

Ambivalence in and beyond crisis: Why migrant domestic workers remain vulnerable despite support

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In Switzerland, migrant women working as cleaners and caregivers in private households are largely invisible. Many lack secure residence permits and work under precarious conditions. During COVID-19, they briefly entered public view – losing jobs overnight, lining up for food aid – yet received little meaningful support from public institutions. Why did pandemic relief so often fail those most in need? Our research shows this reflects a broader pattern of systematically rendering domestic workers invisible and marginalized.

Support that excludes

When the pandemic hit, many workers benefited from state support, most prominently short-time working compensation. Designed to help employers retain staff, it covered up to 80% of lost wages. Yet it only applied to employees of companies, such as restaurants, while workers in private households remained mostly excluded.

This exclusion reveals the conditional nature of many support schemes. It

also reflects the structural invisibilisation of feminised and racialised labour in private households. Migrant domestic workers were excluded not because they were unaffected, but because cleaning and caring in private households was not equally recognised. As one interviewed worker put it: "We are at the bottom of the list. It is the least valued work there is."

Temporary relief, lasting vulnerability

At the local level, authorities and civil society stepped in. They distributed food, offered emergency payments, or created temporary aid schemes, such as exceptional financial assistance for loss of income in Geneva and Zurich. These initiatives provided crucial short-term relief, including for those in informal work or without residence permits. Yet most programmes lasted only a few months and were not designed to address long-term inequalities. Once the crisis eased, support largely disappeared, while precarious conditions remained.

An interviewed domestic worker, a single mother without residence rights, received short-term financial aid but described its limits: "I was able to buy food (...), but I am still in a very difficult financial situation, and even if I work full-time, I do not believe that I will be able to recover. We have ceased to be human beings and have become robots." In this sense, pandemic measures functioned more as charity than as recognition of rights. They mitigated harm but did not address the structures creating vulnerability.

Why many do not seek help

Even when support existed, many workers did not use it. Fear and mistrust played a key role. Applying for aid often requires sharing personal information, which can feel risky, especially for undocumented workers. But even those with permits often try to stay off the radar. This relates to a longer-term trend in Switzerland, where welfare and migration control are increasingly intertwined. Since the 2019 revision of the Foreign Nationals and Integration Act, relying on social assistance can risk permit downgrading or deportation. This has led to widespread non-take-up of benefits, a pattern that became particularly visible during the pandemic.

The fear of being seen as a burden, combined with real risks linked to accessing support, also contributes to a form of self-disciplinisation. In interviews, many domestic workers emphasise independence and distance themselves from relying on support. This shows how many migrant women reject the image of the passive victim, but also how they align their behaviour with dominant expectations to be independent, despite their structural vulnerability.

A system of "ambivalent" support

Taken together, these dynamics point to what we call *governing through ambivalence*. Policies simultaneously include and exclude, help and constrain. This ambivalence is not unique to the pandemic. It reflects how migrant labour is governed more broadly. Vulnerability is reduced but also sustained. And it is precisely this vulnerability that ensures the continued

availability of migrant women as a reliable workforce in the domestic care sector.

The pandemic made ambivalences visible, but they existed long before. Migrant domestic workers remain indispensable yet undervalued. They are not necessarily deported, yet also not protected. If policies continue to rely on temporary fixes and conditional support, they risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to address. Moving beyond crisis management means recognising domestic work as essential labour and ensuring access to stable rights rather than emergency aid.

References:

Mittmasser, Christina, Milena Chimienti, Myrian Carbajal, & Emma Gauttier. (2026) Governing Vulnerability Through Ambivalence: Support Measures for Migrant Domestic Workers In and Beyond Crises. Critical Social Policy 0(0). Online First: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183261452534>

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