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Undocumented migrant domestic workers and the decommodifying effects of reciprocity

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Abstract
The Hungarian socioeconomist Karl Polanyi demonstrated that in pre-modern Europe and most non-Western societies the importance of market exchange has only been marginal – a complimentary source of income for certain categories of the population (Polanyi 1944, 1957a & b, 1966, 1977). The livelihood of man in these societies was guaranteed mostly through redistribution and/or reciprocity. In contemporary market societies it is however the contrary: citizens are expected to survive on resources stemming primarily from market exchange, while resources originating from redistribution (the welfare state) - and, to a smaller extent, reciprocity (social links and obligations) – temporarily supplement or replace market resources when individuals are unable to take part in market exchange (due to old age, disability or unemployment for example). This paper shows the rudimentary decommodifying effects Polanyian reciprocity has for undocumented migrants. Using data collected in 2012 in Belgium through semi-structured interviews with migrant domestic workers, I show that resources stemming from reciprocity are of particular importance for undocumented migrants because they do not have access to the “safety net” offered by redistribution (the welfare state of the host country). I also use the Polanyi-inspired conceptual framework I developed to shed light on the importance of reciprocity for finding and securing jobs, a theme previously explored using the ‘social capital’ approach (Aguilera 2002, 2003; Granovetter 1995).
Introduction

Using data collected in 2012 in Belgium through semi-structured interviews with migrant domestic workers, this paper shows the particular importance of Polanyian reciprocity for migrants staying and working illegally in the ‘host’ country (hereafter referred to as ‘undocumented migrants’).

Migration studies differentiate between types of migration according to ‘entry categories’ such as labour (or ‘economic’) migration, political migration, family reunification, irregular migration, etc. (Sainsbury 2006: 230). Entry categories create a hierarchical differentiation between the social rights to which migrants have access in the ‘host country’. That is why, despite having interviewed migrants with different legal statuses at the time of the interview and who entered Belgian territory through different legal routes (asylum application, overstaying a tourist visa or diplomatic ID, legal economic migration based on EU citizenship, … ), in this contribution I focus mainly on undocumented migrants (who have thus no access to social protection and limited access to social assistance in emergency situations, such as free emergency health care).

Domestic work performed in private homes without a legal contract (hereafter referred to as ‘undeclared domestic work’) by first generation migrants has been chosen as a case study because domestic workers are said to have an advantage over undocumented migrants employed in other sectors (such as construction or agriculture). The personal relationship developing between the worker and the employer in undeclared cleaning and care jobs brings this type of employment close to an open-ended contract (Rosenfeld et al. 2010: 158). The idea was then that undeclared migrant domestic work is a ‘sector’ where the effects of Polanyian reciprocity will be the easiest to observe. My claim isn’t however that there is no reciprocity involved in declared domestic work or in other market activities, but to underscore its key importance for undocumented migrant domestic workers.

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1 The sample includes a total of 13 respondents, from which 5 come from the Philippines, 5 from Poland, one from the Democratic Republic of Congo, one from Morocco and one from Rwanda; 11 are women and 2 are men; 12 work and live in the wider Brussels conurbation and one in Antwerp. Most respondents were aged 40-50, except one in her 20s and two in their 30s.

2 At the time of the interview most respondents had a stay permit obtained after several years of being undocumented. One respondent was an asylum seeker who lodged an appeal after having been formally ordered to leave Belgian territory, and another was an EU-citizen who exercised her freedom of movement within the EU.
The entire oeuvre of the Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi is widely critical of the so-called ‘economistic fallacy’ (also known as the ‘catallactic fallacy’) according to which human beings are by nature market-oriented (read ‘profit-making oriented’) beings. Polanyi endeavoured to demonstrate that in pre-modern Europe and in most non-Western societies the importance of (market) exchange has been only marginal – a complimentary source of income for certain categories of the population (Polanyi 1944, 1957a & b, 1966, 1977). The livelihood of man in these societies was guaranteed mostly through reciprocity and redistribution. In contemporary market societies it is however the contrary: citizens are expected to survive on resources stemming primarily from market exchange, while resources originating from redistribution (the welfare state) - and, to a smaller extent, reciprocity (social links and obligations) – temporarily supplement or replace market resources when individuals are unable to take part in market exchange (due to old age, disability or unemployment for example).

Drawing from Marx and Polanyi’s criticisms of the way market economies transform human labour into a commodity, social policy classic Esping-Andersen (1990: 37) defined decommodification as “the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation”. While social policy analysis endeavours to study and compare welfare states’ decommodifying effects, third-sector research and economic anthropology have shown the enduring importance of reciprocity both in contemporary market societies and in non-Western contexts. This contribution combines the insights of those three disciplines.

Influenced by the approach adopted by Lancee (2011), who analysed the impact of bonding and bridging social capital on migrants’ labour market outcomes, I initially endeavoured to study the decommodifying effects of Polanyian reciprocity for undocumented migrant domestic workers. Such an approach however quickly proved to reproduce the economistic fallacy criticized by Polanyi: it assumed that, in order to earn a livelihood in the host country, undocumented migrants resorted to market exchange, while resources accessed through reciprocity constituted for them an ersatz of the decommodifying effects redistribution has for legal residents and/or citizens of the host country. Data collected through interviews with (previously) undocumented migrants who work or have worked in domestic work however quickly showed me that, for some of them, reciprocity – and not market exchange - is what
enables subsistence in the host country. Some of my respondents subsisted for several years exclusively or mainly on resources originating in reciprocity, while they resorted to market exchange only once their subsistence in the host country has been guaranteed through reciprocity, or as a source of ‘pocket money’ (see ‘Discussion’ below). In this contribution I however concentrate on the rudimentary decommodifying effects of reciprocity. I also use the Polanyi-inspired conceptual framework I developed to shed light on the importance of reciprocity for finding and securing jobs, a theme previously explored using the ‘social capital’ approach (Aguilera 2002, 2003; Granovetter 1995).

After briefly outlining the migration regime and policies pertaining to domestic and care labour in Belgium, where data have been collected, I summarize those elements of the Polanyian heritage necessary to understand the subsequent discussion of the empirical evidence.
The context

Immigration in Belgium is mostly a two-tier phenomenon: on the one hand Westerners (mostly citizens of the ‘old’ EU) working legally in skilled occupations, on the other – migrants from Poland, Romanians (who cannot freely access the Belgian labour market\(^3\)) or undocumented migrants from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) working in low skilled sectors, mainly agriculture, catering, construction and domestic work.

Belgium is an ‘old’ immigration country, but most migrant domestic workers are part of the wave of female ‘autonomous migration’, which started in the late 1980s and fed into housework jobs in private houses or offices, and less often into home-based live-in or live-out care of children, the elderly, and disabled or chronically ill adults.

Official statistics report that in 2008, 1069 individuals have been newly registered as domestic workers in Belgium. In principle this figure also includes foreign domestic workers who first had to obtain a type B work permit in order to work legally\(^4\). However, this figure is only an estimation of all legally employed in the sector because - even when they have a legal contract - workers for whom employers do not pay social security contributions are not registered anywhere (OR.C.A 2010: 14).

The national and ethnic origin of migrant domestic workers in Belgium is quite diverse (Eastern Europe, Latin America, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines). Migrant domestic work in Belgium is also two-tier phenomenon because the service voucher scheme had a segregating effect: those female migrants who can freely access the Belgian labour market (or succeeded in obtaining a stay/work permit) work within the service voucher scheme, while irregular domestic work became a niche mostly for nationals of the Philippines, Brazil or South American hispanophone countries, for whom it is virtually impossible to obtain a stay permit outside of the periodical regularisation-through-work campaigns.

There are few studies of irregular domestic work in Belgium and no statistical data showing how many individuals/households in the Brussels Region

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\(^3\) After Bulgaria and Romania’s accession to the EU, Belgium chose to restrict until December 2013 the access of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens to its labour market.

\(^4\) Non-EEA (and, until December 2013, also Romanian and Bulgarian) workers who wish to work in Belgium as employees must hold a work permit. There are three different types of work permit. Type A is valid for all salaried professions and all employers, for an unlimited period; type B is only valid for one year and allows the holder to work only for the employer who introduced the work permit application; and type C, for students and asylum seekers.
illegally employ a migrant domestic worker. It is not always clear to which extent the findings of existing analyses of migrants’ living and/or working conditions fit the particular situation of undocumented migrants employed in the domestic work ‘sector’.

Undocumented migrant domestic workers are usually outstaying the expired diplomatic ID (Filipinos) or tourist visa (Brazilians and Filipinos) with which they legally entered Belgian territory. Among Filipino domestic workers from Brussels, it is common to start working legally for an expat household (mostly Australian, British, Filipino or US, but also Maltese) with a diplomatic passport, slip into illegality after employers leave Belgium (OR.C.A 2010: 47) and subsequently apply for a stay permit during a regularisation-through-work campaign. When possible, applications for a stay permit are founded on the fact that applicants are parent to a child born on Belgian territory (and thus to a Belgian citizen).

For migrants who cannot freely access the Belgian labour market (non-EEA citizens as well as workers from Bulgaria and Romania), possibilities for legal employment as domestic workers include a type B-work permit, au pair status or a diplomatic passport. The type B-work permit allows one single household to hire a domestic worker only on a live-in (and thus full-time) basis. The imposed minimum wage is then a monthly 1400 euros, which is too high a sum for most households to bear on their own. The au pair status does not allow the benefiting individual to work more than 20 hours per week and 4 hours per day, while only diplomats can hire a migrant worker on the basis of a diplomatic passport.

Third-country nationals who could face persecution when sent back home can apply for asylum, but procedures are very long. It is quite rare to meet domestic workers who are asylum seekers since, as the asylum authorities examine the applicant’s case, the asylum seeker is entitled to material help at the ‘reception centre’ to which they have been assigned. When they arrived in Belgium, the migrant service voucher workers interviewed by Rosenfeld et al. (2010: 156) who have applied for refugee status focused on the administrative requirements linked to their application: wage work was secondary for them, especially since asylum seekers are entitled to room and board as long as their application has not been accepted or

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5 See however the following studies of migrant domestic work: OR.CA 2010; Rosenfeld et al. 2010, as well as Degavre & Langwiesner 2011 for irregular childcare.
rejected. Our respondent Ai, who also applied for refugee status, explains that despite her willingness to work (she hasn’t worked full-time since her arrival in Belgium in 2006) and the 18-month care assistant training she successfully completed while living in a federal reception centre, she is forced to search for informal work because of the difficulty to find an employer willing to go through the process of applying for the working permit necessary to hire her.7

Previously characterising mainly upper-class/better-off families, the ‘internal outsourcing’ of domestic work has now spread outside elite sections of society. This tendency has been acknowledged by public authorities, albeit not for care labour. Since 2004, Belgium has a publicly-subsidized voucher scheme allowing households to outsource certain tasks to employees of companies or agencies operating within the scheme.8 Service users can choose to use vouchers to outsource tasks such as house cleaning, doing the laundry, ironing, meal preparation or transport of less mobile individuals. Unlike similar schemes in France and Sweden, child care, long-term care and gardening cannot be provided through this scheme. Clearly, the scheme isn’t aimed at elderly users: while 30 per cent of a voucher’s costs are tax deductible, pensioners do not benefit from this tax break, since it applies only to taxable income (Sansoni 2009: 18).

Social policy literature has already offered some tentative explanations as to why households choose to privately hire migrant child and elderly carers without establishing a legal contract and paying social security contributions. Among factors explaining why certain households choose this solution, social policy literature cites the lack of public care services, insufficient market supply (in the case of elderly care provision - be it public or market-based - both institutional and home-based services have to be taken into account), a care culture which privileges care within

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7 Since 2010, asylum seekers whose application remains unaddressed for longer than 6 months have the right to work (in some cases while simultaneously retaining the right to stay in a reception centre and/or to help in-kind) after obtaining a type C work permit.
8 “The firms or agencies whose role is to employ the titres-services workers are admitted to the arrangement only after they have been approved by the federal government. […] Several types of firms or agencies may be approved, including local employment agencies (ALE), temping agencies, other private commercial firms, labour market insertion agencies, non-profit associations, local authorities, public social action centres, but also individual persons in the capacity of self-employed employers” (Sansoni 2009: 19).
9 France introduced vouchers allowing private households to purchase domestic and personal care services (Chèque Emploi Service Universel), while Sweden introduced tax credits allowing households to get back up to 50% of the costs of this type of services.
10 Kofman & Sales (2001: 102) speak of the ‘absence or withdrawal of the state’ from care provision.
the private sphere by relatives, a tradition of informality in society, a migration regime supplying cheap migrant labour, a country’s migration history, and a broad affluent middle-class (Bettio et al. 2006; Williams & Gavanas 2008). Studies which focus specifically on elderly care cite unconditional (untied) dependency/care allowances as an important factor behind the spread of undeclared migrant care work (Bettio et al. 2006; Simonazzi 2009; Ungerson 2005; Ungerson & Yeandle 2007).

According to these explanations, it seems unlikely that undeclared migrant care work will spread in Belgium as it did in the last 30 years in other European countries. Among the 27 EU Member States, Belgium has the highest level of satisfaction with regard to the quality, availability, access and affordability of publicly-funded care services for dependent people\(^\text{11}\). In terms of elderly care, both home based and institutional supply are deemed good in the whole of Belgium. While the country has also a good coverage in terms of child care institutions, the situation is less positive in terms of after-hours structures. Existing legal solutions in terms of home based child care seem also ill-fitted to the demands of users who privilege this mode of care over child care in institutions (OR.C.A 2010: 18). According to the study conducted by the NGO OR.C.A (2010: 51), individuals who illegally employ a migrant child minder do not do it because of a lack of available places in publicly-subsidized nurseries, but because this mode of care corresponds to their professed ideal of care\(^\text{12}\).

It seems that in Belgium, ideals of child and elderly care differ. While child care can be provided by individuals without ad hoc training (notably the long-term unemployed, activated by local employment agencies, or *au pairs*), it is not the case for elderly care: as mentioned above, personal care to elderly or dependent adults has for example been explicitly excluded from the services offered within the service voucher scheme.

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\(^{12}\) In Kremer’s (2005:14) definition, ‘ideals of care’ define the kind of care deemed appropriate and morally acceptable for the child’s well-being.
Conceptual framework

The sociology of migration insists on the importance for migrants’ professional or migration careers of ‘social capital’, understood as the resources to which an individual has access through the social networks to which they belong.\(^\text{13}\) For migrants working illegally with no stay (n)or work permit, personal connections are said to be key in helping them secure stable employment and regularize their administrative status. For their part, Polanyi-inspired socioeconomics do not speak of economic, social and cultural capital such as Bourdieu-inspired sociology does (Bourdieu 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Mouzelis 1995), but distinguishes between resources originating from market exchange, reciprocity and redistribution. The latter are ‘forms of integration’ or modes of circulation and allocation of resources, which correspond to social institutions. For example, in contemporary Western societies, reciprocity manifests through kinship, friendship, charity or solidarity links, while redistribution has been institutionalized through the welfare state, and exchange through markets.

Polanyi (1944) originally identified four ‘forms of integration’\(^\text{14}\) (alternatively called ‘socio-economic principles’ or ‘socio-economic logics’, as well as ‘transactional modes’ or ‘allocation modes’ by his followers) that characterised economies through history. Redistribution, reciprocity, householding and (market) exchange are now important methodological tools in heterodox economics, economic history and economic anthropology. By focusing on market exchange, contemporary neoclassical, Marxian and neo-institutional economics tend to overlook other forms of integration, perceived either as auxiliary (redistribution) or residual (reciprocity) in contemporary Western societies (Lemaître 2009: 58).

In his work, Polanyi endeavoured to demonstrate that, contrary to the ‘economistic fallacy’ (also known as the ‘catallactic fallacy’) dominating contemporary social theory, market exchange has not been the dominating, ‘natural’ and ancestral way in which resources circulate between individuals. He showed that until the industrial revolution started in 18th-century Britain, markets were only of marginal

\(^{13}\) See Boyd 1989; Lancee 2011; Massey et al. 1998; Portes 1995; Rosenfeld et al. 2010 ; Ryan et al. 2008.

\(^{14}\) Alternatively called ‘socio-economic principles’ or ‘socio-economic logics’, as well as ‘transactional modes’ or ‘allocation modes’ by his followers and critics.
importance in human societies all around the world. Using pre-modern economies from all corners of the globe as case studies, Polanyi showed that human societies have rather been dominated by reciprocity or redistribution.

An entire discipline at the crossroads of sociology and political science – social policy analysis or welfare state studies - is devoted to studying the effects of redistribution on individuals, markets and societies. For their part, socioeconomics and economic anthropology have convincingly demonstrated the importance of reciprocity both in Western market economies and in developing countries. In this article I endeavour to show the ways in which several forms of integration operate and combine within a single economic activity – in this case domestic work. Drawing on feminist social theory, I go however a step further than solely operationalizing Polanyi’s contention that all economic activities are embedded within social relations.

Feminist theory and Polanyi meet in their criticism of the way Western societies tend to reorganize social life in order to fit economic (read: enabling capitalist utility maximization) objectives, that feminism most often describes as the prioritization of productive over reproductive functions. Through demonstrating that domestic work is characterized both by market and non-market principles, I in fact operationalize some of the feminist criticisms of the ‘double dualism’ present in mainstream political philosophy, political science and both formalist and substantivist economics. This dualism originates in the 17th-century Lockian split between the state (public) and the family (private), later updated when the economy left the private, household domain to enter the public sphere, both in scholarly thought and in collective consciousness (Waller & Jennings 1991: 486). Feminist theory criticized this approach for exaggerating both the atomistic, selfish behaviour of individuals in markets and the connective empathy and altruism supposed to preside over relations involving intimacy, in particular family relations.

Social policy studies of informal home-based care provided by illegally employed migrants or by relatives seem to reproduce this approach, in particular the related perception of markets and families as ‘hostile worlds’ developed by Viviana Zelizer: existing studies explore the supposedly adverse effects of market principles encroaching on care provision by family members, a care mode traditionally perceived as dominated by reciprocity (Grootegoed et al. 2010). Through showing

that the relationship between migrant domestic workers and their employers cannot be reduced to market exchange alone, but is often also characterized by reciprocity and - in the case of domestic work within the service voucher scheme - by redistribution, I show how the conceptually strong divide between an economic sphere driven by utility maximizing behaviour and the rest of society is at best blurry.

Such a contention is not new: domestic work has already been identified as a ‘moral economy’, characterized by highly personalized work relationships underpinned by notions of good and bad, which cannot be reduced to profit maximization (Näre 2008, 2011; Widding Isaksen 2012). Indeed, employers of migrant domestic workers often perceive their relationship with the migrant employee as more than a standard market exchange relation, in which the parties would be interchangeable and would have no obligations towards each other once the transaction is completed. Employers become friends with the worker, develop a maternalistic/paternalistic, protective attitude towards her or even say she is part of the family. Literature cites examples of employers paying for the education of a former employee’s child or helping her obtain a stay permit (and, conversely, of migrants working overtime without being paid for it, in the name of attachment to the cared-for or their family).

(Market) exchange is a two-way movement between willing transactors (individuals, groups or institutions), “neither of whom is required to transact with the other after completion of the agreed-upon exchange” (Schaniel & Neale 2000: 92). In other terms once a transaction is fulfilled, there are no further obligations between the parties. Reciprocity is a flow of resources from one unit (again, an individual, a group or an institution) to one or more other units (Schaniel & Neale 2000: 91). Reciprocity is most often voluntary. Of course there are usually social rules (politeness, family or friendship rules) that encourage us to give to others or to reciprocate other people’s ‘generosity’, but it is very rare that the law forces us to reciprocity (such as in the case of the alimony obligation that children have towards their elderly parents in some countries, for example in Poland).

Reciprocity shouldn’t however be confused with barter or a gift/counter-gift exchange (Servet 2007). First, it should not be restricted to symmetry understood literally: the person I give to in a reciprocal ‘transaction’ is not necessarily the person who gave something to me or who will ‘repay’ me. Second, reciprocity does not require the receiving party to reciprocate. Intergenerational flows are generally cited
as a good example of reciprocity: we give to the next generation and the next generation gives to the generation thereafter (Schaniel & Neale 2000: 92).

There are cases of reciprocity in which there are only two participants in the flow-and-counter-flow. Such cases are however to be distinguished from barter (which is a form of market exchange in the Polanyian conceptual framework). Indeed, thirdly, the resources circulating in reciprocity depend upon the needs and capacities of the participants as well as upon the circumstances.

Redistribution is a form of integration where goods flow to a central authority, which then redistributes them according to collective and political criteria (Schaniel & Neale 2000: 92) (Servet 2007: 262).

Following Polanyi (1957b) himself, householding is sometimes presented as a particular form of redistribution (“redistribution writ small” Schaniel & Neale 2000: 92). I tend to consider it here rather as a particular form of reciprocity – reciprocity between relatives.

\[16 \text{ Mentioned in The Great Transformation along the three other forms of integration, “householding had disappeared from Polanyi’s analyses by the time that Trade and Market was written” (Schaniel & Neale 2000: 102), but re-entered the picture once again in the posthumously published Dahomey and the Slave Trade. In “The economy as an instituted Process”, Polanyi redefined redistribution so that it “may apply to a group smaller than society, such as a household” (Polanyi 1957b: 254).} \]
Discussion

In this section, I discuss collected data in light of the Polanyian-inspired grid distinguishing between resources originating in market exchange, reciprocity and redistribution, with a particular attention to the functions fulfilled by reciprocity. I distinguish between undocumented migrant domestic workers whose migration project has been, well before arriving on Belgian soil, envisioned primarily as labour migration, and those who didn’t equate migration with ‘extreme commodification’. This distinction originates in both groups differential use of reciprocity.

The latter group was able to subsist in the host country resorting exclusively to resources stemming from reciprocity. Fa from Morocco and MaCha from Cameroon subsisted for several years exclusively or mainly on resources originating in reciprocity, while they resorted to market exchange only as a source of ‘pocket money’ or once their subsistence in the host country has been guaranteed through reciprocity. Before their respective relationships with men proved to be different from what they envisioned, neither of them foresaw that their subsistence in Belgium might depend on another form of integration than the householding principle governing the circulation of resources between her husband and themselves. Fa and MaCha benefited from the help and support of Belgian and international NGOs working with migrants, of individuals and informal organizations, as well as of religious institutions (namely a mosque and a convent).

For migrants from the first category described above, the reciprocity component of undeclared domestic work has limited decommodifying effects and thus appears as a palliative to the lack of access to decommodification through redistribution. Resources stemming from reciprocity are not always employment-related, such as in the case of employers financing the education or holidays of the domestic worker’s child or when employers help their undocumented migrant employee to obtain a stay permit. In this contribution I concentrate on the rudimentary decommodifying effects of reciprocity. I also use the Polanyian-inspired conceptual framework I developed to shed light on the importance of reciprocity for finding and securing jobs, a theme previously explored using the ‘social capital’ approach (Aguilera 2002, 2003; Granovetter 1995).
**Finding a job:**

Among my respondents, the Filipino Ro\(^ {17} \), the Rwandian Ai and MaCha from Cameroon explicitly mention the difficulty of finding a job when one has no papers. The Filipino Jo explains that after arriving in Belgium in 2005 she stayed at home for one year taking care of the children of domestic worker friends from the Philippines because she couldn’t find a job herself.

Filipino respondents in particular underscore the importance of a recommendation from fellow Filipino church-goers, neighbours, friends or family, sometimes from an employer who hired a friend or a relative and hence trusts you “by extension”. They underscore that the person who has been recommended wouldn’t like to disappoint the recommending party.

“*When they found out that we are very hard working, when there is somebody coming, they will recommend us: “Oh, you have to take this guy, they are very very good, they don’t lie, they don’t cheat to you”* […]” (Al, Male, Filipino, 42y.)

“But when the employer …well (ehh) observed you the first time you work, and they found you that you are a good cleaner, they will recommend you, with their friends, their colleagues, relatives, something like that. […] My first regular employer until now, he has a son, and then he gave me to his son, to work with the son. And then the son, his son, give me that lady, […] She is very proud for me, about my work. Every time she recommends me [to] her friends.” (Ro, Male, Filipino, 47y.)

Ri from the Philippines found her current job in a French nationals’ household (cleaning and taking care of the family’s children after school) thanks to her previous employer recommending her. She mentions that her current employers knew her already because their children attend the same French school in Brussels as the offspring of her previous employer. The sporadic cleaning and baby-sitting offers with which she tops up her 8 am – 12 pm Monday to Friday position and regular Saturday cleaning job also come from Filipino friends recommending her to potential employers.

\(^ {17} \) All names have been changed.
Undocumented asylum-seeker Ai got her current part-time job (visiting the mother of a friend’s friend in a nursing home) through asking friends and acquaintances for potential openings, similarly to the way she found a placement during her care assistant training (through asking the nurse of the centre for asylum-seekers where she was staying whether she wouldn’t know a colleague searching for interns).

From the jobs the Moroccan Fa got while undocumented, the only two which haven’t been recommended by friends or acquaintances turned out to be negative experiences. After quitting a waitressing job because the owner asked her to stand in front of the café in order to attract clients, a Belgian man she met once when he helped her to get on the metro with her pram found her a job as replacement of an incapacitated cleaning lady. It is through her mother’s friend that she found her third job - cooking and cleaning for an elderly lady as replacement for said friend while she was away on vacation in the country of origin.

Replacing a friend who travelled to the country of origin with the intention to come back (or who is pregnant) is a very common way of finding employment among undocumented migrants. Jo and Ro also started with replacements before finding steady jobs. Ro and Ri, respectively male and female Filipino nationals, explain that right after their arrival in Belgium, when they had no client base yet, migrant domestic worker friends brought them along to work and shared their own hours (and thus wages). It is also how Ro learned to clean: his friend brought him along and showed him what to do and how to finish within the timeframe agreed upon with the employer.

“If there’s an offer, if there is work, I will work, yeah. Even if I don’t know how to work. Because, you know, the cleaning, I don’t know how to clean, because, in the Philippines this is not my work. Yeah, but when I am here in Belgium, you know, all my creativity will [laughs], you know. […] My friend […], he teach me how to clean. The first thing you do after you arrive in the house of your employer, the first thing you do is that here. And then after that here, here and then …Yeah, something like that. But you have to be systematic. Your work, you have to do it systematically in order to finish it. For example the employer will give you four hours for the whole house, huh. And then you can imagine “Ha, four hours, maybe I can finish it four hours”, but you have to finish it” (Ro, Male, Filipino, 47y.).
Paradoxically migrants who can work legally on Belgian territory and want to enter the service voucher circuit also have to rely on informal networks to find work. Indeed, service voucher companies and agencies\(^\text{18}\) often expect workers to find their own clients, probably because when the scheme has been introduced, most new employees were in fact formalizing previously undeclared work and thus “brought along” their own clientele (who transformed from direct employers into “service users”)\(^\text{19}\). That was in fact one of the declared aims of the scheme: to provide an incentive for households and workers alike in sectors where undeclared work is common to move from undeclared work into regular employment (Sansoni 2009: 18).

“All of my employers, I was working with them first … For example, any employer, the first time I met him or her, I will work and then I will not talk to my agency first, yeah [...]. ‘First Madame, I will work for you, with you, as a black and you have to observe me if you like my work or what, yeah. And then if you like it, I will recommend you to my agency, yeah’. That was my first step how you deal with your employer. And if they like your work, OK, they will call your agency and they talk to them’” (Ro, Male, Filipino, 47y.).

El for long didn’t listen to her friends’ advice to follow in their footsteps because she refused to come work in Belgium as long as the country hasn’t opened its labour market for Polish citizens. The service voucher company in which she enquired about job opportunities after arriving in Antwerp told her that it would be preferable to come with her own clients. She started by replacing a friend’s friend working within the scheme who was about to leave for long holidays in Poland. El progressively gained clients through word of mouth. Only two out of the dozen households in which she has already worked have been referred by the company, she found the rest herself through informal links.

\(^\text{18}\) Service voucher workers are not directly employed by the households in which they work, but by agencies acting as intermediaries between those households, the workers and authorities responsible for sponsoring the scheme.

\(^\text{19}\) What results in “a triangular labour relationship – rather similar to the case of temping agencies – consisting of the employer (the approved company or agency), the user (the private person for whom the service is being provided) and the worker. [...] In Belgium direct employment is not authorised and users are thus compelled to go through an approved company or agency to take advantage of services supplied by means of the titres-services arrangement” (Sansoni 2009: 18).
By contrast to jobs for which she has been recommended by family or acquaintances, the job offer Fa found in the classifieds of a free newspaper turned out to be as bad an experience as the waitressing. The man in his sixties of whom she was taking care started to ask for sexual favours and stopped paying her when she refused.

**Securing employment and improving employment conditions:**

In the absence of a legal contract (most often in the absence of any contract at all) and thus of related rights such as paid sickness leave or holidays, the trust, attachment, solidarity or friendship building between migrant domestic workers and their employers can have rudimentary decommodifying effects.

“When I was working in black, you have to work, even if it is an holiday because if you don’t have the work, you don’t have money. (...) Because sometimes the employer didn’t give you money if you are not working. Even if you said:

- Madame, it’s a holiday, so are you paying me?
- No!

Yeah, sometimes it’s like that. But sometimes they have also employer, a good, a good employer, he can understand if there’s a holiday. He will pay you, even if you don’t have to work. […]. You have to avoid that you get sick. You have to take care of yourself that you are not sick because if you are sick, you loose how many …yeah, work. You know, before, even if I had a headache or fever, something like that, I work, I still work… For example one day, you have to think “Ah, for this day I receive sixty euros and then I have a fever, if I don’t work today, I loose my sixty euros”, you know, just imagine. So that’s why I work even if I have fever, yeah.” (Ro, Male, Filipino, 47y.).

According to OR.C.A’s estimates (2010: 8) around half of migrant domestic workers employed illegally in the Brussels Region work only for one employer. Most of our respondents aim at reducing the number of employers for whom they work, but having few employers can also mean increased vulnerability and commodification, hence the importance of the decommodifying effects of reciprocity. Jo explains that the parents of the children she babysits every afternoon after school pay her even when she doesn’t work because the children are on holidays or have a playdate.
outside of home. She explains it wasn’t initially the case, but she complained to her employer:

“‘You should understand my situation, everyday I have to eat and then we have to pay our bills, pay our apartment, like that’. So maybe they understand that, what I said, and now she pays me if sometimes they did ask me not to come, she pays me 25 euros instead of [the usual] 40 [per day]. And then, like, they spend the holiday for one week, they pay me also like 25 euros per day” (Jo, Female, Filipino, 58y.).

Ri also mentions that when she leaves her four hours per day/five days a week job earlier than usual because her employer stayed home that day (which is the case every week for at least one day out of the five she is working for that family), she is still paid as if she worked four full hours.

Finding someone to replace you while on vacation is common practice among migrant domestic workers. As mentioned earlier, it allows, in a truly reciprocal manner, a friend or acquaintance to access employment, the same way one has benefited from the help of more experienced colleagues upon arrival in Belgium. Second, far from creating competition for the recommending employee, it allows them to secure their employment position. Indeed, ensuring employers won’t seek another cleaner or carer (who could replace the concerned employee for good) sustains the longer-term trust relationship established with the employer.

“Last year, when we took our first vacation in the Philippines after ten years, I told her “Madame, you want to have a replacement for some, for temporary?” And then she told me “No no, no need, because I wait for you, even if you will arrive how many months” (Ro, Male, Filipino, 47y.).
Conclusions

According to its Polanyian definition, reciprocity is a flow of resources from one unit (an individual, a group or an institution) to one or more other units. Reciprocity is most often voluntary. In contemporary Western societies, it manifests through kinship, friendship, charity or solidarity links. Of course there are usually social rules or obligations that encourage us to give to others or to reciprocate other people’s ‘generosity’, but it is very rare that the law forces us to reciprocity.

I initially assumed that, in order to earn a livelihood in the host country, undocumented migrants resorted to market exchange, while resources accessed through reciprocity constituted for them an ersatz of the decommodifying effects redistribution has for legal residents and/or citizens of the host country. Data collected through interviews with (previously) undocumented migrants who work or have worked in domestic work however quickly showed me that, for some of them, reciprocity – and not market exchange - is what enables subsistence in the host country. Indeed, some of my respondents subsisted for several years exclusively or mainly on resources originating in reciprocity, while they resorted to market exchange only once their subsistence in the host country has been guaranteed through reciprocity, or as a source of ‘pocket money’.

In this paper I however concentrate on the rudimentary decommodifying effects of reciprocity. Using micro level data collected in 2012 in Belgium through semi-structured interviews with migrant domestic workers, I show that resources stemming from reciprocity are of particular importance for undocumented migrants because they do not have access to the “safety net” offered by redistribution (the welfare state of the host country). I also use the Polanyi-inspired conceptual framework I developed to shed light on the importance of reciprocity for finding and securing jobs, a theme previously explored using the ‘social capital’ approach (Aguilera 2002, 2003; Granovetter 1995).

A very common way of finding employment among undocumented migrants is to replace a friend who travelled to the country of origin with the intention to come back (or who is pregnant. It is also common to start working together with a friend who brings you along with them, shares their own hours (and thus wages) and shows you the ropes. That last aspect in particular has been underscored by a
Filipino respondent who explained he didn’t know how to clean at first, because he
never did it before arriving in Belgium, because it is not a man’s job to do in the
Philippines.

Finding someone to replace you while on vacation is common practice
among migrant domestic workers. It allows, in a truly reciprocal manner, a friend or
acquaintance to access employment, the same way one has benefited from the help
of more experienced colleagues upon arrival in Belgium. Additionally, far from
creating competition for the recommending employee, it allows them to secure their
employment position. Indeed, ensuring employers won’t seek another cleaner or
carer (who could replace the concerned employee for good) sustains the longer-
term trust relationship established with the employer.

In the absence of a legal contract (most often in the absence of any
contract at all), and thus of related rights such as paid sickness leave or holidays, the
trust, attachment, solidarity or friendship building between migrant domestic workers
and their employers can have rudimentary decommodifying effects. For example,
migrant domestic workers often try to improve their situation through negotiating with
their employer to be paid also on public holidays, or even when they cannot work for
reasons beyond their control (for example when the children they babysit daily do not
need care because they have been invited over by some friends).
References


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Van Meeteren