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BEATRIZ CAMARGO

THE NEW WELFARE IN THE DOMESTIC WORK SECTOR: WHO BENEFITS FROM THE VOUCHER SERVICE SYSTEM IN BRUSSELS?

Abstract:

The voucher service policy implemented in the 2000's in Belgium has fostered the formal live-out domestic work market mainly by subsidizing the offer and according tax deductions to households. It had three objectives: fighting informality, creating new jobs especially among long term job seekers, and supporting work-life balance in dual income couples. If the policy should not be classified as pertaining to welfare state services, it is part of the more general movement of the "new welfare management". The voucher policy has moreover specific impacts on the global city-region of Brussels. The paper has a twofold goal: to demonstrate why this public policy on domestic work is part of the European new welfare rationale, and why it fails in reaching its objectives of job creation in the Brussels Region, being more of a tax policy that benefits middle and upper households outsourcing their housework.

Keywords:

Migrant Domestic Workers, Domestic Work, Belgium, New Welfare, Voucher Service.

Created in 2001 and settled in the Brussels Region in 2004, the voucher service system is an indicator of the evolutions of the Belgian welfare state. It intends to promote a formal domestic work (live-out) market, aiming to fighting informality, creating new jobs especially among long term job seekers, and supporting work-life balance in dual income couples. The policy had very different impacts in Belgian regions due to their specificity. Brussels, as a global city-region in a global domestic work market, has

many differences from Flanders and Wallonia regions, mostly in what concerns the presence of migrant workers, whether highly qualified (and earning high salaries) or low-paid.

If this policy should not be classified as pertaining to welfare state services, which mostly concern care services, I will show that many factors contribute to place it as a part of the more general movement of the welfare crisis, or the "new welfare management". Taking as a background the Brussels Region and the voucher service policy, this paper has a twofold goal: to explore why this public policy on domestic work is part of the European new welfare rationale, and to demonstrate how it fails in reaching its objectives of job creation in the Brussels Region, being more of a tax policy that benefits middle and upper households outsourcing their housework.

In order to explore these issues, I will firstly explain the functioning of the voucher service policy. I will then show why the voucher system should be seen as part of the new welfare policy. Thereafter, I will analyze some characteristics of the Brussels voucher market and its dynamics, using data from the annual assessment and from my own fieldwork. I will finally discuss how the voucher policy fails some of its main goals in the Brussels Region.

This contribution is part of my doctoral research (Camargo 2016) that investigated the formalization of the domestic work sector in Brussels Region. The qualitative doctoral research is based on in-depth or semi-structured interviews realized between 2011 and 2013 with domestic workers (30), employers/clients (28)¹ and authorized companies (16), besides stakeholders and other social actors.

1. The Belgian Voucher Service System

Since early 2000s, the Belgian government was successful in fostering a formal housework market, mainly by providing subsidies to former employers aimed at encouraging them to switch to the voucher service. Ex-employers become then clients and authorized agencies are henceforth the ones employing the workers. The price of the voucher is subsidized, reaching €9/hour (2016²), and households benefit from a tax deduction

-
- 1 "Clients" refer to households purchasing voucher services and "employers" for direct employers. I will often refer to all domestic work purchasers as "employers/clients".
 - 2 Price from January 2014 (above 400 vouchers purchased, price will increase to €10). For each voucher, government currently expends €13.04, plus tax deduction.

or a tax credit on the voucher value. Until 2015, the tax deduction was up to the limit of €1,380 per person/year (lowering the price to €6.30/hour). Since January 2015, the system has become regional: while Flanders kept the federal tax deductions, Wallonia and Brussels diminished the ceiling for tax deductions to respectively 10 percent and 15 percent. With a view to creating (new) formal jobs and supporting work-life balance, the State delegates this services to the “more efficient” private market, but subsidizes them through significant tax deductions, which clearly benefits middle and upper classes (Devetter, Rousseau 2011). The policy is thus conceived for live-out domestic workers, paid on an hourly basis. For full-time employees, there is a domestic servant status under Belgian law, which is rarely chosen by employers because it is considered “bureaucratic” and expensive (in terms of tax and social charges), while the employer is legally responsible for the worker. Besides formal arrangements, informal labor might persist as well, in all types of domestic work in Brussels and mostly in live-in arrangements. It is nevertheless hard to show a reliable figure on how broad the shadow market is (Gutiérrez, Craenen 2010; Michielsen et al. 2013; Abrantes 2014).

2. The voucher service policy as a facet of the “new welfare”

At first glance, it does not make any sense to consider the voucher service system as pertaining to the welfare states policies. Four arguments nevertheless show how this policy should be observed under the light of the “new welfare” rationale.

Firstly, one of the goals of the policy, facilitating life-work balance, is part of the care policies, integrating the concerns of the welfare state. If life-work balance is more clearly helped in childcare services, other services such as elderly care or domestic work contribute to this goal because they act on the time that can be “saved” by purchasers. Researchers on the issue agrees that mainly women are concerned with the issue of work-life balance, as they are mainly the ones caring for aging parents and step parents, or taking or not the choice to outsource domestic work (Degavre 2007, p. 404 for Belgium; Stancanelli, Stratton 2011; Van Hooren, Becker 2012, p. 104).

Secondly, the voucher service system follows the same process of marketization (Degavre, Nyssens 2012) or monetarization (Triandafyllidou, Marchetti 2015) of care services applied in other European countries. The concern with reducing government expenditure and the acceptance of

the New Public Management discourse contribute to make national and local experiences similar in the direction of marketization, besides local specificities (Degavre, Nyssens 2012, p. 17). Welfare services are then liberalized into quasi-markets and remitted to private actors, yet financed by the State.

Moreover, the voucher system also functions under a tax deduction scheme, as other welfare services around Europe. Indeed, tax deductions and the so-called “free choice” policies, such as “cash for care” ones, contribute to increase social stratification, as showed by many authors (Pacolet *et al.* 2010; Devetter, Rousseau 2011; Kofman 2013).

Williams and Gavanas (2008, p. 14) stress that in Europe the demand for private childcare (one could add other kinds of care services and domestic work) is not built by the absence of welfare state services – a typical USA reality, largely explored by scholars – but the very nature of state support that is available. The authors call the attention to the danger of households using the consumer logic and calculating their service purchasing as to have the better value for their money (Williams, Gavanas 2008, p. 22). This could lead to, on the one hand, the abuse of workers (as a result of families will to have more work done for less), and on the other a service provision that is inadequate or of poor quality (but cheaper).

“New services” in the marketized rationale share the floor with other welfare services in a more social reasoning. In Belgium, at least three activities in the household voucher³, within a quasi-market, are in competition with other services performed in the tutelary system of care⁴. Thus, the service of “houseworker” (*aide-ménagère*) offered by organizations of insertion of workers in the labor market consists of the same indoor tasks as the voucher system (cleaning, meal preparation, etc.), but for a frail public. This public is often elder people from a working class background, and they will pay the service according to their income (versus the voucher system settled prices). On workers’ side, employment conditions are not

3 Authorized tasks are: cleaning, laundry, ironing, meal preparation and occasional sewing. Outdoor services include small errands, ironing performed in an ironing center (if the company has one) and transport for disabled people.

4 In the tutelary system, services are provided mainly by public or nonprofit organizations that are entrusted with a public service mission under direct oversight from the State, which becomes a “tutor” or “agent” of the service user, in charge of protecting her/his interests, as defined by Degavre and Nyssens (2012, p. 18). Moreover, services are often supposed to guarantee the access of a vulnerable public to the services offered. These tutelary services are actually part of existing labels in Belgian social economy: insertion of workers in the labor market and “family help” (*aide aux familles*).

the same either, social economy employers offering better work conditions to their employees.

Other two examples of services competition are the transport of people with disabilities, often offered by municipalities and at the same price as the voucher services, and the “caregiver” (aide familiale), a global home help service that includes domestic tasks but also help the person to get washed, provide manicure or pedicure, give administrative assistance, and keep the person company. If both services are mainly different, the limited offer of caregivers and the lack in the voucher service policy of people’s needs evaluation or income control favors the access of frail clients to the voucher system instead of the care services system.

Thirdly, there is a historical argument. Both care and householding/housecleaning have been since early ages performed by women within households in an unpaid basis. They both suffer from lack of recognition and invisibility.

Fourthly, a significant part of domestic workers still “do it all”: cleaning tasks, care tasks, household management. Many authors have stressed that emotional work, commonly evoked to define care work, is equally performed when it comes to clean, wash, iron and cook (Lutz 2011).

Therefore, the voucher service policy, intended to be an employment policy, follows the rationale of changes in the scope of the European “new welfare”. This does not make it, nevertheless, a social or a care policy. I will further show that neither social nor employment goals are achieved in Brussels Region.

3. Reinforcing ethnic niches: national groups and recruitment practices

In the Brussels Region, the profile of workers, clients and authorized agencies is *suis generis* comparing to the rest of the country. This particularity may be understood under the light of the global cities literature, first addressed by Sassen (2001). According to Sassen (2007, p. 109), globalized financial centers need both highly qualified and specialized professionals and a great number of manual and low-paid-jobs. At the same time, there is a demand for (all kinds of) domestic services to guarantee the lifestyle of these highly qualified and well paid professionals (Parreñas 2001, p. 26)⁵.

5 If Sassen, in her pioneer book *The global city. New York, London, Tokyo* (2001) did not consider Brussels as a global city, other authors did adopt his approach *a posteriori* (Janssens 2007; Favell 2009; Kuźma 2012).

Available data on clients of the voucher system indicates that they are younger, wealthier and more educated in Brussels than the clients' national average. Indeed, a national survey realized directly with the clients of the voucher services in 2010 (Idea Consult 2011, p. 18) shows that in Brussels 75.8 percent of clients had completed higher education, versus 65,3 percent in the national average. Concerning income, about 18 percent of the Brussels clients answering the survey earn more than € 4,000 per month, versus 15,3 percent of the national average. Similarly, Brussels has proportionally less clients earning under € 1,000 per month: 2,6 percent, versus 3,2 percent in the national level. The main group of consumers is, still, people from a middle-upper class, in the earning bracket € 1.000-4.000 per month, with an important difference, though, between Belgium and Brussels: while the first has 70,2 percent in the category, the former has 65,7 percent, while all upper categories of earning are proportionally better represented. My fieldwork amidst voucher service clients in the Brussels Region is quite convergent to official data. It confirms the presence of highly qualified professionals attracted to the global city-region of Brussels. From the 28 employer/clients participants in my research, most part of them was part of middle and upper classes; 16 of them are Belgian with a Belgian background, while others are foreign or Belgian nationals with foreign background from seven countries, being EU (France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal) and non-EU countries (Brazil, Morocco and USA). They are mainly women and, often, they and/or their partners are working within EU institutions or multinational companies.

Besides young clients (under 35 years of age), that represent 17,6 percent of clients in Brussels Region, versus 12,9 percent in the national average, the elderly are also a significant group: 23,3 percent of clients in Brussels Region are over 65 years of age, even if they are still proportionally less compared to the national average of 28 percent (Idea Consult 2014, p. 16). The proportion of elders increase however annually (Idea Consult 2014, p. 16).

Moving to the observation of workers' profile, there are, as well, many contrasts between the Brussels Region Brussels and the national average. Only 22,9 percent of the 20,304 of the voucher service workers in Brussels Region are Belgian, versus 71,9 percent of Belgians in the national average. Europeans from the EU-27 (except Belgium) represent 56,4 percent of the workforce in Brussels, and non-EU nationals account for 20,7 percent all together (Idea Consult 2014, p. 37). These data do not take into account Belgians with foreign background, which could further increase the sector's "ethnicisation". The "Socioeconomic Monitoring" report (SPF Emploi, CECLR 2015), which analyzes workers in Belgian labor market

by their migratory background, shows that Belgians with a Belgian family heritage represent less than 1 percent of service voucher workers in Brussels Region (2015, p. 94). It is worth noting that only nationals or migrants with a regular stay permit can join the voucher service system. Besides, there is no possibility to immigrate to Belgium under the voucher policy.

Amidst all the worker's nationalities, Polish are still the most significant one. They are 8,8 percent of the total voucher service workforce in all country (Idea Consult 2014, p. 38), followed by Portuguese (2,1 percent), Romanians (2 percent), French (1,7 percent) and Dutch (1,6 percent). Polish workers are the most establish national group in Brussels Region, considerably contributing to shape the formal domestic work market as well as the informal one.

The analysis of the evolution of nationalities present in the voucher sector indicates though a significant grows in some populations of "new migrants" such as Brazilians, Colombians, Ecuadorians and Filipinas. This is mostly an effect of the last Regularization Campaign of the Belgian state in 2009 or of regularizations by family reunion. Table 1 and graphic 1 show the evolution of main nationalities in the voucher service market.

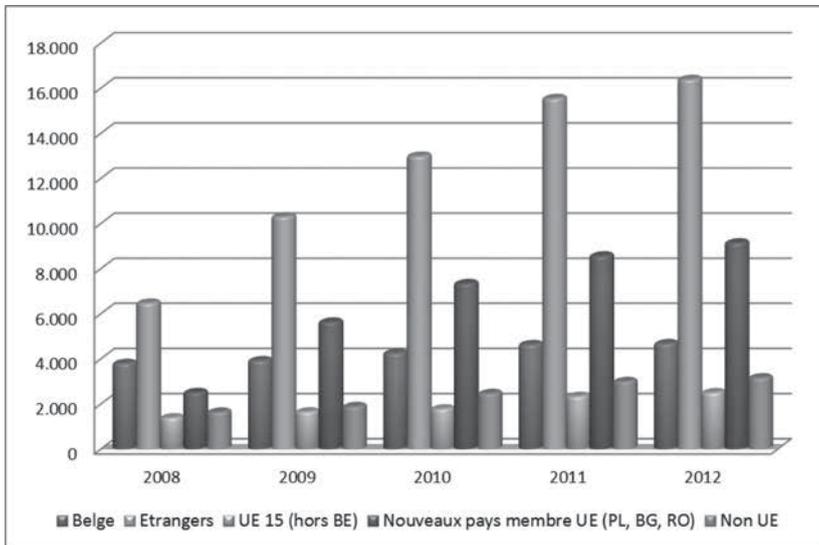
Table 1: Nationality of Voucher Workers residing in Brussels Région from 2008 to 2012.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Évolution 2008-2012
<i>Belgique</i>	3805	3927	4261	4643	4681	+23%
<i>Étrangers :</i>	6479	10309	12995	15551	16398	+153%
Brésil	422	369	538	706	791	+87,4%
Bulgarie	101	185	290	395	414	+309,9%
Colombie	64	91	113	125	128	+100%
Congo (Rép. Dem.)	301	300	303	332	253	- 15,9%
Équateur	438	496	716	868	849	+93,8%
Espagne	89	162	233	377	550	+518%
France	331	268	290	354	219	-51,1%
Italie	136	157	186	221	225	+65,4%
Maroc	354	523	627	714	723	+104,2%

Philippines	67	113	174	258	423	+560,9%
Pologne	1784	4426	5704	6531	6918	+287,8%
Portugal	841	1069	1082	1392	1514	+80%
Roumanie	631	1029	1353	1646	1817	+187,9%
TOTAL travail- leuses	10284	14236	17256	20194	21079	+105%

Source: Camargo (2016, p. 202), data compiled from ONEM (National Employment Office), Statistics directory.

Graphic 1: Voucher Workers' Nationalities Evolution (2008-2012) in Brussels Région.



Source: Camargo (2016 p. 203), data compiled from ONEM (National Employment Office), Statistics directory (visualization of table 1).

Latin-American and Filipina workers are two important groups in the informal domestic work market (Gutiérrez, Craenen 2010; Freitas, Godin 2013). In the Filipinas case, it worth noting that they are highly well represented amidst domestic workers in diplomatic, expatriated and mainly English-speaking circles in Brussels, whether under formal or informal work arrangements (Gutiérrez, Craenen 2010). The possibility to enter the

formal domestic labor market results in a progressive change of the composition of the Brussels domestic works sector's game of the ethnic musical chairs as defined by Waldinger (1994).

As to gender aspects, statistics and my fieldwork confirm that workers are mainly women. Brussels region counts, however, more men workers: 4,5 percent versus 2,6 percent nationally (Idea Consult 2014, p. 37). Among my interviews, I interviewed four migrant men: two voucher workers and two undocumented migrants working within the informal domestic worker market. These findings are consistent with other researches' results, which show that domestic work is a sector of migrants and of women, but that «gender is a stronger stratifying factor [than migration]» (Näre 2013, p. 610).

When it comes to authorized agencies, their range includes individuals, non-profit organizations, temporary work agencies, private companies and local public organizations. This heterogenetic setting creates disparities a priori in the policy application, since the authorized companies do not necessarily have a converging interest (Henry *et al.* 2009). In Brussels, there is a majority of profit-making structures among authorized companies, whether private, temporary work agency or individual, and competition among them is strong (Henry *et al.* 2009; Idea Consult 2012).

4. *Avoiding official recruitment*

Concerning recruitment practices in Brussels, they are mostly informal. Hiring often results from the use of employees' networks, completed within ethnic niches by word of mouth. Some authorized agencies use small ads in local or "ethnic" newspapers⁶ as well. Networks and the migrants' agency in the Brussels voucher service market are essential to solidify niches, as shown previously by Waldinger (1994; 2003) for other sectors. Therefore, some enterprises are specialized in certain nationalities, commonly following the sense of belonging of the managers (when it comes to for-profit agencies), or simply by using employee's ethnic networks.

My findings show how the dynamics of the voucher service market in Brussels Region are embedded in the ethnic niches. The voucher service sector attracts mainly migrant women coming from the informal domestic work market as seen above, also due to the lack of opportunities in other

6 By "ethnic" newspapers we understand ethnic or migrant minorities' publications, published in their national language. An example is the Polish "Gazetka", in which we have found 21 ads for voucher service companies in one edition.

professional sectors. But not only this profile is the majority of voucher workers in Brussels Region, but it is the main profile agencies are looking for in their recruitment practices. For the great majority of voucher service agencies and mostly for-profit-making organizations, “best workers” are those already in the domestic work market, coming from the informal sector: they are autonomous, motivated, experienced, and have their own clientele. On this last point, other Belgian studies agree to point out that many authorized agencies accept to hire new workers only if the last already have a full (or almost-full) schedule of clients (Gutiérrez, Craenen 2010; Michielsen *et al.* 2013).

On the opposite, long term unemployed persons are avoided by for-profit voucher agencies. This profile, called “the Belgians”, is associated with lack of motivation, lack of experience or health problems. Only authorized agencies from the social economy with the “insertion in the labor market” label hire mainly persons on this profile and offer a more intensive following up.

As an essay to increase recruitment among unemployed and, mainly, block the recruitment of Europeans in the free EU market, the federal government has approved a reform in 2012 requiring 60 percent of the quarterly recruitment to be composed by long-term unemployed persons or people receiving a social allowance from the municipality (Moniteur Belge 17 August 2012, p. 48). The so-called “60 percent Rule” established that non-accomplishments of the quotas should be duly justified and trespassers will be fined. The decision was negatively received by authorized agencies and mostly in Brussels Region: they argue that their recruitment is based on the more qualified profiles and not on the statuses of candidates.

On the one side, “60 percent Rule” brings the policy closer to the social goals of its beginnings, of diminishing long-term unemployment. On the other side, the rule seems indeed in discrepancy with Brussels’ reality in the domestic work market, historically dominated by migrants. In the other two regions, the measure was more easily followed (Idea Consult 2014), but since 2015, when the policy became regional, Flanders has abrogated the “60 percent rule”.

5. Final remarks: who benefits from the voucher service system?

Almost ten years after the launch in Brussels in 2004, one can see that the policy has not reached all its goals concerning job development. Although the shadow market has, indeed, shrunk in front of the facilities and the relatively low price offered by the voucher services, workers in the

system have a very close profile of those in the irregular labor market. In both informal and formal labor market, it is an ethicized and gendered sector. Moreover, migrant workers are preferred in comparison with the long-term unemployed (“the Belgians”), initially target group of the policy. The “60 percent Rule” seems unrealistic and unfeasible for the most part of the Brussels authorized companies, as workers in the system are mainly recently regularized migrants or EU nationals using the free circulation of workers. Hence, the voucher services system does not achieve its goal of job creation among long term job seekers, as authorized agencies avoid this kind of public and have a clear preference for domestic workers coming from the informal market, preferably with their clients. In their objective of contributing to the dual income earners, the State is successful, as clients rates in the Brussels Region are growing annually (Idea Consult 2014, p. 14). However, elder people are also increasing among the clients’ group, which shows some problems in the policy targeting and, mostly, the competition the voucher service might be creating with existing care structures. The policy follows the rationale of changes in the scope of the European “new welfare”: building a quasi-market under heavy subsidizes and weak state control on quality of the job and of the service given. On the contrary, the existing care-related domiciliary services are for the most part built in a tutelary rationale that is closer to social goals, watched over by the State in the quality of care and beneficiaries interests. This system is nevertheless under the threat of disappearing, as their budget is increasingly shrinking, or “marketizing”, as many European welfare regimes already are. Moreover, Brussels clients’ profile shows that the measure attains mostly middle and upper classes (an outcome that is national, even if intensified in Brussels). This is in accordance with other similar policies of tax deduction implemented in Europe that contribute to increase social inequalities. Highly qualified and well paid professionals, Belgian or foreign, are therefore a significant part of the voucher service consumers. Most of them were already employers in the informal domestic work market, and took advantage of facilities and lower costs of the formal voucher market, such as prices and tax deduction. The functioning of the voucher services is, after all, oriented to respond to the demand for housework services in middle and upper classes, mostly within dual income couples.

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