Organizing Domestic Workers in Italy: The Challenge of Gender, Class and Ethnicity

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Introduction

The employment of domestic workers has been a vexed question for feminists globally with writers such as Enloe (1989: 179) questioning whether the notion of a ‘feminist domestic employer’ was not in fact a contradiction. In contemporary Europe, the restructuring of the European welfare state (Cochrane 1993), combined with changing patterns of family organization within Europe, has encouraged both governments and individuals to consider domestic workers useful and necessary. The characteristics of paid domestic work in the southern European countries tend to validate Bakan and Stasiulis’s (1995: 303) assertion that: ‘the employment of domestic workers in private households is a crucial means through which asymmetrical race and class relations among women are structured’. Global examples relating to the US (Rollins 1985), Singapore (Tan and Devasahayan 1987), and Brazil (Pereira de Melo 1989) all indicate a problematic relationship between female employers and their domestic employees and the resurgence of domestic work in southern Europe is bringing these issues to the fore. Nakano Glenn’s argument (1992: 3) that ‘the racial division of reproductive labour . . . is a source of both hierarchy and interdependence among white women and women of colour’ is thus beginning to have increasing resonance for the southern European context.

Despite the existence of patchy state welfare provision in some of the southern European countries (Leibfried 1993), as well as a familiar-

References from the Internet

For further information about Bologna and national statistics, Società Multietnica: http://www2.comune.bologna.it/bologna/immigra/
For further information about immigration services in Florence, Ufficio Immigrati: www.comune.firenze.it/servizi_pubblici/stranieri/capitolo8.htm
For further information about north African women in Italy, Algeria e Maghreb: donneculturalecontrohttp://soalinux.comune.firenze.it/cooperativadonne/algeri.htm
For further information about prostitution and migrant women, Il traffico delle donne immigrate persfruttamento sessuale: http://www.isinet.it/PdD/num9/sommario.htm

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istic social structure, the issue of domestic work continues to be somewhat misleadingly conceptualized as a relationship between women—female employers and female employees. This in part reflects the fact that an easy correlation can be made between southern European women’s increased presence in the labour market (Vaiou 1995) and the employment of migrant women to replace them in the home. Women migrants to the southern European countries find themselves predominantly located in and restricted to the domestic work sector (Andall 1997; Escrivá 1997; Lazaridis in this volume). Italy is certainly no exception to this trend and the domestic work sector is now employing significant numbers of migrant women. Evidence of female single-sex migration to Italy for domestic work is prevalent in a range of migrant communities. Data for 1996 indicate that several communities were largely female—Filipino (67%); Cape Verde (85%); Somalians 66% (Caritas de Roma 1997)—and research documenting the characteristics of these groups have confirmed these women’s restriction to the domestic work sector (Korslepori 1991; Andall 1997; Chell 1997). Migrant domestic workers are concentrated in the major cities of Italy. In the early 1990s, Rome and Milan accounted for 48% of the total number of regularly employed domestic workers (ISMU 1996).

The existence of a national domestic workers’ association in Italy makes it a particularly interesting case to study. The ACLI-COLF was established in 1946, to organize domestic workers under Catholic rather than communist political influence. Its early history therefore needs to be understood in the context of the Cold War and the desire within the Catholic sphere to develop a counter perspective to communist and socialist goals in terms of labour relations. The association has since been significantly affected by social and political change in post-war Italy, notably the radicalization of the worker’s movement in the late 1960s and 1970s (Bedani 1995). When the ACLI-COLF was initially established, external migrants were not yet present in Italy and domestic workers came from the depressed regions and under-privileged classes of Italy. This meant that the association dealt principally with issues of class between Italian women. It would be at a later stage that the presence of migrant women would force the ACLI-COLF to consider the relationship between gender, class and ethnicity. None the less, ahead of any feminist group, the ACLI-COLF had begun to acknowledge the presence of migrant domestic workers in the early 1970s and my discussion of the organization will be used to gauge possibilities for a politics of coalition between Italian women and migrant women at both a personal and associational level. The funda-

tamental shifts that have taken place regarding both supply and demand within the domestic work sphere and the ACLI-COLF’s long relationship with the sector certainly warrants closer observation. The research for the chapter is based largely on primary documentation consulted in the ACLI-COLF’s national archives in Rome. This includes material produced at its national congresses, which have been held approximately every three to four years. The material sheds light on the structural constraints that first Italian women and then migrant women would encounter working within the sector. I shall be arguing that the ACLI-COLF’s change in ideological direction in the 1970s—from a clerical to a radical class approach—appeared particularly conducive to an integrative approach to migrant women. By the mid/late 1980s, however, the gradual adoption of a gender focus to interpret domestic work was unlikely to prove as beneficial to migrant women as the earlier class-based perspective had been.

Organizing Domestic Workers

From a global perspective, the domestic work sector is increasingly the target of specific pro-active government regulation. This is also evident in southern European countries. For example, while attempts have been made to limit or impede new entries of foreign migrants to Italy and Spain, these countries have simultaneously introduced policies to permit the continuing entry of foreign domestic workers (Andall 1997; Escrivá 1997). This type of government intervention can significantly affect the structural conditions of migrant women’s employment, allowing minimum scope for individual agency. Thus, in 1991 the Italian government provision that permitted new entries to Italy for domestic work enforced a live-in employment contract on migrant women. In countries like Singapore, work permits issued to foreign domestic workers are contingent on their fulfilling a contractual obligation not to get pregnant or marry Singaporeans (Yeoh and Huang 1999). These examples suggest that, as a migratory group, female migrant domestic workers are globally being perceived by governments to be a socially useful group even where the same governments are actively engaged in impeding other ‘less desirable’ migration. Moreover, in the Italian case, there is evidence to suggest that more flexible entry provisions for domestic work have been exploited by male migrants to gain legal entry and then transfer to alternative economic sectors.

Historically and globally, the domestic work sector has constituted a marginalized sector of employment and has proved notoriously
difficult to organize. This is partly a consequence of the highly personalized relationship between employer and employee but also because domestic work itself has frequently been categorized as a sector beyond ‘the boundaries of the productive working-class’ (Wrigley 1991: 323). The ACLI-COLF established itself in the Italian post-war period as the only body to occupy itself specifically with domestic workers. It is therefore an important, if not unique body, in the post-war European context.

The ACLI-COLF, like its parent structure the ACLI (Italian Christian Workers’ Association), based its practice on Catholic social teaching. This meant that it aimed to help workers formulate solutions to their problems based on the conciliation of capital and labour (Bedani 1995). As I have argued elsewhere (Andall 1997) this clerical perspective largely benefited the employers of domestic workers as working-class Italian domestic workers were encouraged to accept their exploitative working conditions. Indeed, they were not even encouraged to view their employment as work, but rather as an extension of their natural maternal roles. This perspective prevailed within the association until the early 1970s, when the effects of the social and political turmoil of the late 1960s began to be felt. This period culminated in the political division of the association, with the conservative, clerical group forming a new association, the API-COLF in 1971. The ACLI-COLF, on the other hand, changed its ideological direction and adopted a radical class-based analysis of the sector. None the less, despite the early moderate and clerical position of the ACLI-COLF, its very existence did ultimately contribute to a perception of domestic workers as workers and moreover led to structural improvements in the sector. For example, in 1953, the right to a thirteenth month addition to the annual wage was extended to domestic workers and in 1958, a more substantial legislative Act was introduced that attempted to regulate working conditions at the national level.

The ACLI-COLF’s central positioning within the domestic work sphere signified that it had an early awareness of class and ethnic stratification amongst women. Thus, here was an organization that experienced tangible proximity to notions of privilege, subordination and exploitation within the category of gender. This was at a time when the Italian women’s movement tended towards a marginalization of these differences through its validation of the concept of women’s commonality (Caldwell 1991). Although in the 1970s, the ACLI-COLF was primarily concerned with positioning itself within the trade-union movement, it did additionally seek to respond to the emergence of the Italian women’s movement. To some extent, the visible social profile of the feminist movement, which reached its political peak as a mass movement in the mid-late 1970s, forced the issue of class differences between women onto the ACLI-COLF’s agenda. Who would be its natural ally — working class workers (men and women) or (largely) middle class women? The following sub-section will explore the evolution of the association’s relationship with the women’s movement as a useful frame of reference for assessing shifts in interpretation as the presence of migrant women in the sector became more prominent.

Between Italian Women: The ACLI-COLF and the Women’s Movement

The prominence of the women’s movement in the 1970s with its early emphasis on the value of domestic work (unpaid) and the ACLI-COLF’s engagement with domestic workers (paid) might lead one to anticipate a natural relationship between these two spheres. However, it had been the Catholic (conservative) sector, and not the progressive sphere of women’s political activism, which had established and maintained a privileged relationship with domestic workers in the post-war period. Margherita Repetto, a prominent figure within the national women’s organization UDI, acknowledged this in her speech to the ninth ACLI-COLF national congress held in 1976: “The work carried out by the ACLI towards a sector like the domestic work sector is extremely significant . . . because it has bridged a gap left open by other social forces; and this is a reason for self-criticism for all of us, even for an Association like the UDI” (ACLI-COLF 1976: 7). Repetto did, however, argue that domestic workers should be incorporated into the wider battle regarding women’s situation and envisaged that there could be some co-operation between the two associations. The prospect of transforming domestic workers into ‘family assistants’ was interpreted as an important sign of female solidarity, necessary for improving women’s general situation.

By 1979, when the ACLI-COLF held its tenth national congress in Assisi, the social presence of the feminist movement was much stronger. This could be seen in the address given by the national secretary of the ACLI-COLF, Clorinda Turri. She felt that the association should prioritize committing itself as women and as women workers to connecting the specific problems of domestic work with the women’s liberation movement. Despite this objective, the nature of domestic work accentuated a problem implicit within the concept of female solidarity. This was aptly summarized by Turri:
what has become increasingly apparent in these years is that the domestic work relationship and the unjust conditions that it imposes on hundreds of thousands of women is not a sectoral or marginal problem; it can be seen increasingly as a phenomenon which is closely tied to a number of social processes; in particular as a consequence of the refusal, on the part of women, to continue to accept a sexual division of labour which confines the housewife... to do domestic work even when this represents a double work burden; however this legitimate instance of women's liberation is causing a new contradiction because domestic work... is being off-loaded onto other women who find themselves confined to a role of 'reserve housewife'... (ACLI-COLF 1979: 7).11

A very basic contradiction between different constituencies of women was thus registered. It is however crucial to note that in recognizing that both the workers' movement and the ACLI-COLF were calling for the development of social services to deal with the issue of reproductive care and domestic labour, Turri warned of the danger of seeing these services as simply beneficial to women. She argued that the tendency to do this was a direct consequence of men's refusal to engage in a transformation of gender roles and maintained that it was imperative for the workers' movement to engage with this issue as an integral component of its general strategy. I emphasize this point here, because, as will be argued below, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a gradual shift away from such a position. The notion of greater male participation with regard to domestic work was submerged and female solidarity was increasingly called upon to resolve the difficulties Italian women encountered in reconciling family and work roles. Such a shift in fact entailed a buttressing of the traditional division of labour within the home through the employment of one woman, normally supervised by the female employer, to execute domestic tasks. This situation did not therefore call into question the necessity for a transformation of men's roles but rather reinforced the notion of women's traditional responsibility for reproductive care.14

By 1979, although the importance of the women's liberation movement had been acknowledged, ACLI-COLF was nevertheless critical of its neglect of the domestic work sphere:

If we are placing at the centre of our strategy... our refusal to be 'reserve housewives' it is partly because we believe that the problem of domestic workers as women and of the contradiction that the domestic work relationship increasingly creates between women has not been properly addressed even by women's movements... Addressing this problem means placing at the centre of the debate on the woman question, the structural aspect of domestic work, of a different qualitative and organisa-

Furthermore, there was a forthright rejection of the domestic work sector functioning to facilitate gender privilege: 'our sector [knows] that the price of female emancipation for certain sectors of the middle class cannot be paid by other women who still endure material hardship' (Turri, ACLI-COLF 1979: 8). This perspective would inform the association's strategy in relation to the organization of the sector. Already, the debates of the 1973 and 1976 national congresses indicated that the association was keen to implement a radical transformation of both the working conditions of employees and the status conditions of employers. In particular, the association sought to overcome the private nature of the employer-employee relationship, envisaging a new figure of 'family collaborator' or 'family assistant'.15

The proposal was for such assistance to be organized as a social service rather than as a private one, with direct links to public bodies. In terms of the service users, the ACLI-COLF anticipated that these family assistants would be employed in response to social exclusion rather than social privilege. Thus 'family collaborators' would provide care in the community for groups such as the elderly, hospitalized and disabled people.16 The ACLI-COLF, therefore, was, unequivocally focused on improving conditions for working-class female domestic workers (and increasingly ethnic minority women) and in assisting marginalized families rather than privileged families. This was reflected in their new philosophy guiding the association's training courses for domestic workers. Domestic workers no longer be trained to graciously accept their subservient position in relation to the employer. As then national secretary, Pina Brustolin, had stated at the 1973 congress:

Everyone will understand how our approach to training and professionalism is quite different to the past where we prepared workers for bourgeois families, while today we are called to respond to the needs of working-class families.17

Nevertheless, support for the underlying ethos of the women's movement led to a belief that the relationship between the female employer and the female employee could be transformed:

let us here relaunch the proposal to re-establish... - amongst domestic workers and female employers open to this message -, that solidarity between women which is at the root of the feminist movement. Not in order to mystify, with a form of left-wing paternalism, the nature of the domestic work relationship, but to understand that it is the source of
common subjection and that together it is possible to take the initiative to change it, to overcome its current characteristics.

It is a proposal which we already put forward at the last congress but which has not had a concrete reply up until now. With the risk that amongst domestic workers ... feminism could be seen as an elite phenomenon, which is only relevant to women belonging to socially privileged classes (Turri, ACLI-COLF 1979: 9).

A number of the delegates however, were, if not explicitly critical of aspects of feminist ideology, certainly particularly sensitive to the issue of gender privilege and exploitation in the struggle for liberation from men. Carla Lazagna, a delegate from La Spezia, was overtly critical of the feminist movement:

the women's movement cannot grow on the backs of domestic workers. Behind every woman who is able to embark on a process of emancipation is a mother or a domestic worker. In other words, there is a woman who carries out the role of housewife. This means that the housewife role in our society is indispensable and this also explains why amongst domestic workers there is clear contempt for that feminism which constructs its liberation on the backs of other women black or white (ACLI-COLF 1979: 16).

Judging from the experiences articulated by women delegates during the national congresses throughout the 1970s it would have been difficult for the concept of sisterhood and female solidarity, as espoused by the Italian feminist movement in the 1970s, to be uncritically accepted by domestic workers. Many of the women who participated in these congresses were likely to be materially experiencing something quite antithetical to the concept of female solidarity in the private context of their employers' homes.

By the time of the 1982 ACLI-COLF congress, specific awareness of gender, as opposed to a reductive focus on class, had begun to affect the ACLI-COLF analyses. Nonetheless, the organization's intrinsic involvement in the domestic work sector meant that the question of exploitation between women remained a central and difficult contradiction which would constantly resurface. The views of Rosalba Dessi, a provincial delegate for Rome were indicative:

But we professional (or reserve) housewives who experience personally the contradiction of the double day, what should we say? ... When women, through employment, find the means to escape from the ghetto of the family in order to affirm themselves, they force the domestic workers who substitute them to pay for this emancipation. This is then the contradiction: women liberate themselves and 'other women'

The notion not only of privilege between women but also the exploitation of this privilege was therefore repeatedly articulated by activists within the association throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. A decade later a quite different picture had emerged. The overt recognition of exploitation between women in the 1970s may be attributable to the fact that during this period, it was the workers' movement rather than the feminist movement with whom the ACLI-COLF sought a closer relationship. This implied a vision of their disadvantage as workers rather than as women and indicated that they saw class differentials as the basis of their exploitation. Despite some attention to the issue of gender, class stratification continued to dominate their analyses in the 1970s. Their emphasis on class and their desire to form alignments with the workers' movement was problematic however, and the marginalization of domestic workers by the trade union bodies continued into the 1980s.

Between Italian Women and Migrant Women: the ACLI-COLF and Ethnicity

But what of the ACLI-COLF's relationship to ethnic minority women and hence to the position of subjects that were both racialized and gendered? In the 1970s, the ACLI-COLF evolved into an association with a clear class perspective, enabling it to see through the pious mystifications of its former conservative ideology and to focus on the structural dimensions of exploitation. For this reason, it is perhaps no accident that it was during the 1973 congress that the question of migrant domestic workers was raised for the first time. Consonant with the association's new class perspective, the presence and employment of migrant women was viewed essentially as a weapon of the employers to fracture working class mobilization and strength. As Pina Brustolin stated:

In terms of recruitment, we cannot help but be worried by the spread of the phenomenon of 'importing' coloured [sic] domestic workers which certainly represents an unscrupulous response from employers to their obligations, which today are a result of legislation and in the future will be guided by contractual duties. In fact many of these workers are employed without a regular work permit ... and therefore any obligation to pay insurance contributions is avoided. This is an obvious attempt to use these workers, available to work under any conditions, as a 'reserve army of labour', just when there is a more mature combative mood within the sector to take forward its battle for emancipation.
Ianniello Rosetta, a delegate from Rome, graphically described the nature and extent of the exploitation perpetrated against migrant domestic workers:

our comrades who come to our country to work are not protected in any way; they work like animals, they are treated like dirt and they earn just enough to survive… The problems of foreign female workers is a hot issue which affects all of us, and we must all take on board their difficulties and the obstacles that they encounter to carry out their work.21

Generally, it was recognized that the association had little knowledge of the true dimensions of the phenomenon of migrant domestic workers and the ACLI-COLF committed itself to a detailed national survey of the general conditions of domestic workers.22 On the whole, however, this lack of knowledge and the enormous changes that were occurring both within the ACLI-COLF and the workers’ movement meant that migrant women’s conditions would, in this period, remain largely peripheral to the practical and theoretical concerns of the association. In 1976, the question of ethnic minority women still appeared to be relatively marginal to the principal concerns of the association. As the theme of the ninth congress in 1976 indicated,23 the association remained centrally concerned with its relationship to the workers’ movement. Thus, at this stage, both gender and ethnicity were subordinated to issues of class. In her address to the 1976 congress, the national secretary Pina Brunolin did not include migrant women in her analysis and the concluding motion to the congress prioritized the renewal of the national contract. This is not, of course, to argue that migrant women were to be excluded from any gains made by the sector but rather to suggest that their specific positioning within the sector had yet to be properly addressed. By 1979 however, and probably as a consequence of the growing numbers of migrant women entering Italy and working as domestics, the ACLI-COLF began to adopt a more inclusive conceptual and practical approach towards migrant women. The new national secretary, Clorinda Turri, suggested that the presence of migrant women and the rejection of domestic work by Italian women constituted two important new processes within the sector. The employment of migrant women continued to be viewed as a means for employers to avoid the contractual gains achieved by Italian women workers. There was also an explicit acknowledgement of migrant women’s weaker position in comparison to Italian domestic workers – they were generally paid less, were frequently irregularly employed and worked longer hours. Their employers also appeared to have reverted to an out-moded formulation of the employer/employee relationship. According to Turri (ACLI-COLF 1979: 5):

[they are forced] into almost total subjection at the hands of private agencies and employers. A type of subjection which recreates real conditions of servitude which we thought we had overcome for ever in our country.

In the face of this, it was argued that a paternalistic attitude was not an appropriate response to migrant women’s situation but rather a ‘clear and militant solidarity’ was called for (ACLI-COLF 1979: 5). Turri suggested that the association should liaise with the organizations of migrant workers. Underpinning her calls for solidarity with migrant women was an understanding of a common exploitation based on class. Turri expressed some concern that the economic crisis of the 1970s had led to more Italian women offering their labour as domestic workers. It was felt that this might lead to a ‘war amongst the poor’ between Italian and migrant domestic workers.

In some ways, this latter consideration marked the beginning of a flawed interpretation of migrant women’s positioning within the domestic work sector. It assumed a similarity of structural conditions dictating Italian women’s and migrant women’s participation in the sector. Such an interpretation in fact diminished evidence of a racialized structural segmentation within the sector, where migrant women would work only as live-in workers and Italian women were beginning to work principally on an hourly paid basis. This structural differentiation had in fact already been observed by Turri at the 1979 congress.24

Reference to a war among the poor implied a similarity of circumstances that did not in fact exist. Certainly, some competition might have existed with the older live-in Italian workers. However, judging by the ease with which migrant women could find alternative employing families (Andal 1999) it seemed that, during the 1970s, the demand for live-in workers began to outstrip the supply. Migrant women, however, appeared to be sensitive to the accusation that they were taking jobs away from Italian women. In her address to the national congress in 1979, Brito Tiago, a representative of the Cape Verdean association in Italy, emphasized both that Cape Verdians did not want to compete with Italian workers and also presented the Cape Verdean presence as a temporary one.25

By the end of the 1970s, the ACLI-COLF had begun to interpret the increased demand for domestic workers as a replacement for the housewives. The employment of a domestic worker was seen as
a functional solution to the rigidity of working hours in Italy, the lack of free time and the poor quality of social services. Issues of ethnicity, gender and class were all considered relevant to the domestic work situation. This could clearly be seen in the association’s identification of groups with which it should establish alliances – female migrant workers, women’s movements and marginalized workers. With regard to female migrants it was stated:

We must get used to considering domestic workers from other countries as an integral part of our sector. Not only, we must also not forget that our choice to be part of the workers’ movement obliges us to a fraternal solidarity with workers and exploited peoples all over the world (Turri, ACLI-COLF 1979: 14).

In contrast to migrant women’s absence in the concluding motion of the 1976 congress, in 1979, the concluding motion recognized the grievances presented by migrant delegates at the congress and aimed to publicize and respond to them. Throughout the 1980s increasing attention was given to the issue of migrant workers. At the 1982 congress a number of the interventions referred to the general situation of migrant domestic workers and delegations of migrant workers participated in the national congresses. Concern continued to be expressed by Italian activists over whether the recently acquired gains of the sector would be undermined by the presence of migrant workers. As one of the members of the national executive argued:

employers prefer migrant domestic workers precisely because they can pay them less, speculating on their dramatic situation and on their disinformation with respect to rights which should be guaranteed within the employment relationship.

In her introductory speech to the congress, Clorinda Turri, still acting as national secretary, argued that it was important to formulate legislation that was inclusive of the specific situation of migrant domestic workers to counter their exploitation by employers. This position in fact encouraged the ACLI-COLF to support wider state legislation to regulate the position of migrant workers in general. The association’s approach was thus unequivocally inclusive of migrant workers, dictated by the value of class unity: ‘We need to break the natural hold of the bosses by uniting the sector and overcoming the temptation for opposition between the two groups’ (Turri ACLI-COLF 1982: 7). To this end there was strong support for legislative gains within the domestic work sector to be applicable to migrant domestic workers and the association argued for the inclusion of explicit reference to migrant women in the collectively bargained national contracts.

By the early 1980s then, the question of ethnicity with regard to the domestic work sector had unquestionably entered the vocabulary of the ACLI-COLF. This attention would increase in intensity as the issue of immigration attracted sustained consideration at the wider national level. This can clearly be seen in the proceedings of the 1985 ACLI-COLF conference, which occurred a year before the promulgation of law 943, the first comprehensive piece of government legislation on immigration. During this congress, a special round-table discussion was held on the question of migrant domestic workers. It should be noted that this did not signify that the issue of migrant domestic workers was subsequently excluded from the rest of the proceedings. In fact, a number of migrant representatives spoke during the main proceedings and Italian delegates continued to make reference to the situation of migrant domestic workers in their speeches. It was the round-table discussion, however, which provided the forum in which the ACLI-COLF could spell out its position regarding female migrant domestic workers. The opening speech by Clorinda Turri (now deputy national secretary) indicated that the condition of migrant domestic workers was seen to be closely intertwined with their general situation as migrants. This seemed to imply that although class location was seen as fundamental, ethnicity and a migrant status were privileged over gender as causes of disadvantage. It was for this reason that the ACLI-COLF called for the implementation of appropriate national legislation governing migrants as a whole. The association reiterated its opposition to special employment norms for migrant domestic workers as it was felt that these would be abused by employers hoping to find docility in their overseas domestic workers. The ACLI-COLF perspective to some extent emulated the Christian solidarity position of its parenting structure, the ACLI. Aldo De Matteo, for example, then vice president of the ACLI, unequivocally stated: ‘foreign workers . . . are not stealing jobs, but are pioneers. They have accepted heavy jobs, often rejected by Italians and it is unfair to accuse them of competing when this is not the case’ (ACLI-COLF 1985a: 56).

Given that in the 1970s and early 1980s migrant women were employed almost exclusively as live-in domestic workers, it would have been virtually impossible for an association such as the ACLI-COLF to ignore their presence. This proximity meant that the ACLI-COLF pre-empted both national government and the more progressive arena of women’s politics in responding to the specific situation of migrant women. It would ultimately adopt an inclusive stance, paying sustained attention to migrant women’s specific difficulties at its national congresses. Exclusiveness in itself would not necessarily improve their
greater willingness on the part of the employer to delegate rather than to supervise, thus permitting the possibility of autonomous management for the domestic worker. She did attempt to interpret the new demand for live-in work but failed to fully engage with the racialized dimension of the new labour supply. In her analysis, demand was attributable to a series of factors. These included the insufficient number of nursery places, the limited number of schools operating an extended day and the increase in the number of pensioners who frequently require company as well as assistance. She maintained that women often had no option but to use private organizations or live-in domestic workers as strategies to facilitate family life. Livraghi’s (1992) contribution replicated some of these ideas, as she too focused on how the transformation of Italian families had led to a new plurality of service demands. Marina Piazza (1992) similarly sought to highlight the Italian employers’ perspective by stressing the multiple pressures inherent in their ‘double presence’ (in the home and at work) and the rigidity of city times which caused specific difficulties for women. Di Nicola’s (1994) article centred on analysing the reasons for Italian women’s postponement of maternity. In her view, for Italian women to combine motherhood with both paid employment and a social life, they must have support from parents, in-laws, other relatives or ‘be able to afford the luxury of a domestic worker who today represents the last hope not only for bourgeois families, but for all those middle-class families who have specific caring needs’ (Di Nicola 1994: 176).

As I have demonstrated above, in the 1970s, the ACLI-COLF explicitly recognized the contradiction of women exploiting other women for reproductive work. In the early 1990s, none of the contributors sought to explore this. Alemani (1992) touched on this issue, maintaining that one of the fundamental contradictions that women’s movements have consistently been unable to resolve is that of women achieving their liberation/emancipation through the sacrifices of other women. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the ACLI-COLF had acknowledged that ethnicity or a migrant status had caused greater and specific disadvantage for migrant women, but by the 1990s this perspective had quietly faded from view. The series of commissioned articles in the early 1990s focused on the female (Italian) employer and this prohibited the development of any framework that could accommodate the complexity of women’s interaction within this relationship. By emphasizing the difficulties that Italian women encountered in reconciling their family and work roles, these articles served only to validate Italian women’s increasing propensity to employ domestic workers.
This new ACLI-COLF interpretative model can be situated within Romero's (1992) typology of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. Her description of employers in the north American context identified several categories but it is the Common Victim proposition that best accommodates the ACLI-COLF perspective. The Common Victim view maintains that the sexist structuring of society signifies that whilst professional women have to compete in a man's world, it is still assumed that they will take responsibility for housework and childcare. The female employer thus views herself as no less a victim than the domestic worker. One problem with this typology is that it replicates the notion that it is other women (often privileged by class and ethnicity) who gain from the work of domestics. This occurs because the work executed by the paid domestic worker is assumed to be the work of the wife/mother, thus it is she, and not other members of the family, who is expected to supervise the fulfilment of household tasks. These patriarchal assumptions do not, however, mean that women can totally distance themselves from their own responsibility within the employment relationship. As Romero (1992: 169) has argued:

Feminist analysis should consider not only the privilege and benefits that husbands obtain at the expense of their wives but also those that one group of women obtain at the expense of another. Certainly, as employees, professional women are sometimes victims of sexism, but they still make decisions that ultimately result in shifting the burden of sexism. Hiring household workers to take the place of wives or mothers maintains male privilege at home.

The propensity to conceptualize the issue of domestic service in terms of the Common Victim proposition has a repressive function in that it diminishes the weaker position of the (migrant) domestic worker. In other words, the Common Victim perspective somehow fails to encapsulate the extent of the power disparity inscribed within this relationship.

It would seem that the ACLI-COLF gradually began to assimilate and promote this notion in the mid 1980s and this was likely to have consequences for its conceptual and strategical development in the future. A clear example of this can be found in the Charter of Responsibilities and Rights drawn up for domestic workers for the occasion of its twelfth national congress in the mid 1980s. Here, the Common Victim syndrome is explicitly acknowledged:

We suffer particularly as a result of the contradiction that is created in the relationship between women; many of them can improve their own quality of life and minimise the discrimination that affects them in the current division of roles in society by utilising our work to free themselves from domestic work. We domestic workers, on the other hand, cannot use for ourselves or for our families the services which we offer to other women (ACLI-COLF 1985b: 2/3).

Nevertheless, and quite significantly I would argue, one finds contained within the section outlining the responsibilities of a domestic worker, approval for the domestic worker to view her relationship with her female employer as an act of solidarity between women:

The domestic worker, as a woman, sees the importance of valorising the fact that she is in an employment relationship with other women, whether they are traditional employers of domestic workers or women who use a home-help service. The domestic worker feels, as a woman and as a female worker, that this relationship between women must be solid for a journey of personal liberation and to promote a common battle for social services which all women can use (ACLI-COLF 1985b: 2/3).

This document does note the contradiction ‘between women’ in its preamble, however, the onus of sacrifice and solidarity is placed on the disadvantaged domestic worker. It is she who must make sacrifices in order to promote a battle that will ultimately be beneficial for all women. Notably absent from the section dealing with the domestic workers’ rights is any suggestion that female employers should also make sacrifices as a contribution to women’s struggle, let alone encourage their male partners to make some.

This mode of analysis had begun to prevail by the late 1980s and was readily applied to the specific situation of migrant women. The acceptance of Italian women’s need for female migrant labour to perform a live-in function and the concurrent emphasis on the perceived advantages of this for migrant women were used to validate this perspective (interview, ACLI-COLF). The position adopted by the association suggests that ascribing a victim label to domestic workers may have been applicable when employers emanated essentially from the upper classes, but the emergence of employers from within middle income categories has tended to invalidate this notion, conferring instead a Common Victim status on both service user and provider. As Sacconi (1984: 40-1) has written in relation to this structural change in the background of the employers of domestic workers: ‘far from being a luxury ... it is becoming a real necessity in all those families with young children or elderly members’.
By the early 1990s, the drift towards a narrow gender analysis was consolidated and used to interpret the findings of a major survey of domestic workers undertaken by the ACLI-COLF in the early 1990s.37

the hypothesis which informs our work is that the tensions [and] imbalances ... which we find in the domestic workers' conditions are to be found in the tensions and imbalances which characterise women's condition ... the conditions of the domestic worker then as a mirror of women's condition ... (IREF/ACLI-COLF 1994:9).

Although the ACLI-COLF argued that the presence of migrant women as domestic workers constituted the most important new feature within the sector and acknowledged that their insertion into the live-in sphere had exacerbated their working conditions, its over-riding perspective stressed the useful reconciliation of migrant women's needs and Italian women's needs: 'The type of supply that the migrant domestic worker is prepared to offer reconciles itself well with the needs exhibited by a part of the service users' (IREF/ACLI-COLF 1994:11). Thus, the perceived advantages of live-in domestic work for migrant women (provision of accommodation, food, greater savings potential and therefore the possibility of larger remittances) have been used by the organization to present migrant women's location within the live-in sphere as a preferred choice. Evidence from different national and historical contexts indicates that domestic workers will abandon live-in work for day work or other employment sectors as soon as this becomes available.38

The analysis used to account for the fact that Italian women have largely rejected employment as live-in workers, confirms that a reductive gender focus is not sufficient to understand migrant women's and Italian women's position:

Italian domestic workers prefer to be employed on an hourly paid basis rather than on a live-in basis as this would mean them having to give up an autonomous life-style or the impossibility of looking after their own nuclear family (IREF/ACLI-COLF 1994:13).

Remarkably, the pertinence of this statement for migrant women is totally overlooked. The ACLI-COLF additionally asserted that young (Italian) women avoid the domestic work sphere because they view it as anachronistic in view of women's changed circumstances (AAv 1994:42). Again, there is no indication that such a view might be equally pertinent to many of the young and professional migrant women who cannot exercise such a choice. This view may be conditioned by what Morokvasic (1991) refers to as pervasive ethnocentric assumptions about migrant women's backwardness. In other words, their conditions in Italy are acceptable given that it is assumed that they are not only an improvement on conditions in their country of origin, but also provide escape from oppressive cultural traditions. To this end, the ACLI-COLF failed to engage with the reasons why migrant women work as live-in domestics, and in so doing evaded the issue of ethnicity within the sector. This omission was determined by a paternalistic approach to migrant women which focused on the advantages of live-in work for migrant workers and perceived the disadvantages as being largely related to problems of the sector as opposed to their structural location as female migrants confined to a specific area of the economy. In this way, the severe social consequences of live-in work for migrant women could be marginalized. This perspective is also being used to privilege the gendered ethnicity of Italian women against that of migrant women. The importance of Italian women's family role was explicitly acknowledged as a valid reason for their repudiation of live-in work. The family role of migrant women, on the other hand, was entirely overlooked. This conceptual omission suggested that although the association had ostensibly adopted an inclusive approach to migrant women, in reality it continued to be principally concerned with representing the interests of Italian women, not only as domestic workers but increasingly as employers of domestic workers.

The foregrounding of gender for the analysis of the IREF/ACLI-COLF study can thus be said to have led to some debatable conclusions. One of the questions included in the survey regarded the relationship between female employers and their employees. This was used to assess the extent to which gender could constitute an element of cohesion between women. The results indicated that a greater degree of familiarity was apparent between women within the employer/employee relationship.39 This led to a very positive assessment of the potential for increased collaboration between women. By the 1990s then, the belief that the relationship between female employer and female employee was no longer conflictual led to an apparent resolution of the old and familiar dilemma regarding privileged women's exploitation of disadvantaged women. The new position was decidedly different from that described above with reference to the 1970s:

Is the affirmation still valid that the emancipation of women necessarily negates the same emancipation of other women forced into a domestic role? The responses relating to this seem to indicate that this antagonistic vision has been overcome and is allowing space for comparison and dialogue from which a new relationship between women can develop (IREF/ACLI-COLF 1994:14).
Indeed, even the presence of migrant men in the sector was promoted as a positive:

It is indicative... that male [migrants]... are willing to carry out tasks which have typically been assigned to women and that families are accepting men to fulfil certain tasks. A step forward perhaps for a different and more equal redistribution of reproductive care work within the family...? (IREF/ACLI-COLF 1994: 13)

It is I think extremely pertinent that migrant men, are here lauded for standing at the vanguard of a transformation of gender role stratification within Italy. At the same time, an unspoken compliance with Italian men's reluctance to participate in this transformation is evident in the apparent acceptability of hiring other women to do domestic labour.

The unmistakable prominence of gender and the value attributed to the domestic work relationship between women has had important implications for the nature of migrant women's inclusion into the ACLI-COLF's analysis. Privileging migrant women's gender over their ethnicity has functioned to obscure the ongoing racialization process within the sector, leading to false assumptions regarding women's solidarity. Indeed, this focus on solidarity, while not totally negating the existence of exploitative relationships, has effectively marginalized themes of exploitation. A number of hypotheses could be put forward to explain the ACLI-COLF's gradual change of emphasis. Firstly, there had been changes in the political climate. The progressive collective action of the 1970s had led to a retreat into private life in the 1980s, culminating in more moderate forms of activism and analysis. Secondly, there had been some improvement in domestic workers' situation via the collectively bargained national contracts. Thirdly, the ACLI-COLF's most recent survey had indicated an improved relationship between employer and employee. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, is the relevance of the structural change in the status of employers. The blatant class exploitation between upper-class leisured female employers and working-class women had become much less apparent in Italy. Now middle-class women, with new aspirations and roles, were seen to have a functional need rather than a superfluous desire for domestic workers. This undoubtedly contributed to the new focus on gender. Nevertheless, the marginalization of ethnicity by the ACLI-COLF meant that Italian women's needs, both as employers and domestic workers were implicitly seen as more important than those of migrant women.

Conclusion

The continued demand for live-in workers by Italian families has accentuated the unresolved tension between productive and reproductive care in Italy. This has led to the co-existence of a flexible hourly paid domestic work sphere (dominated by Italian women) and the persistent rigidity of the live-in sphere (dominated by migrant women). This duality within the sector suggests that migrant women's situation cannot simply be explained by reference to gender stratification alone. Rather, attention must also be paid to their migrant status and the rigid structural constraints of live-in work. Recent trends within the ACLI-COLF indicate a privileging of Italian women's gendered ethnicity as middle-class employers and as (largely) hourly paid working-class domestic employees. In relation to migrant women, this has contributed to what Frankenberg, in her study into the social construction of whiteness, describes as power evasion:

Power evasion involves a selective attention to difference, allowing into conscious scrutiny... those differences that make the speaker feel good but continuing to evade by means of partial description, euphemism, and self-contradiction those that make the speaker feel bad (Frankenberg 1993: 156–7).

Once the ACLI-COLF had left behind its clerical response to the domestic work sector and moved on to a class and gendered interpretation, it was able to explicitly articulate those factors responsible for domestic workers' subordination. More recently, however, it has been loath to explicitly verbalize the manner in which a migrant status functions to subordinate ethnic minority women within the domestic work sphere. At its fourteenth congress in 1994, it did recognize migrant women's need for more political space and autonomous representation within the association and also pledged to support them in their need for housing (ACLI-COLF 1994). Generally, however, the 1990s saw a shift towards the acceptance of the utility for Italian female employers to have access to live-in domestic workers, seeming to typify Frankenberg's concept of power evasion. This could equally be observed when the ACLI-COLF asserted Italian domestic workers' preference for hourly paid work to facilitate their family roles but failed to fully investigate the implications of live-in work for the family life of migrant women. The ACLI-COLF's focus on women as a disadvantaged group not only avoids acknowledging the weaker position of migrant domestic workers but it equally masks class differences between Italian women by validating the choices of those middle-class families who
are financially able to employ live-in domestic workers, without engaging in a corresponding discussion of working-class women’s inability to do so. Interestingly, then, it would seem that the potential for an inclusivity that acknowledged the specific structural location of migrant women was more prevalent in the 1970s than in the 1990s. In the 1970s, there was no attempt to fuse the interests of middle/upper class women with those of working class women. Rather the exploitation seen to be inherent within the domestic work relationship was something to be challenged and, indeed, radically altered. By the 1990s such a fusion of interests had become an integral component of the ACLI-COLF’s strategy and it is precisely the attractiveness of interpreting migrant women’s presence in the live-in sphere as a straightforward and useful reconciliation of supply and demand that in fact suggests that the contradiction at the basis of the domestic work relationship remains unresolved.

Notes

1. It was initially known as the Domestic Workers group (GAD) within the ACLI (Italian Christian Workers’ Association). The ACLI was established in 1944 as an association for workers aiming to promote Christian values. COLF is an abbreviated form of collaboratrice familiare, ‘family collaborator’.
2. For more discussion on this period see Duggan and Wagstaff (1995).
3. See Yeoh and Huang (1999) for an example of this.
5. In 1992 for example, male migrants constituted 61 per cent of domestic workers in Sicily (see ISMU 1996).
6. For a more detailed analysis of the ACLI-COLF’s pre-1971 position, see Andali (1997).
8. Professional Association of Italian Family Collaborators.
9. Union of Italian Women. This organization was composed principally of communist and socialist women activists and was originally closely tied to the Italian Communist Party.
10. The UDI’s participation in this congress was indicative of the new left-leaning direction of the ACLI-COLF.
11. All translations from original Italian sources are my own.
12. This is an abbreviated reference as the congress proceedings were published in a special addition of Acli-Oggi, the ACLI’s periodical.
13. This is an abbreviated reference as congress proceedings were reproduced in a special issue of Acli-Oggi.
14. Vaiou (1995: 43), in her study of southern European women has confirmed that ‘male identities in the south do not include in their definition caring and domestic labour’.
15. The new appellation to refer to domestic workers had been introduced by the ACLI-COLF during its fifth national congress held in 1961. It was used to reflect the professionalism of the sector and also as a means of acknowledging domestic workers’ contribution to family life.
16. The national secretary of the UDI, Costanza Fanelli, saw cooperatives as the way forward in overcoming the individual work relationship of the domestic worker. See her intervention at the 1979 national congress (ACLI-COLF 1979).
18. See also the interventions of Bianca Buri from Milan and the trade-union representative Gianna Bitto on this point at the 1979 congress.
19. This delegate would become the national secretary by the time of the 1985 congress, at which time she called for greater links with the women’s movement. See ACLI-COLF 1985a: 19.
22. In the event, they were excluded from the survey carried out in 1974. It was in fact the conservative API-COLF that first investigated the conditions of migrant domestic workers in a 1976 survey. These findings were eventually published in book form in 1979 by Father Erminio Crippa, an influential figure within the pre-1971 ACLI-COLF. See Crippa (1979).
23. The theme was ‘Domestic Workers in the workers movement for the development of social services for a new life-style model’.
24. This structural differentiation had in fact already been observed by Turri at the 1979 congress. See (ACLI-COLF 1979: 5).
25. See her intervention in (ACLI-COLF 1979: 16).
26. Even the contributions by the representatives of the main political parties referred to the question of migrant workers. See interventions by the Christian Democrat member of parliament Giuseppe Costamagna and that of Mariangela Rosolen, a member of the Italian Communist Party’s national women’s committee (ACLI-COLF 1982).
27. This in itself was significant as it suggested that the ACLI-COLF did attempt to integrate migrant women into its organizational structures at an early stage.
29. See interventions by Yeshi Habits, the Filipino representative Corazon Sim, and an Eritrean representative Ali Moussa.
30. The discussion was entitled ‘Le colf immigrate in Italia: linee d’impegno dell’associazionismo’.

31. In fact the congress sent a telegram to the Home Secretary regarding the urgency of an immigration law and asked to hold a meeting with him to present the specific case of domestic workers. The original telegram is reproduced in the proceedings of the 1985 ACLI-COLF congress.

32. These were published in 1992 and 1993 in a journal, Quaderni di Azione Sociale, a debating forum for Italian associationism. Claudia Alemani, an ACLI-COLF representative, opened and closed the debate with two articles entitled: ‘Le colf: un’identità molteplice tra persistenza e mutamento’ and ‘Le colf: eblema del feminilume’. The intervening articles consisted of Marina Plaza: ‘Le implicazioni attuali del concetto di doppia presenza’; Renata Livraghi: ‘Le famiglie e la produzione di servizi’; Giulia Paola Di Nicola: ‘Le sfide sociali della maternità’. Some of these articles were reproduced in the ACLI series ‘Transizioni’ in 1994 in a publication reporting the results of a survey into the conditions of domestic workers. See AA (1994).

33. This article was also originally published in Quaderni di Azione Sociale but references here are to the reproduction of this article in AA (1994).

34. Jacklyn Cock (1980) presented a similar thesis regarding the situation of Black domestic workers and their employers in South Africa, which she describes as a politics of mutual dependence.

35. See also Ramazanoglu (1989) on this point.

36. The interview was carried out with an ACLI-COLF representative in 1993.

37. The interpretative framework adopted for the survey was established during the course of a seminar organized by the ACLI-COLF and IREF in Rome in February 1991. The research took place between 1991 and 1993. This survey currently constitutes the largest and most up-to-date national survey of the domestic work sector. It was based on interviews with 717 domestic workers, 92.7 per cent of whom were women and 34 per cent of whom were migrants.

38. See De Grazia (1992) on Italian women in the inter-war period.

39. 36.5 per cent of workers considered their relationship with their employers to be ‘friendly’, with a slightly lower figure for migrant women (32.8 per cent) and a higher figure for Italian women (38.5 per cent).

40. This view was reiterated by the national secretary Maria Solinas in her speech to the 1994 congress. See ACLI-COLF, Le Colf tra nuovi modelli familiari e crisi dello stato sociale, XIV Assemblea Nazionale ACLI-COLF, Roma, 24–26 febbraio 1994.

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