

Improving the working conditions of PHS workers: successful approaches identified by the Ad-PHS project

1. Introduction

Demand for Personal and Household Services -both care and non-care services - is growing rapidly in Europe. In response, policymakers across the continent are taking steps to recognise the importance of PHS and create regulatory frameworks to tackle undeclared work, ensuring PHS workers decent wages, better working conditions, and improved health and safety while also improving affordable access to services for the general population.

At present, too many domestic workers in Europe continue to be regularly exposed to bad working conditions, which include low pay, long hours, lack of access to social security, as well as abuse. They are often affected doubly as a lack of state regulation and support are exacerbated by a lack of monitoring procedures at the local level. Despite progress, the numbers of undeclared domestic workers in these sectors reaches 3,1 million in the EU27 and several governments continue to insufficiently provide legislative solutions and address the challenges in PHS.

The **Advancing Personal and Household Services (Ad-PHS) Project** aimed to create a common discursive framework around PHS among different actors in 21 EU Member States and engaged thus in a joint communication effort. In this context, the current state of the PHS sectors was recorded and compared for those member states, and gaps or loopholes also identified in terms of protection and working conditions for the workers. While domestic work comprises growing sectors and opportunities, still many undeclared domestic workers across Europe lack a political representation or representation of interests. However, it is precisely these undeclared workers who are often exposed to structural and / or individual exploitation, mistreatment, abuse, harassment, and violence and are deprived of all human and labour rights.

Among other avenues, political action is one of the key perspectives to address and remedy this imbalance. Nevertheless, the PHS sectors are also a gateway for accompanying social and labour market policies, which can also (in)directly influence the status of domestic workers.

When considering the potential of the PHS sectors employment, however, the professionalization and formalization of employment relationships everywhere turns out to be ground-breaking for a sustainable labour market policy. Additionally, as the demand for PHS increases constantly, notably sustained by an ageing population, the sectors have significant jobs creation potential.

From the gender perspective, public support for PHS is generally beneficial, as women represent the large majority of PHS providers, both as workers in the declared and undeclared economy and as those fulfilling household and care tasks in the

unpaid sphere, although public authorities should remain mindful of the risks of interventions resulting in the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Women also represent a large proportion of PHS users, as they form the majority of the elderly population. Women involved in the unpaid sphere would doubly profit from the availability of formalized PHS, both as a possibility for respite care and as a possibility of accessing the employment market. Additionally, transitioning PHS into the formal economy would significantly bolster it, as PHS currently experiences a high rate of undeclared and informal work arrangements. Regularised PHS sectors will offer numerous opportunities for employing workers with different skills levels and qualifications, who have acquired household and care skills in the unpaid sphere and workers who have challenges (re-) establishing themselves in the formal labour market. As a result, policies aiming to boost PHS represent excellent social investment policies, with significant social and economic returns. In order to ensure that these policies are effective, more funding should be directed, at least up-front, towards the sectors associated with PHS.

Studies estimate that through increased development, sectors involved in PHS have the potential to create 5 million new jobs throughout Europe. PHS can create professional opportunities for millions of people to make meaningful contributions to the lives of others in Europe. It is equally important that it can offer such opportunities to a broad variety of workers because of its low barrier to entry, flexible hours and minimal training and experience requirements. As such, although not the objective, PHS can also contribute to job creation for people who face obstacles to finding and keeping jobs, such as people who lack qualifications and formally recognised skills. Some of these individuals are among the 20 per cent of Europeans aged 25 to 54 who did not complete lower secondary education and may therefore struggle to qualify for skilled work. Others may be at risk of job loss due to automation and technology change. Developing regular PHS jobs could also help integrate long-term unemployed persons into the workforce, a group that makes up about half of all unemployed persons in the EU 27. In addition, some jobs in the non-care field require limited language skills presenting opportunities for migrant workers from other Member States and third countries nationals, although in certain contexts language skills can constitute a barrier and should be taken into account in the career development of PHS workers. Women, who are historically more affected by unemployment trends, and who tend to have higher unemployment rates in the EU 27 than their male counterparts, already make up about 90 per cent of PHS employees. Significant efforts should be made to increase the diversity of the workforce, including the recruitment of more men and fighting gender stereotypes. Additionally, pathways for professional development and opportunities career advancement should be created, while ensuring equal access to these for all workers. It is important, however, to note that skilling and qualifications are key to growing and developing PHS, particularly for areas within PHS that are professionally regulated. The emphasis within PHS advancement should therefore lie on the creation of attractive jobs for all, rather than on seeing it as sectors attractive only to workers with difficulties in accessing the labour market.

2. Commitments

In line with:

- the International Labour Organisation Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers adopted in June 2011,
- the European Pillar of Social Rights, and especially, its principles 1 “Education, training and life-long learning”, 5 “safe and adaptable jobs”, 6 “Wages”, 8 “social dialogue and involvement of workers” and 12 “social protection” adopted in November 2017,

the Ad-PhS partners call on the European Institutions to improve the working conditions of the 9,5 million of European PHS workers including helping the third of them to lift out from undeclared situation in which they are forced.

Such commitments from the European Institutions now prove particularly crucial, in light of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has exacerbated the pre-existing issues prevalent in the PHS sectors in terms of working conditions and further emphasise the need for strong action on the part of the European Institutions¹.

3. Recommendations

First of all, current and future PHS employees must have employment rights (including fair wages, the right of association, and the right to create and join unions) and social protections associated with formal and regulated employment across each country. In this regard, special attention should be given to migrant women's representation, since this group covers a large share of the PHS workforce. Additionally, PHS users, especially vulnerable populations, such as older people, chronically ill people and people with disabilities, who often depend on PHS daily, need affordable and reliable services. Addressing the needs and concerns of PHS workers and users, as well as those of employers, be they the end-users or service providers, can help devise approaches for professionalising and regularising the associated sectors. Under the circumstances of prevailing undeclared work arrangements, professional and quality standards are difficult to implement. A lack of adequate worker professionalization has a negative impact both on the PHS worker, who is denied access to upward professional mobility, and the PHS user, who has no guarantee for the quality of the services provided.

Collective bargaining would provide PHS workers with the same rights and entitlements as other workers under general labour law, including social security access and rights to unemployment benefits, pensions, maternity leave, legal holidays, etc. Moreover, professionalization is fundamental to foster quality and formal service provision. Ratification of the existing labour regulations, social dialogue and suitable training programmes contribute to formalise the PHS sectors.

In order to support public authorities and other stakeholders in the development of PHS policies and activities, the Ad-PhS partners have elaborated a series of [thematic guidelines](#) covering key aspects of the PHS sectors, including with regard to working conditions. This tailored guidance covers the following topics:

- Online platforms
- Cooperatives
- Social vouchers programs

¹ For more information on how PHS sectors have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, please refer to the Ad-PhS report "*The short-term impact of COVID-19 on the field of PHS*": https://ad-phs.eu/ht8ag2/uploads/2020/12/ad-phs-covid_report_december-2020_final_editing.pdf

- Social dialogue structures
- Professional profiles and professionalisation
- Rights and obligations of stakeholders

In these guidelines, the partners have formulated the key recommendations addressed to policymakers with regard to working conditions of domestic workers. The Ad-PHS partners recommend that public authorities:

- level the regulatory playing field between online platforms and ‘standard businesses’ to prevent a race to the bottom in wages and working conditions;
- support cooperatives which offer opportunities for PHS workers to collectively and pro-actively improve their working conditions;
- guarantee the involvement of social partners at an early stage in the design and management of social voucher programs in order to ensure that the instrument leads to an improvement of the workers’ working conditions and facilitate their work-life balance;
- create an environment conducive to social dialogue and sectoral collective bargaining as proven successful instruments for ensuring decent wages and working conditions;
- ensure PHS workers right to access professional trainings;
- develop a deeper understanding of employers’, workers’ and other stakeholders’ rights and obligations with the view of ensuring better working conditions for domestic workers.

The Ad-PHS partners wish to stress that, in order to transfer undeclared workers to declared economy and thereby to improve their working conditions, the implementation of the recommendations above requires considerable public investment in the PHS sectors, including both care and non-care services. Furthermore, it is essential to emphasise that such public spending is in essence an investment and not a cost, as the returns for the economy at wide are considerable.