



I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Irregularised migrants doing domestic work in the UK

Sector report

Nando Sigona, Stefano Piemontese, Sara Soares Mendes and Aké Achi

June 2025



Funded by
the European Union



UK Research
and Innovation

Funded by the European Union under Grant Number 101094373.
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s)
only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or
the European Research Executive Agency or UK Research and
Innovation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority
can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary

This report explores how immigration status, labour market structures, and housing arrangements intersect to produce forms of irregularity and exploitation in the domestic work sector. It draws on twenty in-depth qualitative interviews with migrant domestic workers – primarily women from diverse national and social backgrounds, including Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Brazil, India, Kenya, Guinea, and Pakistan – and fourteen stakeholder interviews conducted in the West Midlands, UK, between January and May 2025.

Domestic work emerges as a labour market sector attractive to migrants holding a variety of precarious immigration statuses who are differentially exposed to exploitative employment and housing conditions. Many workers are employed in private homes under informal arrangements, with limited oversight and little recourse to report abuse due to fear of immigration enforcement.

Stakeholders, including legal experts and civil society organisations, confirm that the current system incentivises dependency and creates a ‘compliant workforce’ that sustains underpaid care and domestic labour. Visa rules, sponsor dependency, high recruitment fees, and limited access to legal aid are key drivers of this dynamic.

The report adopts an intersectional approach, highlighting how gender, race, migration histories, and family obligations shape workers’ experiences and coping strategies. Despite severe constraints, many migrant workers resist exploitation through mutual support networks and acts of self-advocacy.

The findings underscore the need for policy reform to decouple immigration enforcement from labour rights, expand legal aid, enforce workplace protections in private homes, and create accessible, secure and sustainable pathways for migrants to regularise or maintain their lawful status.

This report is part of the Horizon Europe and UKRI-funded I-CLAIM project and contributes to understanding the dynamics of irregularity not as a fixed legal condition, but as a shifting position shaped by structural and regulatory processes, labour sector conditions and economic interests.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary | 2 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 4 |
| 1. Introduction | 5 |
| 2. Context | 5 |
| 2.1. Demographics and immigration pathways..... | 6 |
| 2.2. Working conditions..... | 7 |
| 3. Methodology and sampling..... | 8 |
| 4. Migrants in the domestic and care work sector | 9 |
| 4.1. Immigration pathways into domestic work | 9 |
| 4.2. Experiences in the labour market | 11 |
| 4.3. Immigration status as a mechanism of exploitation | 12 |
| 4.4. Livelihood and legal precarity | 13 |
| 4.5. Migration status and housing market | 14 |
| 4.6. Coping strategies, social networks, and Resistance..... | 14 |
| 4.7. Family and transnational lives | 16 |
| 4.8. Future aspirations and wellbeing..... | 17 |
| 5. Conclusion..... | 17 |
| 6. References..... | 18 |

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to the Refugee and Migrant Centre, Migrant Voice, and Manoel Botelho for their support during fieldwork in the West Midlands. We also wish to thank Sabrina Marchetti and Griff Ferris (JCWI) for their valuable comments and feedback on earlier drafts of the report. Finally, we extend our sincere thanks to all the interviewees who generously shared their experiences and insights with us.

About the authors

Nando Sigona is Professor of international migration and forced displacement and Director of the Institute for Research into International Migration and Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham.

Stefano Piemontese is a social anthropologist and Research Fellow at the Institute for Research into International Migration and Superdiversity of the University of Birmingham.

Sara Soares Mendes is Campaign and coalition building coordinator at Nanny Solidarity Network and Research Associate at the Institute for Research into International Migration and Superdiversity of the University of Birmingham.

Aké Achi is CEO of Black Europeans and Migrants at Work and Research Associate at the Institute for Research into International Migration and Superdiversity of the University of Birmingham.

How to cite

Sigona, N., Piemontese, S., Mendes, S.S., Achi, A. (2025) *Irregularised migrants doing domestic work in the United Kingdom*. I-CLAIM

1. Introduction

This report offers unique insights into the working and living conditions of migrant workers with precarious legal status in the domestic work sector. It draws on twenty in-depth interviews with migrant domestic workers and ethnographic observations in the West Midlands (UK) carried out between January and May 2025. The participants—primarily women from diverse social and national backgrounds, including Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Brazil, India, Kenya, Guinea, and Pakistan—shared accounts of life and work in the UK under conditions of legal precarity, economic marginalisation, and social invisibility.

Their accounts illustrate how immigration control, exploitative labour practices, racialised and gendered expectations converge to shape not only their work experiences but also their mental health, family life, and future aspirations. While the participants vary in age, nationality, immigration pathway, and legal status, common themes emerge. These include the risks and consequences of irregularisation, the power dynamics intrinsic to the sponsorship system, and the emotional and physical toll of domestic work performed under surveillance, threat, or abuse.

The perspectives of fourteen stakeholders—legal aid providers, civil society organisations, and migrant rights advocates—help situate these personal narratives within broader policy and structural contexts. These perspectives illuminate how the immigration system, labour market governance, and enforcement practices shape the conditions under which migrant domestic and care workers live and work.

This report is part of the Horizon Europe and UKRI-funded project “Improving the living and labour conditions of irregularised migrant households in Europe” (I-CLAIM), which aims to examine the living and working conditions of irregularised migrants, through and household and intersectional perspective, in six European countries: Finland, Poland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The I-CLAIM project approaches irregularity not as a fixed status but rather as dynamic position vis-à-vis the state, co-constructed at the intersection of immigration law, recruitment practices, labour market stratification, housing regimes, and enforcement mechanisms (Gonzales et al., 2019; Piemontese & Sigona, 2024; Sigona et al., 2021) that encompasses not only migrants without residence permit, but migrants increasingly at risk of irregularisation due to structural features of the immigration system.

The report is divided into four sections. Following the introduction, the first section outlines the national and local legal and policy context of migration and the labour market, with a particular focus on domestic work. The second section briefly describes our methodology and sample. The third section presents the main findings, highlighting the types of irregularity present in the domestic work sector and their impact on the working and living conditions of migrant workers and their families, their coping mechanisms, support networks, future aspirations and acts of resistance. The final section concludes highlighting the multi-faceted nature of domestic work and how the immigration system impact differently on the workers according to their immigration status.

2. Context

Domestic work encompasses a range of home-based personnel, including cleaners, chauffeurs, cooks, personal carers, and nannies (ILO, 2015). Empirical research conducted in the UK and other contexts (Anderson, 2000; Anderson & O’Connell Davidson, 2003) highlights the significant gendered and racialised

dimensions that characterise the sector. Indeed, female workers appear to be disproportionately preferred for these positions, with employers attributing to them an inherent capacity for household maintenance and caregiving responsibilities. This phenomenon correlates with what scholars have termed ‘gendered devaluation’ (Sedacca, 2022), wherein domestic and caregiving labour is systematically categorised as non-productive and lacking specialised skill requirements (Modern & Portela Barbosa, 2023).

Simultaneously, research shows that employers often prefer migrant workers, believing they are more hard-working due to supposed harsh conditions in their home countries. This positive bias leads to widespread exploitation, as documented by advocacy groups, investigative journalists, and researchers who have identified numerous forced labour indicators in these sectors. These include: abuses, deception about working conditions, restricted movement, isolation, intimidation and threats, confiscation of ID documents, wage withholding, debt bondage, poor working and living conditions, and excessive overtime requirements (ILO, 2012).

Notably, while traditional informal networks, such as word-of-mouth referrals, digital messaging groups, and social media platforms, continue to serve as the predominant mechanisms for securing employment (de la Silva et al., 2019), domestic work has witnessed increased penetration by digital labour platforms. Dedicated apps such as Hassle, Handy, Bubble, and KoruKid have significantly contributed the progressive feminisation of the UK’s platform economy sector (Balaram et al., 2017), increasing dynamics of job insecurity, financial instability, misclassification of workers as independent contractors, and control through rating systems and algorithms (Nanny Solidarity Network, 2023).

2.1. Demographics and immigration pathways

Research on the cleaning and domestic sectors in the United Kingdom has predominantly focused on Filipino and, to a lesser extent, Latin American workers. The experience of Filipino migrant women in these sectors is closely linked to the Overseas Domestic Work (ODW) visa, designed specifically for domestic workers accompanying their employers in the UK for a maximum of six months. For the duration of the visa, their holders are permitted to travel internationally and, following policy amendments implemented in 2016, change employers within the domestic work sector (see Piemontese & Sigona, 2024). However, significant restrictions persist: the visa prohibits employment outside private households, precludes access to public funds, and cannot be extended, except in specific circumstances (UK Visa and Immigration, 2025).

Latin American workers, while rarely accessing the UK through the ODW route, constitute another demographic group overrepresented in the domestic sector. Many of them hold EU citizenship, with one in five Latin American residents in the UK having acquired this status either through ancestral connections to EU countries or through naturalisation following extended residence in an EU member state (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016). Individuals with this background have often moved to the UK as EU citizens in the aftermath of the 2008-2014 financial crisis (de la Silva et al., 2019) or acquired EU citizenship after the Brexit referendum, and subsequently applied for the EU settlement status. Despite their relatively privileged migratory status, they have encountered substantial barriers to employment, including linguistic challenges, non-recognition of academic qualifications, and financial constraints, resulting in two-thirds taking up cleaning jobs upon arrival in the UK (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016). More precarious trajectories with fewer opportunities for upward social mobility are those of Latin American workers who enter the UK with a Visitor visa, which permits stays of up to six months. Indeed, many become undocumented when their visas

expire, often due to deception by employers who promised to resolve their immigration status (Modern & Portela Barbosa, 2023).

In addition to these pathways, since 2022, care workers and home carers have become eligible to apply for the Health and Care Workers visa. This policy modification has enabled UK employers to recruit internationally for these positions, resulting in a substantial increase in visa issuance through this route. Approximately 60,000 visas have been granted, representing 32% of the total Health and Care Workers visas issued during this period. The primary beneficiaries have been workers from India, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Ghana (Sumption & Brindle, 2023).

Notwithstanding their divergent immigration statuses and associated entitlements, these communities exhibit some shared experiences of workplace abuse and exploitation, which sometimes lead them to seek help through the National Referral Mechanisms established to combat human trafficking and modern slavery.

2.2. Working conditions

Due to the private nature of the workplace and the absence of regulations, the domestic work sector is more susceptible to exploitation and forced labour compared to other sectors. A recent study by the *Latin American Women's Rights Service* (LAWRS) (Modern & Portela Barbosa, 2023), revealed that domestic workers often face unpredictable and excessive working hours, inability to take breaks, and a lack of paid annual leave and other forms of unlawful wage deductions. Underpayment is also prevalent with an average hourly rate of £5.75 in 2019, significantly below the then National Minimum Wage (Jiang, 2019). A comprehensive survey undertaken by the *Voice of Domestic Workers* in 2019 revealed that 69% of Overseas Domestic Worker (ODW) visa holders lacked private accommodation within their employers' residences, only 50% received adequate nutrition, 75% experienced verbal or physical maltreatment, and 7% reported incidents of sexual assault (Jiang, 2021). Research by *Kalayaan*, a first responder for modern slavery cases, found that 40% of them present indicators of trafficking, 70% have no day off, and 73% are affected by passport retention by employers, concluding that restrictions implemented in 2012 and 2016 immigration policies for ODWs have directly increased their vulnerability to trafficking and modern slavery (Sharp, 2024).

The experience of isolation caused by relentless work schedules is particularly exacerbated for individuals holding 'tied' Overseas Domestic Worker visas, creating conditions analogous to contemporary forms of servitude (Gostoli, 2020; Mcque, 2023; Simons, 2023). According to a 2014 survey conducted by *Kalayaan*, a London-based advocacy organisation supporting domestic workers, approximately three-quarters of workers with ODW visas reported restrictions on independent movement outside the household (Breese, 2023). Notably, even in circumstances where workers' immigration status is not tied to their employers, significant obstacles to exiting exploitative conditions persist. These include emotional attachment to care recipients and limited alternative employment prospects resulting from social isolation and economic deprivation (Breese, 2023; Modern & Portela Barbosa, 2023).

Power asymmetries between employers and domestic workers are frequently intensified by the administrative and juridical dimensions of migration. In the absence of secure reporting mechanisms, the lack of legal status often functions as a precursor to exploitation and mistreatment. Moreover, prohibitive visa renewal fees can further perpetuate cycles of dependency and employer exploitation. This phenomenon is particularly evident in cases where employers commit to covering legal and visa-related expenses but

subsequently impede salary negotiations and remunerate workers below minimum wage thresholds (see Simons, 2023). Significantly, even individuals possessing more secure residence authorisations (such as EU pre-settled or settled status) may experience deteriorated working conditions due to misinformation regarding employment rights, apprehensions concerning immigration status, and deliberate deception by employers (Modern & Portela Barbosa, 2023).

More generally, several UK legal factors hinder improving conditions for domestic workers: private homes are exempt from labour inspections, workers lack basic rights like the 48-hour work week limit (Sedacca, 2023), and the UK has not ratified the ILO's 2011 Domestic Workers Convention. However, on a positive note, the 'family worker exemption' allowing below-minimum wage pay was abolished in April 2024, following advocacy by groups coordinated by the Nanny Solidarity Network (ATLEU, 2023; Sedacca, 2023).

3. Methodology and sampling

This study was conducted between January and May 2025 with current and former domestic workers living in the West Midlands region of the UK. The urban centres of Birmingham, Coventry, and Wolverhampton, where the fieldwork was concentrated, are notable for their ethnic diversity. On average, 23.5% of the population in these cities identify as Asian and nearly 10% as Black. Islam is the second-largest religion after Christianity, with over 15% of residents identifying as Muslim. Migration is a key feature of the local demographic landscape: 25% of residents in these urban areas were born outside the UK, and 15% hold a non-UK passport (Office for National Statistics, 2025).

We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty migrant domestic workers, both current and former. Interviews were audio-recorded and held either online, by phone, or in person, depending on participants' availability, which was often very limited. The interview guide explored migration journeys and legal status, experiences in the labour market, livelihood and legal precarity, access to support networks, and future aspirations. Each participant received a £30 voucher in recognition of the time and insights they shared.

The research team included two research assistants with lived experience of migration and precarious immigration status, who are actively involved in migrant and worker rights organisations, with one of them having also worked in domestic settings. Their experiential knowledge and familiarity with sectoral dynamics and policies were crucial in building trust with participants, conducting interviews covering potentially sensitive issues, and analysing the data in relation to broader structural conditions affecting domestic work.

To supplement this primary data, we conducted fourteen expert interviews with trade unionists, representatives of civil society organisations supporting domestic workers, immigration lawyers, and migrant rights advocates. These interviews provided essential context, helping situate the lived experiences of domestic workers within broader debates about labour rights and migration governance in the West Midlands and beyond. Additional desk-based research, including the analysis of grey literature, further informed the study. Parts of the thematic analysis and drafting process were assisted by ChatGPT, a large language model developed by OpenAI. No personal or identifiable data was shared with the tool, and all inputs were anonymised in line with data protection requirements.

Building on recent changes in legal pathways into domestic work (see previous section), our study extends existing research in two main ways. First, we move beyond the narrow definition of domestic workers as

those on the Overseas Domestic Worker visa. Instead, we adopt a broader definition that includes non-UK citizens with a range of immigration statuses engaged in home-based work—such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and adults—for individuals, households, or agencies. Second, this broader definition has enabled us to include a more diverse set of workers in terms of nationalities and legal pathways, encompassing not only Filipino and Latin American women who traditionally hold domestic work visas, but also asylum seekers and domiciliary care workers from Africa.

Participants' countries of origin represent an important but not determining factor. Rather, our analysis identifies three emerging groups of domestic workers whose differentiated profiles reveal how immigration status, nationality, and racialisation interact to shape a diverse spectrum of working and living conditions in the sector.

Eight participants were recruited from among domiciliary workers through the “Justice for Sponsored Workers” campaign. This group—unique in including a small number of men—consists mainly of workers from West and Southern Africa. All held Work Visas and were employed by Home Office-licensed sponsors. Despite formal status, many faced acute precarity, with visa expirations looming and financial hardship following wrongful dismissals by sponsors. With an average age of 40, these participants had been in the UK for an average of 2.5 years.

Another eight interviewees were recruited among women at different stages of the asylum process, either via Migrant Voice, posters placed around Birmingham, or WhatsApp groups. Primarily from Sub-Saharan Africa, these women were all over 50 and had lived in the UK for an average of 14 years. During this time, they experienced frequent status changes, moving between irregularity and temporary regularity as asylum claimants. Their accommodation was unstable, ranging from Home Office hotels and NGO housing to employers' homes and friends' residences. Most engaged in informal, cash-in-hand domestic work—often but not exclusively within the African diaspora.

The final group included four younger Brazilian women, mostly in their 30s, recruited through social media and community spaces frequented by the Brazilian diaspora. These women migrated to the UK around the time of Brexit and had lived in the country for an average of seven years. While one participant obtained legal residency via a dependent visa following periods of overstaying, others acquired EU Settled Status through ancestral Spanish or Italian citizenship or by marrying EU citizens.

4. Migrants in the domestic and care work sector

4.1. Immigration pathways into domestic work

Irrespective of their current circumstances, most participants had moved between legal statuses over time and experienced some form of legal insecurity in the past, for some this was still an imminent threat which shaped their outlook on the present and future.

Asylum seekers' trajectories alternated with long periods of irregularity, often initiated with student, work, domestic work, or tourist visas, and their migration plans changed with worsening political conditions in their countries of origin. Domiciliary workers presented a reverse experience: they entered through work visas but then experienced various forms of precarity, such as difficulty paying immigration fees or losing sponsors. For Brazilian workers, while regularization provided some benefits, they remained unable to leave

the domestic work sector due to structural constraints and faced high fees for navigating visa-related processes and regularising their immigration status, creating financial burdens that further entrenched their precarious positions.

These transitions—from worker to undocumented, or student to asylum seeker—are often triggered by employer abuse, visa expiration, or bureaucratic delays. This fluidity exposes the fragility of legality and the systemic production of irregularity by institutional design.

The participants' migration journeys were shaped not only by the aspiration for a better life but also by state policies, private intermediaries, and sometimes sheer desperation. Their legal statuses at the time of the interview ranged from permanent residence permit to no status at all, but all had experienced precarity and status insecurity at some point in their life in the UK.

Many arrived on skilled worker visas designed to fill labour shortages in the UK's care sector through safe labour migration routes. For workers like Api, Nathan, Jibran, Sunitha, and Affia, these visas promised stability and employment but quickly became tools of control¹. Tied to a single employer, they could not change jobs without securing a new Certificate of Sponsorship. In practice, this meant accepting poor pay and conditions in order to maintain their legal right to remain in the country.

Others arrived through different immigration pathways. Adriana, and Katiane arrived in the UK on tourist visas and successively, in the case of Adriana after a period as visa overstayer, managed to secure their status before Brexit through EU citizenship, either through marriage or using their European ancestry to claim EU citizenship.

Bruna first moved to Italy to secure the Italian passport through her husband's ancestry but due to the length of the process they overstayed their visa. They eventually secured their status and moved to the UK before the Brexit cut-off date and secured EU settled status. Samantha moved to the UK with her daughters after divorcing from her partner in Portugal. Thanks to her EU citizenship, she secured her status soon which meant that, though not immune to exploitation, they experienced greater autonomy in choosing work and negotiating terms.

Several interviewees had experienced multiple change of legal status since entering the UK. Evelyn came initially as a student, but her circumstances changed, and she was forced to seek asylum after experiencing political persecution in her home country. Brenda fled an abusive employer after discovering she had been deceived about her pay and rights and then spent years undocumented before claiming asylum. Bella and Faith also transitioned into the asylum system after escaping trafficking, domestic violence, or employer abuse. Their status changes often involved long periods of limbo, where they were unable to work legally and access public funds.

Sponsor license suspensions, visa curtailments, and bureaucratic delays left many migrants exposed to irregularity through no fault of their own. Jibran's employer lost their sponsorship license, and his status

¹ All names in the report are pseudonyms. that have been either agreed upon after the interview or assigned by the research team to reflect the national, ethnic, or religious identity of the participants.

evaporated overnight: “I was left with nothing, no job, no house, no papers. All because the sponsor broke the law, not me”.

Stakeholders highlighted how the post-Brexit immigration system while it liberalised entries also weakened the rights of migrant workers—driving many migrants into legal limbo and financial insecurity. The rise in skilled worker visas for the care sector was noted as a sharp shift, initially aimed at highly skilled sectors like medicine or engineering, more recently funnelling workers into underpaid care roles. One stakeholder noted, “There’s a significant rise in care work visas... but people are coming with the expectation of stable employment and are shocked by the lack of hours and support [they receive]”.

Stakeholders also described how legal precarity is compounded by limited access to legal aid leaving individuals without representation in life-altering legal processes. Undeclared domestic work is a survival strategy from destituted asylum seekers.

The irregular condition was not an unintended consequence but actively produced by the state through mechanisms such as sponsor licence suspensions, and chronic delays in processing applications. In this system, migrants are blamed for ‘non-compliance’ even when institutional failures invalid legal status.

4.2. Experiences in the labour market

The labour market experiences of the participants were overwhelmingly defined by insecure income, overwork and lack of personal and family time. Most worked in private homes as clearers, nannies and carer under harsh conditions that bore little resemblance to the formal contracts they had signed. Many had worked without any contract for long period of time.

Brenda’s story encapsulates the intensity of live-in domestic labour. Recruited from Swaziland by a diplomatic family, she arrived in the UK on a domestic worker visa. From 5 am until after midnight, she cooked, cleaned, and cared for children—without breaks or adequate food. She was paid just £100 per month. When she later saw her visa documents, she discovered her employer had falsely claimed to be paying her five times that amount. When she raised concerns, she was threatened with deportation and silenced.

Faith similarly described working seven days a week, providing dementia care, yet earning less than £450 a month. Affia recounted being placed ‘on call’ indefinitely, often travelling over 100 miles to visit clients, with little to no compensation. She was told to “keep waiting” for shifts that never came, while still expected to pay rent, send remittances, and remain available.

The labour these women performed was both physical and emotional. Domestic care work often required round-the-clock presence, yet this presence was devalued and rendered invisible. As one participant put it, “You are always working, even when they say you are not”. For live-in workers, the boundaries between work and life collapsed entirely and there was little hope to address this issue while staying in the same job.

The racialised and gendered aspects of the work were also evident. Sunitha, who had been a senior nurse in India, was employed in the UK as a domestic care assistant and treated as if she lacked qualifications. “They never recognised my experience,” she said, “only my accent.” Evelyn, a Black woman with extensive care experience, was frequently assigned the most difficult shifts and clients. “They saw me as stronger,” she explained, “but that also meant they thought I didn’t need rest.”

In contrast, Samantha's secure legal status allowed her to exercise agency over her working conditions. "I don't do rota work", she said, comparing her position to that of some of acquaintances who have no status. "I decide who I work for, and I tell them the rate. I am not desperate". Her case illustrates how legal security can translate into labour agency, while precarious status creates the conditions for routine abuse.

Stakeholders corroborated worker testimonies of exploitative working conditions, noting that the Points Based System has effectively "outsourced immigration control to employers". The resulting dependency makes it difficult for workers to refuse poor conditions or advocate for themselves. As seen in the accounts of Affia and Sunitha, poor pay, excessive hours, and disrespect for qualifications are systemic, not exceptional. In this regard, one legal expert highlighted: "You begin to see that people get locked into particular sectors and particular roles... and it makes it very difficult to break away from that."

The structural rigidity of the sponsorship system is seen as producing a 'compliant workforce', particularly in care and domestic roles, where oversight is minimal and protections are hard to enforce.

4.3. Immigration status as a mechanism of exploitation

Across the interviews, immigration status repeatedly surfaced as a mechanism through which exploitation was enabled, deepened, and justified. The specific vulnerabilities created by precarious or irregular status—especially among those on tied visas or in the asylum system—were routinely weaponised by licensed employers, agencies, and sometimes even by individuals within the migrants' own communities.

Additionally, stakeholders criticised the absence of safe reporting mechanisms. Under current systems, workers who report abuse risk referral to immigration enforcement, particularly those without legal status.

For those on skilled worker visas, the sponsorship system created intense dependency. Participants like Api, Faith, and Sunitha described how employers reminded them regularly that their immigration status could be revoked. "They said if I don't like it, they will cancel the Certificate of Sponsorship", Faith recalled. "Who was I to argue?"

With no real option to change employer without starting the costly visa process over again, workers accepted conditions that violated their contracts and rights. Api paid £6,000 for her first Certificate of Sponsorship, and when her employer failed to deploy her, she had to borrow more money to secure a new one. Nathan recounted that even when his sponsor relocated him in breach of immigration conditions, he felt he had no choice but to comply.

Others, like Bella and Fara, who were undocumented or had fallen out of status, were even more vulnerable. Bella was brought to the UK under the promise of domestic employment and instead found herself in near-total isolation, working without pay for nearly a decade in private homes. She was not allowed to speak to neighbours or have friends. Her church community, which had initially facilitated her placement, also ignored her suffering. "I had no one", she said. "Even the people who prayed with me said it was normal".

Those living in asylum accommodation or awaiting legal decisions faced parallel forms of control. Fara, for example, described being housed with strangers, denied access to cooking facilities, and treated "like a number". When she complained about being locked in by her host family, she was told it was "better than being homeless".

This systemic exploitation benefitted a range of actors: licensed employers profited from cheap, compliant labour; recruitment agents and unscrupulous immigration lawyers; some community leaders or intermediaries—like Bella’s church elder or Api’s cousin—acted as gatekeepers, extracting value from their vulnerability; the broader UK care economy, chronically underfunded and understaffed, leaned heavily on a workforce whose legal precarity made them unable to demand rights.

Several women reported experiences of sexual exploitation that were directly enabled by their immigration status. Fara was repeatedly trafficked for sex and domestic work, with threats of deportation used to silence her. Faith described being propositioned by intermediaries when her sister refused further financial help. These stories reveal how gendered violence is facilitated—and in some cases, normalised—within the irregularity assemblage.

4.4. Livelihood and legal precarity

The economic and legal insecurity participants experienced was not incidental—it was structural. Most of the domestic workers interviewed had incurred large debts to secure their entry or remain in the UK. Some were misled by their sponsors and agents to believe that the fees were to cover immigration charges as part of their Certificate of Sponsorship application process. For many, those debts became a trap. They accepted abusive conditions because they felt they had no choice.

“I was drowning in payments”, said Jibran, who paid £10,000 to an agent in Pakistan. “You don’t have choices when you owe that much”. Sunitha paid £12,000, Affia over £24,000. Even when participants worked full-time hours, deductions for housing, transport, or ‘training’ often reduced their take-home pay to below minimum wage. And when they lost work—often due to sponsor misconduct—they found themselves without income, housing, or legal status.

Recruitment fees were common among migrants on a skilled worker visa, often paid through loans or asset sales. These debts created intense pressure to accept exploitative conditions. The structural indebtedness not only binds workers to their sponsors but renders the idea of exit financially impossible, reinforcing a dynamic of coerced compliance even when legal rights are nominally available”.

Living conditions were poor across the board. Brenda and Nathan lived in shared, employer-controlled housing where they were monitored and lacked privacy. Bella was housed in multiple temporary accommodations, some infested with rats. Faith was moved repeatedly without notice, sometimes losing her belongings in the process. Fara described being locked in a room without heating. Even those with the legal right to rent often faced discrimination or unaffordable costs. “I paid £700 a month for one room”, said Api, “and still had to send money home”.

The legal and economic precarity described by workers—high recruitment fees, debt, and housing instability—was confirmed by stakeholders. Destitution and debt are for some the consequence of the high immigration fees they must pay to maintain their lawful status. This debt drives workers to submit to exploitative working conditions just to stay afloat.

Stakeholders also identified the contradictions between Home Office enforcement and real labour market needs. “The way the immigration rules are set up is almost like the perfect storm to create exploitation”, a trade unionist said, highlighting how restrictive visa regimes and lack of access to benefits amplify vulnerability.

4.5. Migration status and housing market

Some workers are live-in caregivers and are provided accommodation by their employers, who function as both visa sponsors, travel agents, and landlords, or through estate agencies acting on behalf of these landlords. This dual role creates a scenario in which workers often face significant pressure to submit to exploitative practices due to the lack of viable alternatives. When workers assert their rights, they risk termination of employment, which can lead to visa revocation by the Home Office and subsequent eviction from the employer-provided accommodation.

Service occupancy agreements, which are established between employers, landlords, and agents, grant employees a license to occupy specific properties necessary for the performance of their work duties. Generally, employees covered by a service occupancy agreement do not pay rent for their accommodation, as the arrangement is designed to support their job functions. Employers are also obligated to report expenses such as council tax, water, and sewage charges to HMRC. However, in practice, particularly concerning sponsored workers, employers offering service occupancy licenses often require overseas employees to pay rent and relevant charges while simultaneously retaining the authority to evict them upon termination of employment.

This practice raises critical questions regarding the authenticity of these agreements, posing the dilemma of whether they represent genuine service occupancy arrangements or assured shorthold tenancies. It is evident that sponsored workers find themselves in a precarious position, subject to the control of their licensed employers, sponsors, or landlords, which effectively fosters a subservient status among these employees. Such practices are in violation of national and international law, as they bear a resemblance to conditions akin to modern slavery.

In Faith's case, she wrongly held liable for the council tax and her liability began while she was still in Zimbabwe:

I explained to the council I had not yet received my visa decision. I was still in Zimbabwe. Then I told them I can even bring my passport and my daughter's passport, but they insisted I bring a tenancy agreement.

Stakeholders underscored that visa dependency and lack of rights translate into poor housing conditions, reinforcing narratives from workers like Faith. Dual employer-landlord roles, unclear tenancy agreements, and wrongful council tax liabilities were seen as systemic. "There are profound tax implications for the employee", one legal worker observed, referring to cases where workers are forced to pay charges that should be borne by employers.

Housing was not just a living condition but a mechanism of control. Whether in employer-tied service occupancy agreements or temporary asylum housing, migrants' access to shelter was routinely used to extract labour, enforce silence, or ensure compliance with work demands—further entrenching their irregular condition.

4.6. Coping strategies, social networks, and Resistance

Despite profound constraints, many participants developed strategies for coping, surviving, and—where possible—resisting the structures that kept them vulnerable.

Legal strategies were one route. Some, like Evelyn and Brenda, turned to the asylum system after fleeing abuse in domestic work. Others, like Api and Nathan, fought to change sponsors and remain in legal employment. These processes were often financial expensive and psychologically draining. “I had to do the paperwork myself”, said Evelyn. “No one was helping. I kept trying. I had to”.

Informal support networks were also essential to find work in the sector, particularly for those with more precarious legal status. Participants relied heavily on family, church communities, and WhatsApp groups to find work, housing, and emotional support. Jibran’s pastor gave him a place to stay after he lost his job. Bruna found all her cleaning jobs through migrant WhatsApp groups. Faith was temporarily supported by a women’s shelter. Bella eventually escaped her abusive situation through the intervention of a client’s relative, who noticed her distress.

Some participants engaged in quiet forms of resistance. Samantha, with her secure status, refused to work for agencies that offered exploitative ‘rota’ work. Evelyn, after her asylum claim was refused, began speaking publicly about the mental health toll of waiting in limbo. Bella, once a trafficking victim, is now training to support others through advocacy and community work.

These actions—small and large—reflect not only resilience but also a refusal to be defined solely by vulnerability. As one participant put it: “We survive through each other. That’s the truth”.

Stakeholders acknowledged the resilience of migrant workers and pointed to a growing need for structural reform to support these survival strategies. They advocated for a firewall between immigration and employment enforcement, to allow workers to report abuse safely. Others emphasised the importance of legal reform, such as increasing the 60-day grace period to find a new sponsor and reducing visa fees.

While all participants navigated highly constrained and often hostile systems, the type and quality of support they received varied widely. Formal institutional support was often absent or ineffective, leaving most to rely on informal networks or non-governmental organisations.

Nathan had joined a union early on but received no meaningful assistance when facing exploitation by his sponsor. Brenda struggled to access legal aid during her transition from undocumented to asylum-seeking status. Faith’s efforts to report her sponsor’s abuse to the Home Office were ignored. “The system protects the sponsors, not the workers”, said Jibran, reflecting a sentiment shared by many.

In contrast, a handful of participants received life-saving support from third-sector organisations. Bella, after escaping her exploiters, was referred to a support charity that helped her find accommodation and begin recovery. Evelyn was housed and assisted by a refugee charity after leaving an abusive employer. Fara found help through a local charity, which supported her asylum claim and mental health recovery.

Yet even this support was patchy and precarious. Services were underfunded, geographically uneven, and not always culturally sensitive. Faith had to leave her shelter due to eligibility issues. Bella was moved from one overcrowded accommodation to another, each more isolating than the last.

For most, survival depended on informal networks. Family, friends, and migrant communities filled the gaps left by the state. However, not all networks were benevolent. Bella’s initial exploitation was facilitated by her church elder, who presented himself as a helper. The line between community and coercion was at times blurred.

Support organisations play a vital role in filling some of the gaps left by the state. Yet many reported being overburdened and under-resourced, echoing the experiences of workers who described sporadic or absent institutional support. “There are legal aid deserts,” one stakeholder explained, “especially in areas with high migrant populations”. This leaves civil society groups to act as de facto support systems—often without the legal mandate or capacity to meet demand.

4.7. Family and transnational lives

Family was the invisible thread running through many of the interviews—a source of both strength and pain. Participants often migrated to support children and relatives back home, yet the very act of migration led to long separations, missed milestones, and emotional estrangement.

Api sold her family’s house and car to fund her journey to the UK. Once here, she worked without breaks or rest to send money home. Her children remained in Zimbabwe with their grandparents, and her marriage suffered under the strain of distance. “Should I lose my marriage, or keep the job?” she asked, visibly torn.

Faith similarly prioritised remittances over personal comfort. Despite earning less than £500 a month, she sent what she could to her children. “They depend on me”, she said, “even when I can’t afford food myself”.

Others spoke of the pain of being unable to reunite with family. Brenda, in her sixties, has not seen her children in years. She dreams of being with them again, but laughs bitterly when asked if it’s possible: “A bank account would be freedom”, she says. “That’s how far away normal life feels”.

Fara, who came to the UK fleeing sexual and gender abuse, spent years searching for her missing son. The emotional toll of that loss compounded her trauma. Vatusia, a lesbian asylum seeker from Guinea, spoke of being estranged from her family due to her sexuality. Her migration was not just economic but existential—a flight from violence within the home.

Samantha and Adriana, with secure legal status and no dependents abroad, were better able to set boundaries and live more autonomously. But even they acknowledged that family expectations shaped their decisions, particularly in terms of remittances and emotional obligations.

For many, transnational motherhood and kinship were double-edged: providing motivation, but also making it harder to say no, to rest, or to stop.

Family separation and financial pressure were highlighted by both workers and stakeholders. The latter described how new visa rules restrict family reunification, compounding emotional stress and undermining financial stability. This policy shift adds to the strain described by interviewees like Api and Faith, who must support families abroad while navigating exploitative jobs and high living costs in the UK.

4.8. Future aspirations and wellbeing

Participants' outlook on the future was shaped largely by their immigration status and current working conditions. For those with secure status, the future felt open, if still challenging. Adriana and Bruna have made peace with life in the UK and feel rooted. "It's not easy", said Bruna, "but at least I can plan".

For others, the future was filled with uncertainty. Evelyn remains in limbo, awaiting an asylum decision that will determine whether she can rebuild her life. Brenda, after years of instability, has stopped imagining the future altogether. "I'm too old", she said, "I just want peace. Not to be scared all the time".

Affia, after a stress-induced stroke, faces both physical and economic recovery. "I don't know what tomorrow brings", she said. "I just keep working. Because what else can I do?".

And yet, there were signs of hope. Bella, once held in servitude, is now training to support trafficking survivors. Evelyn wants to become a mental health advocate. Jibran dreams of a better system for sponsored workers and is beginning to speak out. "If we speak," he said, "maybe others won't suffer like we did".

Stakeholders reinforced the view that secure legal status and safe supporting mechanisms are a foundation for wellbeing and future planning. Without it, workers are trapped in cycles of fear, debt, and overwork.

5. Conclusion

This report reveals that the irregular condition of many migrant domestic workers in the UK is not an accidental outcome but a structurally produced reality. Immigration laws, recruitment practices, labour market structures, and housing regulations combine to generate a state of chronic precarity that is gendered, racialised, and deeply exploitative.

Irregularity is not a binary status, but a continuum shaped by dynamic and intersecting forces. Even those with legal residence often fear slipping into irregularity, unable to maintain their lawful status due to financial pressures, unscrupulous sponsors or personal circumstances, like a divorce. While those already undocumented face barriers to escape exploitative conditions. The state's dual role—as regulator and enforcer—contributes directly to this entrapment, especially through systems like tied visas, visa curtailments, and the absence of firewalls between labour rights enforcement and immigration control.

The fear of irregularisation as much as undocumented legal status act as a force multiplier of exploitation, enabling employers, agents, and institutions to extract labour with minimal accountability. Meanwhile, women carry the dual burden of being carers—both professionally and within their transnational families—while also being treated as expendable.

Stakeholder insights confirm that the current framework—marked by visa dependency, fragmented enforcement, and a punitive approach to migration—creates a structural context for the exploitation detailed in this report.

Yet these workers are not just victims. They are also strategists, advocates, and survivors. They navigate bureaucracies, resist abuse, support one another, and—when conditions allow—claim space for joy, rest, and dignity.

As Faith put it, "We didn't come here to beg. We came to work, to live, to be treated like people".

6. References

- Anderson, B. (2000). *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*. Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/doing-the-dirty-work-9781856497619/>
- Anderson, B., & O'Connell Davidson, J. (2003). Is Trafficking in Human Beings Demand Driven? A Multi-Country Pilot Study. In *IOM migration research series no 151607338X* (Issue 15). International Organization for Migration.
- ATLEU. (2023, March 10). The Family Worker Exemption: Still in place and still driving exploitation. *Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit*.
- Balaram, B., Warden, J., & Wallace-Stephens, F. (2017). *Good Gigs. A fairer future for UK's gig economy*. RSA Action and Research Centre. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195069884.003.0037>
- Breese, E. (2023, April 3). 'Tied' visas are putting migrant domestic workers at risk of abuse. *The Big Issue*, 1–9.
- de la Silva, N., Granada, L., & Modern, D. (2019). *The Unheard Workforce: Experiences of Latin American migrant women in cleaning, hospitality and domestic work*. Latin American Women's Rights Service August.
- Gonzales, R. G., Sigona, N., Franco, M. C., & Papoutsi, A. (2019). *Undocumented migration*. Polity.
- Gostoli, Y. (2020, September 8). The domestic workers fleeing modern slavery in the UK. *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/8/the-domestic-workers-fleeing-modern-slavery-in-the-uk>
- ILO. (2015). 8.1 *Defining domestic work*. International Labour Organization. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/81-defining-domestic-work>
- Jiang, J. (2019). *A Special Vulnerability: Migrant Domestic Workers Enslaved by The Non-renewable Overseas Domestic Worker Visa in the UK*. August, 1–16.
- Jiang, J. (2021, May 21). A Manual for Organising Migrant Domestic Workers: Lessons from The Voice of Domestic Workers in London. *Tools to Transform. A Workbook for Asian Diasporic Organising in Europe*. <https://toolstotransform.net/portfolio/joyce-jiang-20210521-a-manual-for-organising-migrant-domestic-workers-lessons-from-the-voice-of-domestic-workers-in-london/>
- McIlwaine, C., & Bunge, D. (2016). *Towards visibility: The Latin American community in London*. <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/publications/towards-visibility-latin-american-community-london/>
- Mcque, K. (2023, October 12). Revealed: Allegations of abuse and captivity without pay at UAE's lucrative recruitment agencies. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/12/revealed-allegations-of-abuse-and-captivity-without-pay-at-uaes-lucrative-recruitment-agencies>
- Modern, D., & Portela Barbosa, L. C. (2023). *Behind Closed Doors. Experiences of Latin American domestic workers in the UK*. Latin American Women's Rights Service August.
- Nanny Solidarity Network. (2023). *Evidence Submission to the 2023 Low Pay Commission Consultation*. <https://nannysolidaritynetwork.co.uk/nsn-low-pay-commission-evidence/>

- Office for National Statistics. (2025). *Local indicators for the West Midlands (E47000007). Combined Authority in the West Midlands* [Dataset]. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/E47000007-west-midlands>
- Piemontese, S., & Sigona, N. (2024). *The Legal and Policy Infrastructure of Irregularity: United Kingdom*. I-CLAIM. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10977054>
- Sedacca, N. (2022). Domestic Workers, the ‘Family Worker’ Exemption from Minimum Wage, and Gendered Devaluation of Women’s Work. *Industrial Law Journal*, 51(4), 771–801. <https://doi.org/10.1093/indlaw/dwac005>
- Sedacca, N. (2023, November 17). The family worker exemption revisited: A sustained campaign against the devaluation of domestic work. *UK Labour Law*. <https://uklabourlawblog.com/2023/11/17/the-family-worker-exemption-revisited-a-sustained-campaign-against-the-devaluation-of-domestic-work-by-natalie-sedacca/>
- Sharp, A. (2024). *12 years of modern slavery: The smokescreen used to deflect state accountability for migrant domestic workers*. Kalayaan. https://www.kalayaan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Kalayaan_Report_2024_.pdf
- Sigona, N., Kato, J., & Kuznetsova, I. (2021). Migration infrastructures and the production of migrants’ irregularity in Japan and the United Kingdom. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00242-4>
- Simons, M. (2023, October 26). ‘They treated me like an animal’: How Filipino domestic workers become trapped. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/oct/26/how-filipino-domestic-workers-become-trapped>
- Sumption, M., & Brindle, B. (2023). Work visas and migrant workers in the UK. In *Migration Observatory Briefing* (p. 5). COMPAS, University of Oxford. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/work-visas-and-migrant-workers-in-the-uk/>
- UK Visa and Immigration. (2025). *Overseas Domestic Worker visa*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/overseas-domestic-worker-visa>

I-CLAIM Consortium



Utrecht
University



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice
Department of Philosophy
and Cultural Heritage



UNIVERSITY
OF WARSAW



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



Katholische
Hochschule Mainz
Catholic University
of Applied Sciences



THE JOINT COUNCIL
for THE WELFARE
OF IMMIGRANTS

act:ionaid
—REALIZZA IL CAMBIAMENTO—

Centrala



ASSOCIATION
FOR LEGAL
INTERVENTION

SYNDICAT
EUROPÉEN
TRADE UNION



Deaconess
Foundation

KATHOLISCHES
FORUM

LEBEN IN DER
LEGALITÄT



Contact info

icclaim@uu.nl

For press inquiries:

I-CLAIM Communications Manager

miriam.mir@ceps.eu

Follow



www.i-claim.eu



Funded by
the European Union



UK Research
and Innovation

Funded by the European Union under Grant Number 101094373. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency or UK Research and Innovation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe