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Caring for the elderly in the family and in the nation?

Anti-immigration politics and migrant care labour in the Northern league (Italy)

Abstract

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This paper aims at connecting two scholarly debates which developed separately: studies of the populist radical right, and of the international division of reproductive labour. Migrant care labour (MCL) is a strategic site for addressing the relationship between anti-immigration politics and the gendered division of work in Italy: through the prism of MCL, the paper discusses the gendered dimensions of the NL ideology, propaganda, politics and activism and the discrepancies between them.

First, the gap between the NL rhetoric on elderly care as a ‘labour of love’, and its action while in political office during the 2008-2011 Berlusconi government is discussed. In a country characterised by a familistic Welfare regime, the NL strict anti-immigration agenda gave way to positive policies towards MCL, consenting to massive regularisations of these (female) ‘useful’ and ‘deserving’ migrants. While the party ideology celebrates native women as unpaid elderly care providers in the family, in practice it implemented policies whereby racialised women are called to take on these care chores. Interviews with party representatives and a qualitative content analysis of the NL newspaper articles are used to explore how the NL attempted to handle this ambivalence through propaganda.

Second, interviews with female NL activists are used to show how they negotiate the party rhetoric and its politics on immigration and the family. Care work, celebrated by the party as a feminine mission for the prosperity of the nation, provides them with a valued role. At the

same time, women struggle to combine domestic responsibilities with their job and activism. A model alternative to both the NL politics and rhetoric lies at the heart of the activists' practices, whereby care work should be no longer carried out by migrant women, neither confined to the private sphere.