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The Invisible Hand of Care: A Typology of Brokerage Actors in Migrant Care Labour

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Abstract

Providing senior care is one of the most pressing challenges in a rapidly ageing Europe, particularly in the Central and Eastern European region, which remains largely a care-sending area. Poland has emerged as a trans-European hub for long-term care, acting as a sending, receiving, and transit country, driven by commercial and non-commercial migrant brokerage. Brokerage actors play a central role in facilitating the employment of live-in care workers across Europe. In this article, we present an empirical typology of brokerage actors in the care sector, categorising them according to two dimensions: formalisation and commodification. This typology captures a broad range of actors, from informal migrant networks and individual brokers, through semi-formal actors such as self-organised caregiver groups and social media platforms, to formalised institutions such as civil society organisations, public employment offices, and commercial agencies. Using this typology, we examine how and why formalised informality is increasing within the care economy, under what circumstances, and with what consequences for carers' working conditions. While marketisation has introduced formalising effects on enterprises and labour relations, this is not a one-way path towards decent work. Rather, formalisation itself often generates new forms of informal practices and precarities.

Keywords

brokerage actors; Central and Eastern Europe; (de)commodification; Germany; (in)formalisation; migrant workers; Poland; senior care; Ukraine

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the formalisation of work has been synonymous with decent work, as it implied employment contracts, social security coverage, stable wages, and compliance with labour standards that protect workers' rights. Over the past 15 years, driven by Europe's rapid ageing, the migrant live-in care sector has gained social significance and undergone gradual formalisation (Aulenbacher et al., 2024). However, informal work remains dominant, taking multiple evolving forms. Recent multi-crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have permanently reshaped transnational care organisation in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region (Ezzeddine, 2024). The pandemic disrupted transnational care chains as mobility restrictions prevented established circular mobility, resulting in acute labour shortages. This accelerated the digitalisation and marketisation of care, and strengthened the legitimacy of brokering agencies, which temporarily regularised workers' status and entered public debates (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024a). The war in Ukraine further destabilised these arrangements, as temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees enabled intra-EU mobility and labour market access, while the temporary nature of this status reinforced instability in transnational care provision.

Providing senior care is one of the most important challenges in Europe, especially in the CEE area, which remains largely a care-sending region. Poland currently has the features of an important trans-European hub for long-term care, as it simultaneously exports Polish care workers to countries such as Germany, attracts Ukrainian migrants to provide live-in care in Poland, and serves as a transit country for migrant carers moving onward to Germany and other European destinations. Within this system, the brokerage of migrant workers has become a pivotal mechanism facilitating the reception, transit, and employment of live-in care labour across Europe. However, despite growing research on the commercialisation of home care, less attention has been paid to how diverse brokerage actors operating across formal and informal spheres shape transnational care labour markets.

In this article, we propose an empirical typology of actors brokering the care workforce to, from, and via Poland, thereby contributing to debates on (de)commodification and (in)formalisation of transnational care labour. In the case of Polish care workers being sent to Germany, we observe that previously informal intermediaries have been gradually replaced by new formal economic actors, creating new transnational value chains (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024b). By contrast, care brokerage between Ukraine and Poland has a hybrid character, whereby informal and formal intermediation are developing simultaneously. We examine why and how the care economy exhibits both increasing "formalised informality" and persistent informality. While commercialisation promotes businesses and employment formalisation, it does not necessarily improve migrants' working conditions. New forms of informality and precarity are emerging not only despite formalisation, but also because of it. At the same time, informality remains an integral part of brokerage and may also produce de-commodifying effects. These emerge through friendship-based job sharing, solidarity networks complementing trade union representation, and the everyday practices of commercial agencies and non-commercial welfare organisations that mediate between informal and formal, as well as paid and unpaid transnational care provision.

The article is structured as follows: First, we outline key theoretical concepts related to commercially brokered migrant care work. Next, we introduce the mobility context, distinguishing between East–West mobility (sending care workers from and via Poland) and East–East mobility (recruitment from Ukraine). This

is followed by an explanation of our methodology. The empirical section presents a typology of brokerage actors, and the final section discusses the main findings and conclusions.

2. Formalising Care: Theoretical Discussion

Commercially brokered migrant care labour has become a core component of European senior care systems (Aulenbacher et al., 2024). Brokers occupy a central position within migration infrastructures (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), operating as both informal networks and formalised actors (Faist, 2014) whose intermediation practices span recruitment, matching, and employment. While formal and informal brokerage coexist in transnational live-in care, formal agencies are increasingly driving sectoral formalisation through business practices and policy lobbying. Despite diverse organisational models, brokers share a common logic of recruiting labour from poorer regions to address shortages in wealthier ones (Aulenbacher et al., 2024).

Drawing on the transnational value chain framework (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024b), we conceptualise brokerage as the processing of care labour that creates value within markets embedded in intersecting care, labour, and migration regimes, shaped by policy configurations and regulatory gaps (Bruzelius & Shutes, 2022; Lutz, 2025; Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2011). In doing so, we ground our typology in multilevel and intersectional approaches to care migration and shed light on migrant brokers as "assemblers," with ambiguous and overlapping roles, functions and motives (Koster, 2019) and on a "linked ecology" (Bastide & Yeoh, 2025) of actors, infrastructures, practices, and brokers who transcend the boundaries of formality, economic calculation and functions. Thus, our typology draws on an ever-expanding body of research on brokerage in care migration, bringing together various dimensions of different typologies: It builds on the role of informal placement through networks and migrant communities in irregular care migration (Ambrosini, 2017); it considers the first cross-country systematisation approach to the commodification, marketisation, and corporatisation of senior care provision proposed by Farris and Marchetti (2017; for a typology of the formalisation of domestic and care work through agencies around the world see also Fudge & Hobden, 2018); and it brings into focus a new actor—digital intermediaries such as labour platforms. The first typology of brokers in the Polish-German care market also highlights the key role of these actors in shaping working standards (Leiber et al., 2019). The editors of the book *Home Care for Sale: The Transnational Brokering of Senior Care in Europe* note soberly that across Europe a trend can be observed whereby, regardless of employment models and the profit orientation of companies, there is less of a linear correlation with working conditions than might be expected (Aulenbacher et al., 2024). While formalisation was expected to improve care workers' conditions (Yeates, 2009), this has proven overly optimistic. We want to answer the question of why this is the case by examining three perspectives on work: its informalisation, its marketisation, and the intersectional characteristics of outsourced domestic work.

Informalisation is a relative, broad, and heterogeneous concept (Evans & Tilly, 2015), particularly in cross-regional analyses. Transdisciplinary labour studies conceptualise informal work through the analytical dimensions of economies, their actors and practices, and their characteristics—whether at the level of industries, enterprises, or employment relations. Formal employment is commonly divided into two types, waged and self-employment; however, the literature identifies numerous subcategories within each (Chen, 2015, p. 409). The informalisation of work has multiple causes, and the globalised division of labour produces flexible specialisation and subcontracting chains—phenomena also evident in our field (Chen, 2015). Recent debates highlight the global, cross-sectoral expansion of informalisation and the

heterogeneity of its forms. As observed in our field, the boundaries between informal and formal work are increasingly blurred by the growth of non-standard employment (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024b). Informalisation is also linked to the digitisation and platformisation of work, whereby labour rights are often constrained by selective and limited forms of formalisation, even when care platforms introduce regulations (Strüver, 2021, p. 107). Non-standard labour in transnational live-in care thus reflects broader challenges debated in labour studies, including shifting dichotomies such as workers' autonomy vs control, social protection vs risk, and flexible vs rigid regulation. These developments also have significant implications for how "decent work"—traditionally associated with stable employment, fair remuneration, and reliable security—is being reinterpreted.

Feminist theories of work conceptualise care as part of an expanded notion of labour, encompassing unpaid and informal reproductive work that is rendered socially invisible and systematically undervalued through the naturalisation of a binary gender order (Becker-Schmidt, 2004). Constructed as female, care is situated at the intersection of family obligation, formal employment, and semi-professional labour. Research in the sociology of professions further shows that gender shapes professional hierarchies, from informal attributions of competence to formal criteria of recruitment (Wetterer, 2017). While attempts to formalise paid domestic care are yet to be integrated into a coherent theoretical framework, the literature so far agrees that standardisation and professionalisation generate structural paradoxes, particularly regarding the emotional and regulatory dimensions of care work.

Tronto's (1989) distinction between "caring for" and "caring about" exposes a tension between expectations of empathy and the professional norm of emotional distance, whereby proximity is devalued and detachment framed as competence, a dynamic echoed in Waerness's (1984) contrast between holistic and transactional care models. These tensions are further intensified by the household as a contested site of living and working, captured by Folbre's (2001) concept of "prisoners of love," where emotional attachment coexists with systematic undervaluation and exploitative conditions.

Brokered live-in care exemplifies how "externalization societies" (Lessenich, 2016) respond to the care crisis much as they once did to labour shortages: by recruiting workers from less prosperous countries, for whom care work abroad often offers a desirable alternative and sometimes an escape from precarious living conditions. Within the CEE region, this form of "care extractivism" rests on a historical East–West hierarchy and is shaped by structural exclusions and inclusions mediated through EU citizenship rights (Lewicki & Probst, 2025; Uhde, 2024). Moreover, several CEE countries are not only "exporters" of care workers but have also begun to externalize care costs themselves. They are thus emerging as destinations for migrant care labour and positioning themselves as "semi-peripheries" within the trans-European care economy (see Hrženjak, 2026). Debates on the international division of labour between central and peripheral regions are increasingly moving away from framing the conflict between labour and capital simplistically as a zero-sum game, without espousing "win–win" narratives that are overly optimistic about the consequences for the periphery (such as the global South and, by extension, Eastern Europe). In the final analysis, the capitalist economy still deepens the care crisis by rendering reproductive labour—essential to capitalist production—invisible, while reinforcing labour divisions based on gender, class, and ethnicity (Fraser, 2022).

Although the commodification and marketisation of care and health have been embedded in the EU's framework of "new economic governance" since 2008 (Stan & Erne, 2024), these developments have been

widely critiqued as short-term capitalist responses that deepen inequalities. Dowling (2021, p. 15) describes this dynamic as "care fixes," capturing the reorganisation of production, reproduction, and care relations through policies that marketise care and recast citizens as consumers in welfare markets. While commodification and marketisation of care work are the dominant trends, the opposite tendency of de-commodification is also relevant to our case study. Both concepts derive from Esping-Andersen's (1990) understanding of welfare regimes and refer to the extent to which individuals' or families' welfare either depends on the market (commodification) or is secured by the welfare state, civil society, or families (de-commodification).

3. Context

The organisation of care migration from Ukraine to Poland and from Poland to Germany, as well as the emerging transnational live-in care markets, reveal both commonalities and divergences shaped largely by the distinct geopolitical trajectories of Poland and Ukraine in recent decades.

3.1. East–West Mobility: Posting Care Workers From and Via Poland

In the early 1990s, economic restructuring prompted Polish women to commute to Germany for work. Visa restrictions fostered a rotation-based migration system that relied heavily on informal channels such as word-of-mouth and Polish community networks (e.g., churches). Following Poland's EU accession in 2004, transitional restrictions limited access to the German labour market until 2011, allowing only self-employment or service provision via Polish-based companies. Together with rising demand for senior care, this facilitated the emergence of transnational care agencies.

Today, the posting model dominates: Around two-thirds of agencies based in Germany and 90% of those in Poland operate under this scheme, self-employment remains secondary (10–15% of German and 5% of Polish agencies), and regular employment plays only a marginal role (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024b). In this model, workers are employed in the sending country and posted under the EU freedom to provide services, within a complex legal framework combining national regulations and EU law (including the Services Directive and ECJ rulings), so that the labour law of the sending country applies, while selected host-country standards, such as working time and rest periods, must be respected.

The system has expanded to include third-country nationals legally residing in the EU, with Polish agencies specialising in posting such workers and using the Polish labour market as a springboard. As a result, Poland has become a "trans-European hub" for carers not only from Poland but also from Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Romania, and primarily Ukraine.

This mirrors a key feature of the Polish labour market regime, which involves outsourcing work and its regulations to temporary work agencies and, at the same time, Poland's leading role in the EU in recruiting third-country nationals for temporary labour markets (Matuszczyk & Kowalska, 2024, p. 6).

In Poland, posted carers are usually employed under "civil-law contracts" outside labour law, shifting risks of unemployment, illness, pregnancy, and old age onto workers. Although a minimum wage was introduced in 2017, working hours are often negotiated informally with households, which hold significant power despite

not being formal employers. Standby time and shared activities are frequently excluded from working time. Due to blurred boundaries between work and private life and the legal inviolability of the home, actual working hours often diverge from contracts, and inspections are virtually impossible.

Since the mid-2000s, brokerage has become increasingly professionalised, transnational, and digitally mediated. The number of agencies expanded rapidly: from 30 companies in Germany in 2007 to 337 in Germany and 190 in Poland offering live-in care services to Frankfurt alone in 2017. While German agencies focus on client management and conflict mediation, Polish agencies, as primary contractors, carry most operational responsibilities, including recruitment, administration, transport, training, and worker support. Given limited regulation, agencies have assumed a quasi-regulatory role, setting standards and practices themselves.

3.2. East–East Mobility: Recruiting Care Workers From Ukraine

Although the live-in care sector in Poland is relatively recent, rapid population ageing has generated increasing demand. Despite its growing importance, the sector largely operates within the grey economy, characterised by informal employment, unstable working conditions, and limited social protection (Kałuża-Kopias, 2018). It is highly feminised, shaped by traditional gender roles and labour market structures that channel women into low-paid and precarious care work (Fedyuk et al., 2023). Insufficient institutional support and limited public funding further constrain the sector, which remains underdeveloped and poorly prepared for future demographic challenges.

The absence of comprehensive reforms has contributed to persistent labour shortages. Polish workers increasingly prefer better-paid and more regulated jobs abroad, particularly in Germany, while migrants are more likely to accept caregiving jobs in Poland despite precarious conditions (Kałuża-Kopias, 2018). From its outset, the Polish home care market has depended strongly on transnational mobility, especially circular migration between Ukraine and Poland (Kindler, 2008). Estimates suggest that between 70,000 and 100,000 Ukrainian women work in the domestic sector in Poland (Klakla et al., 2023), the majority of whom are employed irregularly (Rogalewski & Florek, 2020). Poland also functions as a transit corridor for onward migration from Ukraine to other European countries, complicating assessments of the actual scale of employment in care.

The most dynamic changes occurred after 2022, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the granting of temporary protection status to Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland. While this provided access to selected social rights, including healthcare, it did not contribute to a reduction in irregularity in the care sector.

Ukrainian migration into Poland's domestic care sector began in the 1990s, enabled by post-Soviet border openings and the 1993 visa-free regime (Kyliushyk & Chról, 2025). It initially relied on informal networks with limited institutionalised intermediation. After Poland's EU accession in 2004, small agencies emerged in response to growing demand for senior care, often operating in a grey zone, while employment remained largely irregular. Following the 2014 war in eastern Ukraine and the reintroduction of visa-free travel in 2017, Poland became the primary destination for Ukrainian women, and brokerage diversified through agencies and online platforms, although standard contracts remained rare (Kałuża-Kopias, 2018).

Polish agencies increasingly recruit Ukrainian migrants already present in Poland, and brokerage has become more digitalised via social media and embedded in migrant networks (Kindler & Szulecka, 2022). In the absence of clear legal regulation, much of the sector continues to operate in the grey economy, with agencies assuming quasi-regulatory roles.

4. Methodology

This article draws on two research projects and one PhD study. The first project, Decent Care Work (2017–2021), examined the transnational brokerage of migrant care workers into private households in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. We refer to 42 interviews conducted in Poland and Germany between 2017 and 2020. These included expert interviews with employers' organisations, employee-oriented counselling centres, employers' associations, and representatives of brokerage agencies based in Germany and Poland, and semi-structured interviews with care workers, family members, and relatives of care recipients. The second project, CareOrg (2023–2026), is investigating the processes of marketisation and the transnational organisation of senior care in the CEE area. The main data analysed here stem from interviews conducted in Germany, Poland, and Ukraine between 2024 and 2025. These included interviews with: five representatives of Polish brokerage agencies and eleven employees from five different Polish agencies, two representatives of Polish employers' associations, two trade union representatives, one representative from a Polish counselling centre, and two Polish researchers; a focus group discussion was conducted with six Polish care workers following an on-site training session organised by a Polish agency. Further interviews were carried out with five representatives of German brokerage agencies, one representative of a non-profit organisation, and two representatives of German employers' associations. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors involved in the transnational care sector between Poland and Ukraine: six care workers and four brokers, including a representative of a brokerage agency, a Ukrainian-born moderator of a large Facebook group used for informal job brokerage in care work, a self-employed broker from Ukraine operating as a registered business, and an informal broker from Ukraine who facilitates employment and door-to-door transportation to the workplace. Additional data was drawn from the PhD project of Roxana Fiebig-Spindler, which included interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 with the owner of a German agency, four employees from two agencies, and sixteen interviews with thirteen Polish care workers. Accessing and conducting research with agencies presented notable challenges. While some were open to collaboration, others were harder to reach, often citing research fatigue or prior negative experiences, and perceiving researchers as fundamentally critical. Recruiting brokers for Ukrainian women working in Poland was difficult, as many operated semi-formally or informally and were reluctant to participate. Access was gradually achieved through desk research, personal requests, snowball referrals, and engagement with online caregiver communities. In contrast, arranging interviews with caregivers was easier, facilitated by personal networks of the authors of this article, snowballing, and support from a care workers' organisation.

Most interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native languages, facilitating trust-building and ensuring the depth and authenticity of the data. This proved especially relevant given the vulnerable and often precarious position of the care workers. Transcripts were analysed using MAXQDA software, following the methodological steps of grounded theory (see Müller & Skeide, 2018) and thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of cross-cutting patterns.

5. Typology of Brokerage Actors in the Care Sector

In this section, we present the results of our analysis of brokerage of migrant care work, focusing on the CEE area with empirical reference to Poland as a sending, receiving, and transiting country for migration. We propose a typology of brokers in the care sector (see Table 1) that distinguishes between different types of brokerage according to two dimensions: their degree of formalisation (formal, semi-formal, or informal) and commodification (not-for-profit or for-profit). This captures a spectrum of actors, ranging from migrant networks and individual brokers operating informally, through semi-formal arrangements such as self-organised groups of caregivers or social media platforms, to formalised institutions including civil society organisations and commercial agencies.

However, these categories should not be understood as fixed or mutually exclusive. Brokerage actors frequently operate across and between these positions, combining formal and informal, commercial and non-commercial, and legally regulated and unregulated practices. In this sense, our typology should be understood as an analytical tool for identifying dominant organisational logics and practices rather than as a strict classification of empirically separate actors. As Koster (2019) argues, brokerage often functions through overlapping and assembled arrangements shaped by intersecting economic, political, and social rationales. Accordingly, actors in the care sector continuously navigate and combine multiple brokerage roles within a dynamic and unregulated transnational care market.

Table 1. Typology of brokerage actors in the care sector.

Commodification /Formality	For-profit	Not-for-profit
Informal	Individual brokers	Migrant networks
Semi-formal	Online group facilitators and job platforms	Self-organised communities of caregivers
Formal	Agencies and other business entities	Civil society and public institutions

Even though all brokerage types may operate across both migration contexts, important differences emerge between East–West and East–East mobility. Formal for-profit agencies based primarily in Poland and Germany are particularly dominant in the posting of Polish and increasingly Ukrainian care migrants to Germany, whereas the recruitment of Ukrainian women into the Polish care sector relies more strongly on hybrid and informal forms of brokerage, often organised through transnational migrant networks, individual brokers, and social media-based intermediation operating between Ukraine and Poland. By systematising these diverse forms of brokerage, the typology sheds light on the multiple and often overlapping mechanisms through which migrant workers access employment in the care sector.

5.1. Migrant Networks: Informal Non-Profit Actors

As most care workers engaged in transnational care in Poland and Germany are employed informally, personal networks play a crucial role in facilitating migration and job placement and serve as a primary source of information. Caregivers often prefer informal brokerage due to higher expected earnings, greater accessibility and flexibility, and mistrust towards recruitment agencies associated with unclear or exploitative practices. Informal arrangements involve fewer bureaucratic barriers and rely on trusted ties between relatives, friends, or acquaintances. While previously organised mainly face-to-face, such

non-profit brokerage is now increasingly mediated online and embedded in shared migratory experiences and mutual support. The following account of a Ukrainian caregiver working in Poland illustrates how care work circulates through these informal, transnational connections:

> I find work mostly through friends. It's mostly through women I know who work in caregiving. One woman tells another about available work, and someone goes home. When I first came to Poland, I called my relative, who already had several contacts with Ukrainian women. I wrote down their numbers. So, the circle of acquaintances grew. It's all done over the phone. And that's how we find the work. (care worker_5)

While informal non-profit job brokerage offers advantages such as flexibility, autonomy, and access through trusted networks, it is not without its challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of enforceable labour protections. The work brokers organise is completely undeclared or underdeclared—for example, by relying on EU tourist health insurance—bringing with it all the negative consequences. Employers are often reluctant to formalise employment relationships, even when explicitly asked to do so by caregivers. As a result, the scope of duties remains vague and easily expandable, which frequently leads to exploitation. Migrant women are left without effective mechanisms to defend their rights or negotiate the terms of their work. Job loss in this context entails starting the entire search process anew, often under conditions of financial stress. Moreover, the constant risk of being replaced by another worker willing to accept lower pay or more duties creates additional insecurity within these networks.

5.2. Individual Brokers: Informal For-Profit Actors

Paid informal brokerage existed earlier and was typically mediated by a "former acquaintance," without contracts and involving payments from both employers and workers. A prominent example was the so-called "bus driver" model in Ukrainian migration to Poland. From the 1990s, these intermediaries—usually men—developed transnational networks, providing entirely informal yet multifaceted services, including job placement, visa facilitation, door-to-door transport, and conflict mediation. Operating on a commission basis, driver-intermediaries initially played a key role in agriculture but later expanded into manufacturing and care work. Over time, they also began receiving job offers from recruitment agencies and migrant women themselves, particularly those seeking a replacement or sharing job leads. Despite their significance, this form of intermediation has been criticised for its lack of transparency and exploitative potential, and its relevance declined with the introduction of visa-free travel and the consolidation of informal migrant networks:

> Well, first of all, they can promise to bring someone, even to factories or plants, but I even talked to several drivers…to see if they personally know the employers, how it actually works. Well, no, they don't know anything personally, they don't know….They just get a certain amount per person, and after a month of work, they receive this money, for example. And I know many people who ended up in not very good situations, endured it, and in the end earned nothing and went on looking for better jobs. So, in my opinion, they haven't built a very good reputation. Again, it's only for the purpose of profit. (Facebook care workers group coordinator_2)

In the case of Polish migration, drivers are partially part of the sector and are more formalised, sometimes cooperating with agencies.

Other informal, individual for-profit brokers operate locally and provide only matching services. Notably, many care workers refer to these brokers as "agencies," even when their mode of operation differs markedly from that of formal agencies. Closer examination often reveals that such an "agency" is in fact a single person—usually a woman—whose name circulates informally among migrants. Caregivers typically have no written contract with these intermediaries, and wages are usually paid directly by the employer rather than through the broker. Despite the informality of these arrangements, such brokers retain considerable influence in connecting employers and caregivers, as one care worker described:

> I don't know the address. The company is just called "Justyna" [the name has been changed]—run by a lady. I have her phone number, and that's where I call….I heard about it through our diaspora. Someone gave me the phone number and said there's this agency. (care worker_6)

One of these individual brokers confirms this approach, stating that it is a central point of contact and obviously receives many offers from job seekers: "Most caregivers find me themselves. Acquaintances through acquaintances. Of course, I post announcements on Facebook" (informal broker_3).

The most frequently mentioned advantage of working with individual brokers is that the cooperation does not resemble traditional agency-based employment. A key point of distinction lies in the financial arrangement: Caregivers emphasise that no one profits directly from their labour. In most cases, the broker is paid a one-time fee by the employer for matching them with a caregiver, while the worker receives their full wage directly from the household. Despite the practical advantages that this model of private intermediation offers to caregivers, it does not lead to formal employment or greater protection of their labour rights. As our interviewees reported, they are often responsible for negotiating the terms of their work on their own, including fundamental issues such as the scope of duties and securing at least one day off per week.

5.3. Online Group Facilitators and Job Platforms: Semi-Formal For-Profit Actors

Among semi-formal for-profit actors, coordinators of large online caregiver communities—most notably Facebook groups—play a prominent role as platforms for job searching. Moreover, in Germany, we now also find traditional job platforms that place live-ins in households (e.g., marta.de). Some of these groups attract tens of thousands of members; for example, at the time of our study, the largest Ukrainian group in Poland had 50,848 members, while the largest Polish group in Germany exceeded 100,000 members. Operating with minimal or no regulation, these communities constitute a semi-formal form of labour intermediation and are used by a wide range of brokers, from individual informal intermediaries to large agencies. In exchange for a fee, coordinators post job advertisements on behalf of both informal and formal actors, often extending recruitment beyond the Polish labour market to other EU countries, thereby blurring the boundaries between informal and formal brokerage.

While primarily used for job intermediation, these social media groups also function as spaces for information exchange, collective orientation, and emotional support among caregivers. They enable users to assess wage levels, job responsibilities, and working conditions, as well as to share experiences and strategies for asserting boundaries. In this way, the same digital spaces simultaneously facilitate for-profit brokerage and non-profit practices, combining labour market mediation with mutual support:

> These topics [discussions about rates] are constantly discussed [in a Facebook group moderated by the interviewee]. And now caregivers even ask before agreeing to a certain job: "How much should I ask for this service?" So they exchange information all the time….That is, any information on how long one can stay during the war on the territory of Poland, whether you need to leave Poland, or whether insurance is needed now to cross the border….They [women] start sharing information and experiences…teaching each other how to defend their personal boundaries. (Facebook care workers group coordinator_2)

Another example is often reported by care workers of agencies having conflicts with German clients about the amount of food provided in the client's household to the care worker. Even though regulations regarding meal provisions exist in German law, some agencies and clients do not ensure caregivers receive adequate nutrition, and caregivers are often left uninformed by their agencies about their rights and the actual value of the food provisions. One of the caregivers we interviewed mentioned that she could rely on an informal solidarity group on Facebook, where information on regulations was shared so that she could better navigate this conflict.

Although social media has become one of the central infrastructures of job intermediation in the care sector, its role extends well beyond simple job matching. By circulating information on pay rates, working conditions, and mutual expectations, these platforms actively shape informal labour norms and everyday understandings of rights and obligations. At the same time, however, they do not provide effective safeguards against exploitation. In this way, being located at the intersection of informal and semi-formal arrangements and operating across both non-profit and for-profit logics, social media platforms overlap and combine different brokerage roles.

5.4. Self-Organised Communities of Caregivers: Semi-Formal Non-profit Actors

In the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework protecting the rights of domestic care workers, the responsibility for negotiating working conditions and defending labour rights has increasingly fallen on the caregivers themselves. Given the lack of established sectoral trade unions specifically dedicated to migrant domestic and care workers in Poland, grassroots initiatives created by caregivers themselves have begun to assume functions associated with labour representation, advocacy, and informal worker protection. In this context, mechanisms of self-organisation and grassroots empowerment have emerged as critical strategies of collective advocacy. A significant step toward institutionalising such efforts was the establishment of the Workers' Initiative Commission for Domestic Workers at the All-Poland Trade Union (hereafter: the Commission), initiated by Ukrainian women themselves at the end of 2021.

This group represents a pioneering effort to create a support infrastructure specifically targeting migrant domestic workers, particularly caregivers. It provides vital services including access to legal and psychological assistance, consultation on legalisation procedures, and dissemination of informational materials about workers' rights. Self-organised communities of caregivers function as semi-formal, non-profit actors in job intermediation, as they receive employment offers directly from families seeking care for a relative. In some cases a verbal agreement on the caregiver's rights and responsibilities may be established with the facilitation of the Commission. Moreover, this self-organised community organises regular meetings and community-building events, reinforcing a sense of solidarity and shared struggle among migrant women, as one Commission member told us:

> We sit down, we talk, and I give advice. I [member of commission] say: I know that work is important to you, but don't show that you'll accept anything without limits. Cleaning, laundry, cooking for the whole family—you're going in as a caregiver first of all….So we try to advise from the very beginning, because I say…to all of them: We can't guarantee protection, but we can teach you how to protect yourself. But you also need to know how to communicate in a human way. I'll show you how to draft a contract, how to talk to employers. I explained it all literally. Even little role-plays: "Good morning, good morning," we practiced dialogues like in a theatre setting, so they could learn how to respond to questions from an employer, what kind of questions a worker can ask. (member of the Commission_12)

Another important organisation of this kind is the Caregivers' Alternative Union (Związkowa Alternatywa Opiekunek), which is a part of Związkowa Alternatywa trade union and was established in 2020. This organisation primarily sees its role in improving working conditions in the sector for Polish care workers in Germany through lobbying of the Polish and German governments and public relations, raising awareness about the lack of regulation and poor working conditions in the sector. However, as mentioned by a member of this organisation, Caregivers' Alternative Union has also intervened in many conflict situations between companies, clients, and care workers, and it is involved, more or less directly, in job placement processes through everyday work on social media—for example, maintaining "blacklists" for care workers. Since the work is only partially institutionally supported and financed, and most of it consists of unregulated voluntary activities, this actor should be classified as a semi-formal organisation.

Despite the emergence of inspiring initiatives such as the Caregivers' March (on April 13, 2025, Ukrainian caregivers from the Commission for Domestic Workers marched through the streets of Warsaw to demand better working conditions and legal recognition of their work) and other grassroots union efforts, it is important to recognise that these forms of mobilisation remain limited. Many caregivers continue to work under informal arrangements and lack basic legal protections, which significantly discourages open advocacy. Fear of losing one's employment, migration-related insecurities, and an isolated workplace with long working hours and a general lack of institutional support contribute to the reluctance of many women to engage in public actions or openly demand their rights.

5.5. Agencies and Other Business Entities: Formal For-Profit Actors

Formal for-profit brokering agencies constitute one of the most institutionalised segments of labour intermediation in the care sector and are driven by clear profit expectations linked to demographic ageing: "A commercial enterprise is about making a profit—and senior care is one of those areas where, looking at demographic trends, there's a clear opportunity" (representative of agency_1). However, such agencies remain very heterogeneous, ranging from small regional operators to large corporations with transnational infrastructures. Polish-based agencies often operate in dual markets, simultaneously posting Polish and Ukrainian workers to Germany and other EU countries while recruiting Ukrainians and other non-EU nationals for the Polish care sector. Although the domestic care market in Poland is still relatively small, it has grown steadily, with agencies increasingly adopting business models developed in the Poland–Germany context, including structured recruitment procedures and standardised training. Recruitment strategies typically combine in-house human resources departments with cooperation with independent recruiters under various business-to-business arrangements, allowing agencies to reduce operational risks while maintaining access to migrant networks across sending and receiving countries. External recruiters may be

based in Poland, Ukraine, or elsewhere and operate under diverse legal forms, reflecting the flexible and hybrid character of formal care brokerage, as illustrated by the following statement from a representative of one such agency:

> I have my own human resources department. It currently consists of four people. They're all based in our office. From which we handle recruitment [Ukrainians] both in Poland and in Ukraine. Besides that, we have our own private recruiters—they're more like freelancers—with whom we have B2B contracts for recruitment….Right now, I have people who are based in Poland—and because they have strong networks of contacts in Ukraine, it's worth it for them to open a business in Poland and carry out recruitment activities from here….But I also have people from Ukraine who work for us and are self-employed. (representative of agency_1)

Beyond their recruitment infrastructures, agencies are also engaging in processes of institutionalisation within the Polish market. This includes the emergence of professional associations, industry lobby groups, and collaboration with think tanks that advocate for agency interests in both Poland and Germany. These structures not only facilitate networking and information exchange but also contribute to shaping the regulatory agenda in ways favourable to commercial actors.

While the domestic market continues to expand, agency strategies are increasingly shaped by developments in Germany, which remains the primary destination for many recruits. Regulatory gaps have allowed agencies to operate flexibly; however, anticipated legal reforms—particularly in live-in care—have prompted some to diversify into tightly regulated home nursing services offering hourly care, which are financially compensated within the German healthcare system. This recent shift illustrates how agencies operating in an unregulated field are adapting their business models to secure their position in a potentially more regulated environment.

Despite their organisational sophistication, formal for-profit agencies do not eliminate precarity and exploitation. Caregivers are typically employed under civil law contracts that offer limited protections, while fee distribution lacks transparency and compliance with social insurance obligations remains inconsistent. Although agencies invest in onboarding and basic training, key aspects of working conditions, including rest periods and labour rights, are often left to informal arrangements between caregivers and households.

Recent policy debates in Poland highlight tensions between improving labour standards and maintaining sector viability. In 2024, a proposal to mandate standard employment contracts for migrant caregivers aimed to reduce abuse and informality but faced strong opposition from agencies citing higher costs and administrative burdens. Industry representatives warned that without parallel public funding or enhanced care allowances, such regulation could undermine the affordability and availability of care services.

5.6. Civil Society and Public Institutions: Formal Non-Profit Actors

While various forms of labour intermediation exist in the care sector, none simultaneously guarantee both formal employment and protection from exploitation of migrant workers. As one of our interviewees aptly stated: "The employer wants to save, and the agency wants to profit. And it's always the poor caregivers who suffer. That's also unfair" (Facebook care workers group coordinator_2). Against this backdrop, civil society and public institutions have begun to experiment with what might seem almost impossible in this sector:

formal, non-profit job brokerage. Such initiatives remain rare, but they demonstrate that alternative models are possible.

A key example is provided by church-based organisations such as Caritas and Diakonie, which operate as formal, non-profit, and publicly co-funded and regulated trans-European providers. These actors represent a model approach in terms of fair employment conditions and preventing brain drain effects in sending regions by offering regulated, socially responsible recruitment pathways. The unique feature of live-in care brokerage by non-profit church organisations, such as the Caritas project CariFair, is that they offer a traditional employment contract, which offers several advantages for caregivers compared to the posting model or self-employment model preferred by commercial agencies, including full social rights and transparency regarding their social security contributions and earnings. However, these arrangements have their limitations, particularly when it comes to exercising oversight over private households. This structural constraint highlights the persistent challenges facing even the most ethically driven non-profit brokers. The employer model practiced by Caritas is often not attractive for many families, because it involves higher costs and greater responsibility for the families as employers, even though Caritas takes over the paperwork. As the representative of CariFair explained: "You can't make a lot of money with it. There is a fixed gross contract, everything has to be paid, the families pay a lot, then you have to pay for the support of coordinators." CariFair therefore stressed that political support, for example through subsidies, is needed because the employer model is very expensive for families and currently not competitive in the live-in market.

6. Concluding Discussion

The proposed typology of transnational care-work brokerage aligns with recent research on the growing marketisation of home-care mobility. It shows how the degree of formalisation of commercial brokerage and the resulting business models, which often rely on non-standard employment, reflect brokers' responses to their institutional environment in sending and receiving countries, including care, migration, and labour regimes, as well as supranational and global labour and education markets. These patterns are also shaped by relations with other actors, such as clients, workers, and competitors. By examining processes of informalisation, the typology highlights their preconditions and ambivalent effects on work arrangements and conditions, thereby contributing to ongoing debates on how this kind of care work should be regulated.

Furthermore, the typology offers new insights into the ongoing debate about the commodification and decommodification of care provision, and the respective roles of the market, community, state, and family. It clearly demonstrates the continuing importance of informal brokerage, despite the strong tendency towards formalisation. The persistence of the grey market is due to factors such as labour costs, bureaucratic hurdles for all involved, and a lack of recognition of qualifications. Digitisation and the ability to recruit via social media and job platforms from one's desk and from/to any location have further fuelled informal brokerage. However, it is particularly interesting to note the blurred boundaries between formality and informality, which are becoming evident in various and changing practices and roles of almost all types. These blurred boundaries are part of many business practices of formal organisations, such as agencies that engage in formalised informality. Moreover, informality is widely embraced not only by economic actors but also by non-profit brokers. The sustained relevance and the emergence of new forms of informality are key findings of our typology.

On the one hand, platform-based brokerage introduces regulations such as registration and rating systems into their business models and operates within the formal economy. However, their operations are usually limited to matching and tend to shift working relationships towards undocumented or, at best, non-standard employment. The platforms analysed here are even less formalised than major companies in the field, such as Helpling and care.com. Most platforms are organised as closed groups on social media, primarily Facebook. The practices of their administrators are extremely opaque and correspond much more closely to informal than to formal working relationships. As responsibilities are unclear, there is no quality assurance, monitoring, or evaluation of recruitment and job placements.

On the other hand, we observe a democratising effect of social media, which serve as central transnational infrastructures for care workers. They not only facilitate informal for-profit and non-profit networks but also provide a real boost to grassroots activism and self-organised communities in this challenging field, characterised by professional isolation. Various forms of de-commodification-based solidarity, reciprocity, and exchange develop in informal networks, and these can become successful grassroots organisations that are increasingly institutionalised and supported by established trade unions. However, the organisations we have analysed still primarily rely on the voluntary work of their members. In an unregulated environment, their role remains crucial in combating persistent structures of inequality.

Increased formalisation is particularly evident in commercial agencies engaged in brokerage. Agencies pursue a range of business models, from small self-employed individuals to large corporations and joint stock companies, franchise systems, B2B arrangements, and platforms. These models align with the general trend towards non-standard employment. Companies posting workers to Germany base their employment models primarily on civil law contracts (which are common in the Polish labour market), while in Poland, B2B contracts dominate, particularly for Ukrainian workers who are based in both Poland and Ukraine. In Germany, the self-employment model is becoming more popular.

These national patterns are shaped by EU law. Poland has become a hub for the mobile care sector, largely thanks to the combination of Polish civil law contracts and EU regulations on posting workers within the EU and from third countries. Furthermore, transnational labour markets drive subcontracting cooperation across national borders. Here, non-standard work emerges both from the nature of transnational live-in employment (workers' rotation, domestic work, the relevance of brokerage) and international outwork, in which various actors exploit these arrangements across transnational value chains, pushing responsibility and risk downward (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024b). To an increasing extent, this takes the form of formalised precarity: a race to the bottom in white gloves, as formalisation often serves to legitimise precarity.

Through the marketisation of health sectors and explicit or implicit familialisation policies, the state relinquishes its responsibilities to the market, families delegate their responsibilities as employers to agencies, and, ultimately, much responsibility is transferred to care workers, who, in all employment models, are contractors. The intermediary's role is thus crucial: Their choices regarding employment models, their cooperation practices, and their understanding of their role all have a direct impact on the working conditions of care workers.

At the same time, formalising care work remains essential to ensure contracts are precise and transparent, and to provide clear information about job offers and working conditions, genuine support, fair wages, and

free time. Nevertheless, formalisation has significant limits. Caregivers, families, and agencies frequently emphasise the ethos of giving, receiving, and providing care at home, contrasting this with the impersonal character of overly standardised institutional care. In this sense, standardisation is only possible to a certain extent (regarding work processes, professionalisation, and training; see also Fiebig-Spindler, 2026). Nevertheless, non-standard employment models have serious implications for working conditions. Unequal bargaining power, informal negotiation of duties and hours, the influence of stereotypes, and moral frameworks can result in highly ambivalent outcomes. Hence, the broker's role is key here, to manage conflicting expectations such as that of families that often desire "24-hour remote control," as one Polish agency described it. Examples such as the non-profit CariFair and some commercial agencies demonstrate how flexibility and security can be combined.

The proposed typology of brokers holds the potential to be applied in other parts of Europe; its elements can be found in other articles in this thematic issue. We identify comparable patterns globally (Peng, 2024) and in other sectors: The key role of temporary agencies and brokers in enhancing labour market flexibility (Coe et al., 2007) persists, effectively leveraging transnational subcontracting structures and value chains to manage mobility, rotations and housing—as already seen in the meat industry (Mense-Petermann, 2018), construction sector, and agriculture (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2014). The rise of these transnationally brokered, atypical employment relationships and business models calls for further research and regulation of such transnational labour, including platform-based activities, as well as innovative worker representation through trade unions and independent advisory bodies for these diverse, mobile workforces who increasingly operate on platforms, as self-employed workers, or as franchisees.

At the same time, the typology shows that clear categorisations of roles, rights, and obligations are difficult to define in this specific working environment. Here, agencies take on the tasks of trade unions, trade unions broker jobs, workers become customers of agencies, and families become employers; commercial practices go hand in hand with voluntary work and solidarity. And last but not least: Professional care work itself remains a mixture of informal closeness and formalised distance.

However, brokers remain key actors in shaping transnational home care, not only in terms of the organisation of work but also regarding daily work practices, roles, and responsibilities. In light of the fundamental challenge of reconciling the need for flexible care work with secure working conditions amid gender and racial inequalities, an open process of mediation and negotiation involving all stakeholders and cooperating in stable "working alliances"—community organisations, trade unions, employer associations—is required to develop ethical, fair, and sustainable working models.

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Data Availability

The data are confidential and largely concern vulnerable groups; therefore, only selected and anonymized datasets are available upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

Perplexity AI was used for formatting the references.

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