status from them. Participant 8 noted that an individual she cared for had COVID-19, but they did not take the patient to the hospital despite her insistence. She eventually felt ill: "What is there to hide in that?" If you don't tell me now, I'm going home on my day off; I'll infect my son" (Participant 8).

In addition to the risk of being infected and the discrimination they were exposed to in this regard, the unregistered and insecure work of many domestic workers in Türkiye led to the fact that they could not benefit from the support packages announced by the government and could not receive appropriate health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospital fees are among the most critical obstacles for employees seeking healthcare services. The vast majority of participants stated that they have residence permits, but they cannot benefit from health services free of charge because they do not have a work permit. A few domestic workers stated that their employers covered their health expenses during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the majority said they did not receive health services. As a result, the lack

of appropriate access to health services and care has reinforced the precarious situation that makes migrant domestic workers dependent on their employers.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article describes the working and living conditions of women migrant domestic workers during COVID-19. Findings confirmed the precarious working and living conditions of migrant domestic workers before the pandemic and highlighted their worsening during the pandemic. Low wages, increasing job insecurity, lack of overtime pay, lack of adequate personal protective equipment, and insufficient rest are among the problems domestic workers face during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reductions in income, financial hardship, increased workload, and difficulties in mental/physical health and access to appropriate care came to the fore in the scope of this study.

The difficulties they face are closely related to the unregistered and insecure working conditions of women migrant domestic workers. However, these features have posed significant challenges during the pandemic. Undocumented migrant domestic workers have been excluded from the country's welfare regime and cannot access care. Domestic workers living in shared houses could not even go to these houses, had to stay at their employers' houses with heavy workloads, and could not get paid for overtime.

Moreover, they had to accept these difficult conditions with fear of losing their jobs and income. Migrant domestic workers' experiences of inequality stem from their migrant status. This status makes them more vulnerable and dependent on their employers (Anderson, 2007), resulting in their exclusion from benefits, healthcare, and other social welfare benefits. This situation has been reinforced during the pandemic by health risks, job loss, and insecurity (Vilg & Piacos III, 2021).

Regarding the deteriorating conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted the future plans of domestic workers. Due to the challenging living conditions in Türkiye amid the pandemic, they are making plans to go to Europe, where working conditions are better. In Türkiye, on the other hand, there is a need to increase the supply to meet the demand for care work. Due to the inability to collect regular data in Türkiye, there is not enough standard information on the number, migration processes, and working conditions of those who migrated to Türkiye and worked in domestic services (Ünlütürk Ulutaş, 2009, p. 505). Because domestic work is perceived as a low-status and heavy-duty business, it is not attractive to the domestic workforce, and migrant domestic workers predominantly perform residential housework. In this situation, the acceptance of the migrant workforce in Türkiye to serve with low wages and harsh working conditions has increased the demand for the migrant workforce (Uğur & Yanık, 2016, p. 74). The high demand for migrant labor, especially in domestic work, is accompanied by low-pay and insecure working conditions. On the other hand, this system is valid for domestic workers in Türkiye, regardless of whether they are migrants. In general terms, problems include the prevalence of unregistered work in the working system of domestic workers, the fact that domestic workers are outside the scope of the Labor Law and Occupational Health and Safety Laws, uncertainties regarding working hours, leave and rest rights, the absence of wage standards, employer violence and the lack of supervision by intermediary consultancy companies.

The experiences of women migrant domestic workers in Türkiye indicate that the care crisis has reached a peak during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policies pursued until now need to be corrected. Making the necessary legal arrangements to improve the working conditions of domestic workers in Türkiye will be the first step to correct these policies. Convention No. 189 has not yet been ratified by Türkiye yet. The International Labor Conference adopted the Convention concerning decent work for domestic workers (Domestic Workers Convention No. 189) and a Recommendation (No. 201) in supplementing it in 2011 (ILO, 2011). To ensure that domestic workers have access to decent jobs and enjoy social protection rights, both documents contain explicit provisions for migrant domestic workers. The disapproval of Convention No. 189 is an essential obstacle for all domestic workers in Türkiye to achieve decent work and thus social rights. A global crisis such as COVID-19 has demonstrated the urgency of ratifying the ILO Convention (189) and has increased demands for it. However, what is necessary to combat the care crisis is to prevent the identification of paid care for women, the poor, and migrants. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the value of essential workers in general and domestic workers in particular at the discursive level, this study and other studies show the adverse impact of the pandemic on the working and living conditions of domestic workers and the contradiction between the discourse and policies. In contrast, the value of care work has increased on the one hand, and the depth of the care crisis has increased on the other. Therefore, improving working conditions and, consequently, the living standards of migrant domestic workers in the context of decent work and establishing policies that foster resilience against crises like COVID-19 require rethinking the global crisis of care and developing policies to combat it.



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