

I am grateful for allowing me to participate in addressing a topic that concerns many people in the European Union: **'Being a migrant worker'**.

I am Angela Flores, born in Ecuador, I immigrated to Belgium 22 years ago. In my native country I did my law training, but in Belgium I encountered barriers to making the equivalence of my studies and I had to dedicate myself to working as **a housekeeper**. At first, due to lack of a work permit and not speaking the language, I had to submit to exploitation by working up to 14 hours a day for very low wages. When I learned the language, I was able to find more conscious families with whom I worked with better conditions. I worked for 10 years as an undocumented person. Then I got my papers and was able to legalize my work. During the course of my journey, I joined the union and over time, I decided to participate in the union delegation. I also became a member of the Labour Party of Belgium.

I have found from my own experience that the access of immigrant workers to skilled jobs and to high-level jobs presents more resistance for immigrants of **non-European** origin and their descendants than for Europeans.

And as for the integration of immigrants into the workplace, Belgium is not the best student in the field. In 2019, only 61% of immigrants had a job, compared to 71% of natives. This is explained by the level of qualification, non-proficiency in the language, **non-recognition** of diplomas and discrimination. A study by the University of Ghent, for example, showed that in an identical profile, a Turkish applicant had to send 44% more of his resume than a Belgian to wait to pass a job interview. Therefore, many immigrants do not manage to get a job, let alone at the height of their qualifications.

Immigrant women from outside the European community, above all, face an extremely precarious labor reality. They do jobs that are often invisible and poorly paid and most of the time, these jobs are part-time. According to a Eurostat study, in 2023, 35% of immigrant women in the EU worked part-time, compared to 25% of EU-born women. In terms of salary, in Belgium women earn on average 23% less than men. As you can see, gender discrimination aggravates the situation, resulting in lower salaries compared to men.

I am going to refer especially to the situation of immigrant women who work as housekeepers, as is my case.

In Belgium, the provision of domestic services is organised into a sector called "**Service Cheques**" and is offered to individuals or families through companies specialised in this sector. The participants in this system are: on the one hand, the employer, who is the owner of the Service Checks company; on the other, the customer, who is the user of the service; and the "house helper" who is the person who performs the work and is mostly women. Users make the payment through checks subsidized by the State. This system was created in order to bring out of the shadows thousands of workers who worked irregularly, who were exploited and whose rights were not respected. Their work was regularized under the category of blue-collar work. And at first this system was good and fulfilled its objective, but with over time, capitalism became interested in this sector and began to exploit the workers:

The intensity of the work was accentuated. They have greatly reduced the number of hours allocated to the worker to clean a house, yet they demand the same work. The bosses of the agencies accept and allow the exploitation of their workers, because for them the only thing that matters is to have loyal and happy customers and satisfied shareholders. And this overload of work translates into disastrous effects on the health of workers.

On the subject of work-related diseases, according to studies carried out by the unions, we have found that **the work of a housekeeper is a job that makes you sick**. Female workers remain in good health only during the first 10 years of work, after which they begin to have health problems. According to a study, the figures of illness in the Service Checks sector are alarming. This sector has a number of more than 160,000 workers. According to this study, "every day 1 over 5 workers falls ill" and **one** in 10 has been unemployed due to illness for **more than** a year. In 2023, the sickness rate was 20.2%, compared to the global rate for other sectors which was 8.2%. The main causes of illness in this sector are hard physical load or loneliness, since workers work in isolation, in addition to structural factors. There is a direct link between seniority and sickness rate. Workers with less seniority have fewer health conditions than those with more seniority.

The most common pathologies are: musculoskeletal disorders and skin disorders and lung diseases caused by the use of harmful cleaning products. House helpers are 35 times more likely to suffer from musculoskeletal disorders than the average for other sectors. This also affects mental health.

The State invests little in research into women's diseases. They refuse to recognize these diseases as occupational diseases. And the authorities and employers are not doing enough to take preventive measures and that is one of the axes of our struggle: we demand greater control by the labour authorities, the adoption of measures to prevent diseases and risks and compliance with legislation. It has been found that 90% of the companies that offer domestic services do not respect the legislation on welfare and safety at work, so this sector presents the highest number of claims for illness or disability, which has an enormous social cost. The most unacceptable thing is that it is a sector subsidized at 70% by public money and employers, instead of allocating that money to the well-being of their workers, allocate it to swell the profits of shareholders. As an example: the largest company that in 2022 made a profit of 6 million, in 2023 added 15 million. As you can see, the money is for the shareholders, among which banks participate and for the workers it is the disease. These are the hands of capitalism.

And what about the situation of undocumented workers? This is an even harder chapter. According to the League of Undocumented Domestic Workers, around 50,000 undocumented women from Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America work in conditions that can be described as modern slavery. These women not only face low wages, but also sexist violence, sexual violence, discrimination and long working hours.

The exploitation of undocumented workers favors social dumping by putting workers with legal residence in competition with undocumented workers, who are forced to accept exploitation in order to keep their jobs. To solve this problem, it is necessary to deal with applications for regularisation of undocumented workers more quickly, to treat applicants from third countries equally with that of the member countries, to increase the wages of all workers and to share migration on the continent in solidarity.

As I mentioned before, I participate in the trade union delegation and at the same time, I am a member of the Labour Party of Belgium and from these spaces I have taken an active part in the struggle of the workers and especially of the housekeepers, to preserve the rights acquired, to conquer new ones and for equality.

Until 3 years ago we were completely invisible, we had no representation and our labor sector showed symptoms of growing precariousness. So a small

group of workers decided to take action and rely on the unions to build a front of struggle for the vindication of our rights. Building this front was not an easy task, as we all worked in isolation, locked in houses everywhere. So we had to go out and look for the workers one by one, where she was. It took a long time and today we have an organized front, with which we wage the struggle while we work. And the struggle is waged in the street, in the union, in the street: We have carried out mobilizations, strikes, actions. Every March 8, on the occasion of Women's Day, we carry out mobilizations against femicide and for equal rights for women. We have visited the Minister of Health, whose word we have managed to commit to work for greater control of occupational diseases and risk prevention for housekeepers. We have carried out actions in Parliament to ask legislators for clear laws for our sector. And we have achieved small victories such as: a small salary increase, the reimbursement of part of transport, among others, but there is still much to be done for the dignity of our work.

We remain mobilized for fair employment contracts and decent wages, for respect and safety in the workplace. For the recognition of our health problems as occupational diseases. We also call for the immediate implementation of social inspection for risk analysis and a proportionately correct workload.

However, fighting in the streets is not enough. We need our demands to become positive law so that their application is mandatory. That is why we must fight in Parliament as well. This is street, Parliament, street.

And our best allies on this front are the parliamentarians of the Labour Party of Belgium, the PTB. Those who intervene in parliaments for our demands and also march with us in the mobilizations. And we are very optimistic about the next parliamentary period, because the PTB managed to increase its number of parliamentarians and will also have a good bloc made up of blue-collar workers. Sending workers to parliament is a strategy of the party as part of the struggle for improvements for the working class. Who better than the workers to legislate in favor of their class?

Other parties, which call themselves left-wing or centrist, have offered us their support before the elections but then send their promises to the trash can.

Women trade unionists play a vital role in this struggle. As part of the commemoration of June 20, "Day of the House Helpers", we remember that working women not only work, we also fight for the rights of all. According to a report by the European Institute for Gender Equality, women trade unionists have been instrumental in making significant progress on labour rights in recent years. It is essential that we continue to fight for our rights, we will not allow our voices to be silenced. We reaffirm our commitment to fight for a better future for immigrant workers.

Thanks for listening to me!