

"Italy's alternative to nursing homes: Ukrainian caregivers"

Byline: David Berretta Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

Date: 03/15/2007

PERUGIA, ITALY - Each Saturday, as vendors at this city's biggest open market clear out their stalls to head home, dozens of middle-aged women, too blond to be Italian, do their own kind of packing up.

Out in the dusty parking lot, the women load slightly outdated clothes, cellphones, linens, and appliances into white vans. Tucked in with letters and packets of money, the goods are destined for the families in Ukraine these women have left behind. It's a voluntary exile that is driven by economic need at home – and a host country desperate for their skills as live-in companions for the elderly.

An average life expectancy close to 80 years has left many families struggling with how to care for aging parents while keeping up with two careers. Wary of retirement homes, Italians have embraced the Ukrainians with gusto as an answer to a shortage of in-home caregivers, a professional role snubbed by many.

Over the past five years, the migrants, attracted by Italian wages, have filled the gap, bringing economic benefits to both their home and host countries.

"Italy has created this demand, and it has invented this solution," says Alessandro Castegnaro, statistics professor at the University of Padua and one of the few scholars to have given academic attention to what he calls a "hidden revolution." He estimates that immigrant caregivers are saving the Italian economy around \$1 billion yearly.

"Without them, the national health system would edge towards collapse" Sergio Pasquinelli, a social researcher, told the newspaper La Repubblica last fall.

New deal on salaries, but illegals still work for less

With many immigrant caregivers believed to be working or residing in Italy illegally, estimates of their numbers range broadly, from 600,000 to 1 million.

Depending on whether they work in the south or in the wealthier north, most caregivers make between \$750 and \$900 a month.

Only over the last few years have Italy's powerful labor unions taken interest in this professional category, attempting to protect workers in it from the long hours and low wages many employers impose on needy immigrants.

A recent deal on caregiving contracts brokered with the federation of domestic employers set the minimum monthly wage at \$715, the maximum number of weekly hours at 54, and paid vacations at 26 working days a year, according La Repubblica Metropoli, a weekly supplement aimed at immigrants that is published by one of Italy's largest circulating newspapers.

But many workers overlook the strict regulations in order to land a job.

"Clandestinity [living and working illegally] is caused not only by laws that complicate regularization, but also by Italian families' demand for low wages," says Professor Castegnaro.

Ukrainians 'work harder' and are more in demand

While caregivers come from a number of countries including Moldova, Romania, and Peru, the main caregiver exporter to Italy is Ukraine.

Ukraine's social volatility and a steadily rising inflation rate that touched 18 percent in 2005 – the legacy of a sudden transition from a state-controlled to a market economy – have pushed workers abroad in search of higher wages.

"Prices now are almost as high as in Italy; salaries are not," says Tatiana, who was a cook in northern Ukraine before coming to Perugia two years ago.

"Italy is good, we all like it. People are kinder," says Tatiana, whose 18-year-old son is still in Ukraine. She cannot go back until she receives her residence papers.

But some of the differences are less appealing: "Dogs and cats here are pampered more than children in Ukraine. Stores here will throw away food the day after the expiration date. In Ukraine they will leave it there for three, four months," observes Tatiana. "It hurts, for me to live and eat well, while my son does not."

Ukraine has seen incoming remittances increase by a factor of 18 in six years: from \$33 million in 2000 to \$595 million in 2005, according to the World Bank.

Over the same period, Italy's small Ukrainian immigrant community, once numbering a few thousand, has become the fourth-largest in Italy. Females make up more than 80 percent of residents – the highest gender disparity among foreign residents here.

"Our women go to Italy, our men to Portugal," agrees Alina, a smiling, short-haired woman from Kamianets-Podilskyi, 250 miles southwest of Kiev. Her Italian is brisk and lively, punctuated by "Madunnina mia," a typically Italian stock phrase that literally means "Oh my little Mary."

She sits down to talk with me with her cleaning gloves still on, after finishing her housecleaning duties at a family house where she had previously worked as a caregiver.

When asked why Ukrainians have developed a reputation being most reliable, she replies: "Ukrainian women like to work more."

Part of it might have to do with education. More than 30 percent of Ukrainians in Italy hold the equivalent of a bachelor's degree, and another third a high school degree.

"I was an accountant in a huge factory," says Alina, "but all of the sudden, my supervisor told me there was no diesel, no gas, no money,

no job. After a month, my children were growing, we needed the money, and there were no jobs. It was then that I heard that so many had gone to Italy to work."

A temporary stint, but still yearning for home

Most of the Ukrainian women here seem to view their time abroad as an investment, not a permanent relocation.

What makes this kind of temporary migration most convenient is the compatibility between the workers and the clients' needs regarding living arrangements. A nuisance for the few Italian caregivers still in the business – the necessity to live at home with the elderly – is a crucial advantage for immigrants, allowing them to bypass their two biggest expenses: food and rent.

The length of their time abroad varies: some stay only a few years; others, like Alina, plan to stay 10 years.

"It is a long time, especially now, with my little nephews of 4 and 7 months," she says. In the meantime, sending money and goods home brings some relief.

"I just bought a big suitcase," says Alina, "and filled it with presents, like a beautiful, warm jacket for my David, at 50-percent off."

By:

(c) Copyright 2007 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.