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| **No 32 /2018** | **15 June 2018** |

**Growing shortage of carers makes it high time for EU to regulate live-in care sector**

**The EESC held the fourth of its Going Local meetings on the live-in care sector in the EU, this time in Poland. The country provides much of the sector's workforce in western EU Member States, but has itself started to face a serious shortage of qualified carers in recent years**

With the rise of the informal economy, government support is crucial for securing high-quality services for care recipients and decent working conditions for caregivers, whose number is on the rise in the face of soaring demand for care services in Poland and elsewhere in Europe, it was revealed at the meeting held by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in Warsaw on 13 June.

Among the main subjects discussed at the meeting – which brought together thirty stakeholders, including academics, labour inspectors, employer organisations, NGOs and journalists – were possible ways of regularising this increasingly in-demand profession, the current difficult situation of migrant live-in carers in Poland and that of Polish workers in Germany.

The event was opened by **Adam Rogalewski**, rapporteur of the EESC's [own-initiative opinion](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/rights-live-care-workers) on the rights of live-in care workers, which is the **first policy document at European Union level to deal with this sector in Europe.**

**Mr Rogalewski** pointed out that live-in care was enshrined in the 18th principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which reads: "Everyone has the right to affordable long-term care services, in particular home-care and community-based services."

Yet live-in care has long remained almost invisible to EU and Member State policy-makers, leaving the sector unregulated and highly fragmented, with both carers and care recipients in a vulnerable position.

Poland is in an unusual situation, with many of its citizens migrating to Germany and other western countries to care for their elderly and sick and – as the EESC meeting in Berlin in March had brought to light – often providing around-the-clock care, with inadequate pay and without basic rights or social protection.

Most of the Polish carers find their work in Germany through agencies. Brushing aside allegations that these agencies did nothing to ensure good working or living conditions for the carers, **Krzysztof Jakubowski** from the Association of Employment Agencies (SAZ) insisted the wellbeing of such workers was paramount to them, adding: "The posting system is very complex and all parties must assume their share of responsibility."

"There is a common misunderstanding about the 24-hour working day, as the work of carers is normally five hours a day," said **Bozena Adamczyk** from the SeniorMedica 24 agency.

Now itself faced with a shortage of carers, Poland is host to a large number of migrant care workers, most of them from Ukraine. Estimates put the number of Ukrainian women employed in Poland households at roughly 70 000, although this is expected to grow, as the demand for live-in care will continue to increase.

Testimony at the meeting from a Ukrainian live-in care worker revealed that many of them worked in very difficult conditions, without proper contracts. She described their situation as even worse than that of Polish carers in Germany.

"Live-in care workers should be treated equally to other workers, including in terms of working time, pay and health and safety measures. The approach has to be prioritised and holistic at governmental level, including pecuniary support for families and the general improvement of the healthcare sector, " trade unionists **Barbara Surdykowska** of Solidarnosc and **Renata Gorna** from OPZZ said.

They pushed for a realistic approach to the regularisation of live-in care arrangements that avoided self-employment or treating carers as second-class workers.

It is the Member States, however, who should increase their support for the sector, especially given the rise of the informal economy and non-standard work contracts which greatly hinder the professionalisation of care services.

"While it seems necessary for rules and minimum standards for the provision of live-in care to be defined at the EU level they cannot be created in isolation from the wider context of the informal economy and undeclared work. Professional service providers are not able to compete with the informal market due to the high costs of their service. The provision of high-quality services for senior patients and decent working conditions for caregivers requires government support," said **Stefan Schwarz**, from the Polish Labour Mobility Initiative.

For his part, **Janusz Pietkiewicz** from the EESC Employers' Group urged: "We need to find practical incentives to move from the informal economy to legal employment in the care sector. Member States should create comprehensive systems of support for people using care and their families, including financial support and tax relief. The role of the state and its administration is crucial to achieve this."

**Krzysztof Pater** from the EESC's Diversity Group pointed out that the current rural exodus and nuclear families represented a double challenge for caring for older family members. The Polish care sector would not be sustainable without opening up to foreign workers.

Reflecting on the needs of care recipients, **Weronika Kloc-Nowak** from Warsaw University said**: "**Receiving care in one's own home corresponds to the Polish cultural norms. Without the transformation of the organisation and financing of long-term care in the current system, live-in carers – treated as a cheaper alternative to institutional care – will be subject to irregular and precarious work conditions."

**Mr Rogalewski** summed up the meeting's conclusions in three main headings: regularisation, professionalisation and state support for live-in care work. These echoed the conclusions reached at the EESC's previous country visits to the UK, Germany and Italy, which were part of its ongoing consultation procedure on live-in care work in the EU.

The aim of these visits was to put under the spotlight not just the precarious situation of these workers in Europe's labour markets, but also the many uncertainties faced by care recipients, who often recruit carers through informal networks or the internet.

**Mr Rogalewski** concluded by announcing that the next roundtable would be held in Sweden in September and the final conference, at which the results would be published, in Brussels in December.

**BACKGROUND**:

The EESC opinion adopted in 2016 presented eight recommendations for Member States and 12 recommendations for EU legislators to improve the overall capacity of the sector to create quality jobs and deliver quality care. They include implementing processes for recognising qualifications and experience acquired by live-in care workers, improving the way they are posted and incorporating their rights into the European semester. A rigorous application of the Victims' Rights Directive in cases where workers are victims of exploitation, and the improvement of safeguards in the Employers' Sanctions Directive to protect labour rights of undocumented workers should also be high on the agenda. It is also necessary to collect adequate data on live-in care workers and carry out research into their working and living conditions.

The findings of the EESC country visits will be presented in a report which will be published later in 2018.

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/if-we-wish-meet-our-growing-demands-live-care-we-must-recognise-rights-care-workers>

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/europe-needs-proactive-policy-long-term-care-sector>

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/live-carers-face-precarious-conditions-despite-shortage-care-workers-eu-labour-market>

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/eesc-shines-spotlight-vital-role-live-carers>

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