

*New Scholars*

**THE PRIVATE HOME AS A PUBLIC WORKPLACE:  
EMPLOYING PAID DOMESTIC LABOR**

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**ABSTRACT**

Through an analysis of 30 qualitative interviews with white women who employ domestic workers, this research explores the way they negotiate their roles and responsibilities as employers. Paid domestic work relationships challenge the dichotomy between public and private spaces and transform women's traditional work within the family into wage labor. Overall, employers had a difficult time assuming employer positions, evidenced by their lack of direct and straightforward communication and supervision strategies. Many also emphasized the personal or emotional aspects of the work, likening the role of domestic workers to that of homemakers, reinforcing the gendered division of this labor. Furthermore, the article considers the impact of all this on the working conditions of domestics and possible strategies to change the exploitive conditions of this type of labor.

The rapid increase in middle-class women entering the workforce in recent decades (Anderson, 2001), coupled with growing income inequality (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001), has caused an increase in the demand for paid household labor. In 2005, just over 59% of women were in the labor force, and since 1975, the number of working women with children under the age of 18 has increased from 47% to 71% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). While it is clear that some women

have long worked in wage labor (often not having the class privilege of not having to work), recent decades have revealed a large influx of class-privileged women into the white-collar and professional sectors. This movement of upper- and middle-class women into the workforce creates a demand for others to take on caring labor in the home (Hochschild, 2003b; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

Paid domestic work is uniquely situated labor. Because it takes place in private homes and is usually associated with women and unpaid labor, it is often treated as a labor of love rather than “real work” and is thus devoid of many legal protections that traditional employment offers. Although both minimum wage laws and Social Security laws have been extended to cover most domestic work positions, many employers do not meet these standards. Instead, domestic work positions are often negotiated within the informal labor market, regulated by community norms and values (Romero, 2002). Most employers and employees remain unaware of the legal regulations governing domestic work, most obviously because there has been no substantial effort by the government or media outlets to inform domestic workers or employers about these regulations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

Given this tension, it is especially important to understand the ways in which employers take on employer roles and responsibilities and negotiate these through the structure of paid domestic labor and through interactions with domestic workers. The present article explores this issue, asking how white middle/upper-class women who employ domestic workers negotiate their roles as employers and handle the management of paid domestic work. As the article illustrates, many employers have difficulty handling the negotiation of private and public boundaries and invoke various strategies to avoid conceptualizing themselves as employers (and likewise their homes as workplaces), which in turn negates workers’ rights and exacerbates their already precarious position in the informal labor market.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Theorizing a feminist analysis of paid domestic work is a complex task. It requires the simultaneous or intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, nationhood, citizenship, and sexuality, in addition to a structural critique of how patriarchy and capitalism facilitate the subordination of women and reinforce exploitative relationships between women. Many high status and well-paid professions have been structured on the basis of the sexist and heterosexist assumption that one who holds a position in these professions has a wife at home. “Most careers are still based on the well-known (male) pattern: doing professional work, competing with fellow professionals, getting credit for work, building a reputation, doing it while you are young, hoarding scarce time, and minimizing family work by finding someone else to do it” (Hochschild, 2003b: 20). As women have entered these professions at higher rates, little has been done to change the structure of occupations in order to make them more inclusive. This high status labor

participation is one of the most instrumental forces in facilitating the need for paid domestic labor. The long days necessary for fast track jobs and for moving ahead in the workplace limit the time women have to perform household duties, duties that continue to be considered women's work. Many women are forced/privileged to hire someone to help them perform such duties.

For some married women, hiring domestic workers is preceded by a struggle to change the gender division of labor in their home; however, for others the work that domestic workers perform is unproblematically considered "women's work" (Mattingly, 2001: 375). Studies consistently document men and women's unequal division of household labor, with women continuing to perform about 70% of family housework (Coltrane, 2001; Kroska 2004; Walker, 1999); however, there are various explanations for why these inequities persist. Scholars have advanced theories regarding the partner's gender ideologies, time, and resources to explain these unequal contributions; however, even when controlling for these variables, gender still remains a powerful determinant of who performs household labor (Kroska, 2004).

In addition to alleviating some of this second shift labor, employing a domestic worker gives middle-class women free time to spend on leisure activities or to devote to their children and families (Meagher, 1997), enabling them to give "moral/spiritual support to the family while freeing them from servitude" (Anderson, 2001: 27). Although in some cases men and children contribute to household work, often, paid domestic work supplements and replaces women's unpaid labor in the home. Likewise, past research has found that the decision to employ a domestic worker and the "supervision" of domestic work was handled almost entirely by women (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). These arrangements are not necessarily challenging sexism but rather shifting the burden of sexism from white middle-class women to their employees. Paid reproductive work is often structured to replicate the unpaid work women perform, and the responsibility of waiting on children and husbands is placed upon domestic workers. In effect, this reproduces the demeaning and sexist aspects of housework and reaffirms women's inferiority (Parreñas, 2001; Romero, 2002). Furthermore, the supervision of domestic labor becomes a proxy for race relations in the homes of middle-class white women, as many domestic labor positions are filled by women of color, often within neighborhoods that are otherwise overwhelmingly white (Anderson, 2001).

The public discussion of wages for housework has largely disappeared, and for feminist sociologists housework has lost much of its status, arguably because "fewer sociologists actually do it" (Ehrenreich, 2004: 90). While the majority of Americans do their own housework, those who hold power in terms of influence and resources are the minority who employ paid domestic work. "In their homes, the politics of housework is becoming a politics of not only gender, but of race and class—and these are subjects that the opinion making elite, if not most Americans, generally prefer to avoid" (Ehrenreich, 2004: 91). While we may say that "hiring

help” is necessary for working women, it is a luxury not afforded to most working women. For instance, in the case of Zoë Baird, the first woman nominated for attorney general of the United States, it was discovered in the period following her nomination that she was employing two workers who did not have legal status, paying exploitive wages and not paying Social Security tax on these wages. Lillian Cordero, the Peruvian woman working for Baird and her husband, would often work 70 hours a week, averaging \$3.50 an hour (Lovell Banks, 2003). While these hours are definitely equal to, if not far exceeding, the hours worked by white-collar professional women, it is clear that Ms. Cordero cannot in turn “hire help.” Domestic workers often do not have the same opportunity for release from the double day.

Middle-class households often exploit the labor of women of color, and many of the advances of middle-class white women have been dependent upon this exploitation. Grace Chang (2000) points out that the Baird controversy could have provided an opportunity for women of all social locations to organize around the “shared” cause of women’s work; however, this coalition was never realized. In fact, many women’s groups were silent during the confirmation hearings. Chang (2000: 78) goes on to point out that many mainstream women’s rights groups have not been active in attempts to improve the wages and conditions of paid domestic labor, critically highlighting that “perhaps this is not surprising, as white professional women have historically relied on the ‘affordability’ of immigrant workers.”

White middle-class women not only profit from racial and class exploitation through the availability of “cheap labor” to release them from the drudgery of their own household labor, but they also recreate and reinforce this system of racial and class domination by paying low wages and not offering Social Security and health care benefits (Romero, 2002). As Monisha Das Gupta (2008: 536) points out, “middle-class women’s advancement in the workforce, celebrated by liberal feminists, is underwritten by those who hold dead-end jobs that provide commodified reproductive labor, including domestic service.” As such, she argues, feminists’ “stalled revolution” model, which assumes a heterosexual familial division of labor, ignores nonheterosexual and non-two-parent family arrangements, ignores the commodification of (rather than socialization of) feminized work, and is inadequate to address the transnational reliance of middle- and upper-class households on paid domestic labor.

Domestic workers are often required to perform not only physical labor but also emotional labor, with employers expecting them to treat their paid labor as a labor of love. The job takes on certain aspects of unpaid work, such as emotion work, which requires one to produce the feeling of caring for another. Hochschild first coined the term “emotion work,” referring to the way certain service professions now demand that workers produce the appearance of emotion intended to manufacture a particular customer or client response, a theory that has since been expanded upon to capture the commercialization of both human bodies and

emotion highlighting the centrality of race, class, and gender in its performance (Hochschild, 2003a; Kang, 2003). Scholars have likewise argued that the gender typing of emotional labor is instrumental in understanding men's and women's wage disparities; jobs that come equipped with a demand for nurturing and caring pay lower wages (Guy & Newman, 2004). Some explanations for this lower pay point to the devaluation of carework, arguing that carework is poorly remunerated because of its strong association with women, often women of color (England, 2005).

In domestic work, the embodied dimensions of emotion work are illustrated by the different constructions of how one cleans. Certain types of cleaning imply more care (scrubbing floors on "hands and knees") in addition to the requirement for domestic workers to clean as though they care. What makes domestic work unique is that, contrary to other service professions where the production of emotion is being constructed for customer/client benefit and is often policed by employers (Leidner, 1999), in domestic work the employer is both the regulator of and recipient of the constructed care and emotion. Also, contrary to jobs in the formal labor market, the guidelines for how one is supposed to demonstrate care are unclear. For instance, whereas formal organizations may use books and manuals, providing organizational rules of conduct (one must always smile, etc.), in addition to the scripting of "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 2003a; Leidner, 1999), domestic workers are forced to negotiate these boundaries in the absence of clear expectations. Furthermore, how they are supposed to care is dictated by gendered, raced, and classed performances, as in demonstrating deference as an emotion.

Emotional labor is instrumental to both paid and unpaid work, and various scholars have addressed the issue of emotional labor in both the "public" and "private" spheres. Steinberg and Figart (1999: 12) argue, in their comprehensive review of research on emotional labor since *The Managed Heart*, that

As emotional labor, and especially caring work, moves from the household to the labor market, the distinction between the public and private spheres, so central to the process of industrialization, is blurred. As emotional labor is made more visible in paid work, it becomes increasingly visible as a critical aspect of unpaid work in the home.

Paid domestic work is a poignant example of the interconnections between the public and private spheres of women's paid and unpaid labor. Domestic work relationships entail a significant negotiation of these public and private boundaries, blurring the lines between personal and business relationships. On one hand, employers are looking to hire ideal "employees" who will fulfill their work expectations; on the other, these work expectations go beyond job tasks and often workers are judged more on their personalities than on their job performance (Romero, 2002). Furthermore, this tension reflects an attempt to structure a business relationship in an environment that is traditionally thought of as outside the public space, the home.

Many employers fail to see their home as a workplace or themselves as employers. Employers often conceptualize domestic workers as an extension of housewives rather than as workers. Furthermore, the assertion that a domestic worker is “one of the family” opens up that relationship to further exploitation and conceals the power relationships at work. By claiming that workers are members of the family, employers deny their responsibilities as employers, reinforce the gendered division of labor, and treat female domestics as proto-mothers (Romero, 2002). Anderson (2006: 234) argues that this claim clearly privileges the employer:

For the employer there are clear advantages to the obfuscation of the employment relationship, since it seriously weakens the worker’s negotiating position in terms of wages and conditions.

These emotional demands are structured in an asymmetrical manner: while employers demand care on the part of the workers, they rarely reciprocate this care and often know very little about and are unwilling to consider the private lives of the workers they employ (Anderson, 2006).

Therefore, some scholars suggest that the only way to ensure some type of workers’ rights is to treat domestic labor as a “job,” by extending employment rights and granting work permits to immigrant workers to combat the often oppressive and degrading tasks they are forced to perform because of constrained employment opportunities (Anderson, 2001). Others argue that the formalization of the occupation can reduce its exploitation, making “paid housework virtually indistinguishable from other form of blue-collar service work” (Meagher, 2002: 56–57).

Feminist scholars have significantly problematized the conceptualization of public and private spheres of women’s labor as somehow separate. The public/private binary is used to define sexist, racist, and heterosexist ideal gender roles: “real men” work and “real women” take care of families (Hill Collins, 2000). This idealization of hetero-patriarchal families has marginalized all women and exacerbated the ways in which multiple oppressions intersect to differentiate women’s work experiences and opportunities from those of men (Amott & Matthaie, 1996; Hill Collins, 2000; Kang, 2003; McCall, 2001; Glenn, 1992). Scholars have explored the fact that, particularly for women, home and work are often not separate spheres, and that for many families, home is increasingly another workplace (Hochschild, 1997, 2003b). Paid domestic work in private households provides a literal example of this. What happens when one family’s home is actually another person’s (often a woman’s) workplace?

This article seeks to address this question by exploring the way in which employers handle the negotiations of public and private boundaries, transforming work that is often thought to be a “labor of love” into wage labor. This research is especially timely, illustrating how multiple social locations work to differentiate women’s experiences of labor and family and their relationship to patriarchy.

Furthermore, while there is a wealth of literature exploring paid domestic work, both empirically and theoretically, few of these studies include employers. As critical race scholars have pointed out, complex theories of inequality require an analysis of how privilege functions.

## METHODS

### The Sample

The sample consisted of 30 white, heterosexual, upper-middle-class women who were currently employing (or had recently employed) domestic workers within their home. For the purpose of this work, I recruited participants who employed someone to help with cleaning, recognizing that domestic work is a broad and varied field and that there may be some significant difference between the interactions with workers hired for childcare and those hired for cleaning. However, while this research focused on cleaning, there is often considerable overlap between various aspects of domestic labor: for instance, one might be hired for cleaning and then be asked to watch children and vice versa (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Rollins, 1986; Romero, 2002). Furthermore, a few participants had also employed, or were employing, someone to perform childcare and often talked about this at length during the interview.

Sampling was done primarily in the town of Brookfield, a New Jersey suburban area, for which the racial distribution of residents is 97.7% white, 2.7% Hispanic or Latino, .9% Asian and .4% black or African American. The median family income in 2000 was \$83,531, compared to the U.S. family median income of \$50,046. The median value of a single-family home in this tract was \$277,300, compared to the national median of \$119,600 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The median family income of participants was \$200,000; however there was a significant disconnect between participants' household income and their personal income. The median personal income was between \$11,000 and \$20,000. Clearly, the majority of participants were reliant on a male partner's earnings to maintain their lifestyles. Twenty-seven of the participants were married, one was single, one in a committed relationship, and one separated and going through a divorce. Four participants were childfree and 26 had children. The median number of children was two.

Sampling was geared toward interviewing only white heterosexual women, to reflect the largely white community where the majority of these interviews were conducted and also to explore how racial privilege and definitions of whiteness are articulated through domestic work relationships. Class-privileged and racially privileged heterosexual women have been privy to certain protections of a patriarchal society that, for example, poor women, women of color, and queer women have not. There has been (and continues to be) a racialized and gendered hierarchy of who takes on paid domestic work, and the current demographics and

structures of paid domestic work reflect the gendered, raced, classed, and international division of this labor (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2001; Rollins, 1986; Romero, 2002; Thorton-Dill, 1994). White, class-privileged women have historically purchased the labor of poor women, women of color, and immigrant women in order to free themselves from the demands of reproductive labor, creating a hierarchy among women (Glenn, 1992). White women disproportionately hire domestic workers, even when controlling for social class, and white families spend more on housework services compared to families of color regardless of class background (Cohen, 1998). This difference persists even when one controls for issues of home ownership and assets.

A snowball sampling approach was used to solicit participation, in which participants were recruited through their associations with other participants. These findings are not meant to be generalizable, and therefore the dangers of snowball sampling, such as biases based on the tendency of people of similar values, race, and socioeconomic status to socialize, did not hinder this research. Snowball sampling has been a much utilized sampling method when attempting to solicit “elite” populations. Elite populations are often easy to identify but difficult to gain access to. Obtaining contact through other members of these groups meant that it was easier to forge initial introductions (Bernard, 2000).

Furthermore, snowball sampling helped to uncover certain intricacies in the structure of domestic work as an informal labor market. For example, five of the participants interviewed all employed the same women, all based on recommendations from each other. Since their original hiring, two participants had become unhappy with the work relationship and both subsequently employed someone else who had been referred to them by another family member. Three other participants all employed the same woman, again on recommendations from one another. These extensive interconnections were clearly the product of snowball sampling. Many of the participants shared the names and numbers of peers they knew who had hired someone; these peers were often women they had either gotten referrals from or given referrals to. Almost without exception, hiring was based on referrals and recommendations from friends, family, and neighbors. In fact, only one participant had hired someone who had not already been cleaning the home of a person the participant knew.

## **Interviews**

This work utilized qualitative active interviews for data collection. Thirty interviews were conducted with participants for the purpose of exploring perceptions of paid and unpaid domestic work, the way one negotiates decision making and hiring domestic workers, the gendered roles of housework in this context, the relationships between employer and employee, and the class and racial politics that are involved in hiring domestic workers. I also asked specific questions, asking how much employers actually paid and how they made contacts with



possible employees, and eliciting specific stories relating to domestic workers in this context.

The active interview approach was necessary for understanding how participants construct meaning and live accordingly. The treatment of the respondent as a “passive vessel of answers” denies that the respondent is actively involved in the production and maintenance of reality (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The active interview challenged the supposedly passive role of the interviewer and encouraged me to approach interviewing as a dialogical, discursive, and dynamic process.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Most interviews took place in the home of the participant, but several interviews were done over the phone. The interview is an especially useful method in feminist research for several reasons. It offers access to women’s ideas and experiences in their own words, and interviewing is consistent with feminists’ interest in abdicating control over the research process and facilitating cooperation (Reinharz, 1992), although the interview does not necessarily remove the researcher from a privileged or authoritative position.

### **Analysis**

All but two of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. One was not transcribed, because of a mechanical error in recording, and the other tape was destroyed because of the participant’s discomfort with what she had shared. I therefore decided against using this interview in my analysis. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym at the start of the interview, which was then used during the course of the interview to protect their anonymity. Domestic workers are also identified by pseudonyms that were assigned by the researcher. After transcription, each interview was read multiple times to identify common themes throughout. The transcripts were coded into various categories, which were then linked together to identify concepts emerging from the data. There was no pre-determined coding scheme, and themes were allowed to emerge from the data rather than to be forced upon it. Saturation occurred only after each transcription had been read multiple times and it seemed that all possible categories and themes had been extracted from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## **FINDINGS**

There was considerable diversity among participants concerning the length, type, and frequency of hiring and employing practices. Some participants had been employing someone for only around three months, others for over 20 years. These relationships were not always continuous: for instance, employers might have employed someone 10 years ago and then just hired someone again recently. Most

work relationships were characterized by considerable turnover. Those that lasted over five years seemed more the exception than the norm. Furthermore, there was significant variation in the number of hours per week/month for which participants employed domestic workers. For example, one might employ someone to clean five days a week, or once a month. Far more common was a once a week cleaning (or once every two weeks), usually ranging between two and five hours depending upon how many workers were employed. All of the participants, except one, hired only women, and the one participant who was currently employing a man had hired a married couple. In fact, when I asked Jane, a married homemaker, if the person she hired was a woman, she laughed and asked me, “They *make* men?” Clearly domestic work is considered a female pursuit, even when one is getting paid to do it.

Regarding payment, it is extremely difficult to identify an average standard wage given the considerably large ranges that participants reported. It is made even more difficult given the number of workers who might split those wages and the different ways the wages might be divided. For instance, \$60 for three hours’ work did not necessarily mean \$20 per hour. Most employers paid by the house, a few by the hour. The lowest for-the-house price I heard was \$30 and the highest \$120. The price seemed to vary according to the size of the house and the number of times per month/week that workers would come. The wages mentioned in these interviews are by no means representative of the wages of domestic workers and are presumably on the high side. The majority of women hired contractual housecleaners, which has been documented as the highest paying domestic work position. Furthermore, Brookfield is suburban town, located about 60 miles south of New York City. There is no public transportation system into, out of, or around Brookfield. The lack of public transportation implies that most domestics who work in the area either own a car or have access to one.

While most participants claimed they preferred a professional or businesslike relationship with domestic workers, the way they actually negotiated these work relationships suggests that many participants were not entirely comfortable with viewing their home as someone’s workplace or themselves as employers. As explored in the following sections, while few participants explicitly stated this discomfort, it was implicit in the way that many participants talked about their roles as employers, and within this, how they handled the supervision of domestic labor. This discomfort is instrumental in structuring and, in some cases, negating the rights of workers in their homes. Relatedly, employers’ emphasis on domestic work as emotional labor reflects their resistance to thinking of this otherwise intimate labor in purely professional terms. As such, employers are rejecting the construction of their home as a workplace and protecting the emotional meanings of care work, while also complicating the labor expectations placed upon domestic workers. Likewise, as the final section will argue, because domestic work is mostly negotiated in the informal labor market, the employers in this study relied almost entirely on referrals from friends, family, and neighbors in the hiring

process, a practice that often privileges employers' desires while compromising workers' rights.

### **Negating an Employer Identity/Negating Worker Rights**

This research uncovered various tensions in the ways employers conceptualized their roles as employers and handled the administration of paid domestic work, and these tensions established ambiguous, erratic, and unclear job expectations for workers. No participants offered domestic workers contractual descriptions of job expectations; rather, most expected domestic workers to simply "clean" their home. While this might seem self-explanatory, in fact there are many ways to clean a home and there is much ambiguity regarding what is included in that cleaning, which may strain the work relationship.

Reflecting this, several participants complained at length about their current or past domestic work relationships; however, many felt awkward actually confronting workers when they were dissatisfied. For instance, Anna, a married restaurant manager, was increasingly displeased with her current work relationship and was actually looking to hire someone new at the time of the interview. She felt that Aurelia and Nadia, the two women she was currently employing, had fallen into a "rut" and were not cleaning as well as they used to. However, Anna never directly communicated her dissatisfaction to Aurelia and Nadia and rather was "solving" the issue by looking to hire someone else. This was not uncommon: while many participants complained at length during the interview about workers' job performance, most never actually confronted workers and instead ended the work relationship with little explanation. Explicating this point, Reese, a married stay-at-home mom, stated:

I mean, you know, it's hard to fire someone; you feel bad. Even if they're not doing a good job because they become, like, you know. So you wind up lying and saying, oh, I'm going to clean my house myself for a while, rather than tell them, you do a shitty job, get out of my house.

In terms of openly expressing displeasure, one participant mentioned leaving notes as a way of communicating when she was not happy; others used "hints." For instance, Dolores, a married nurse, explained what she does when she feels June is "slacking":

*D:* Uh, well, sometimes she slacks a little bit. . . . Well, she doesn't move things or, you know. Um, you can see like, you know, when she's dusting, like sometimes she doesn't pick things up. Like she'll go around the furniture, and you know, that kind of thing, but the majority of the times, you know, she's good.

*Interviewer:* Now, when that happens, do you ever say anything?

*D:* Um, I have said, well, what I do is when I see it happening, I take everything off [of the furniture], she gets the hint.

*Interviewer:* And what about if you don't see it and you just notice it after the fact?

*D:* Um, I, I don't think I've really ever said anything to her. Just once she was cleaning, um, she was cleaning my leather couches with something, so I had to tell her what to use, you know, on it. But other than that, she's, she was good. She more or less told me before, you know, I'll clean, I'll put this on here to clean that. You know, I wash the floors with this, is that OK? Like she kind of went over everything before she did it.

If Dolores is there, she will “correct” June through not so subtle hints. However, she admits that she rarely if ever actually says something to June after the fact.

Past research has demonstrated that domestic workers prefer employers who offer plain, clear directives with positive feedback (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). However, many employers' hesitancy to see themselves as employers and their discomfort in defining job tasks places domestic workers in an awkward position, often having to live up to unclear and vague job expectations. As Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001: 139) points out, “The tension between their desire to get their ‘money's worth’ from their nannies or housecleaners and their reluctance to see themselves as employers, combined with their ineffectualness in communicating job requirements when employment first begins, often creates conflict.” Employers' reluctance to be honest and direct in these work relationships complicates the structures and expectations of the labor.

This is not to suggest that employers should criticize or berate workers, but rather that unclear and vague job expectations place domestic workers in a precarious position, forcing them to live up to unstated demands. Employers' failure to communicate denies workers the opportunity to adjust their job performance, and perhaps more importantly, to defend their supposed shortcomings. Unlike Anna, Dolores was not looking to hire someone new and was overall pretty satisfied with the work relationship. However, lack of communication regarding small problems in other cases (such as that of Anna) could eventually lead to job loss rather than working to make small adjustments. While employers may possibly think they are being “nice” by not directly confronting workers, in fact they are denying workers the basic rights that would be available to them in most formalized labor exchanges. Furthermore, it is important to be critical of employers' complaints, realizing that many reflect patriarchal ideologies and expectations of being a mother and a wife, a central component of which is taking care of one's home. Therefore, as employers displace parts of this labor onto other women they may continue to hold onto control of it in order to continue to meet social expectations, possibly now through the supervision of domestic work rather than the performance of it. Given the extreme social importance placed on

housework in patriarchal ideologies, it becomes almost compulsory for employers to be slightly dissatisfied.

Further explication of participants' negation of their employer status was provided by the way they handled the supervision of domestic work. Several employers expressed a strong desire to be out of the house while workers were cleaning. This desire was explained in terms of staying out of the way, not liking the sound of the vacuum, or feeling guilty when watching workers clean. For example, while Dolores was often at work when June was there, she explicitly preferred not to be home:

Usually, I'm at work, yeah. . . . I like to not be there. . . . Well, 'cause you kind of feel you're in the way. And I actually kind of feel a little guilty 'cause, like, she's cleaning my house. You know what I mean? I kind of feel like I should help her.

Dolores was not the only participant who expressed such guilt. Christina, a homemaker who had recently gone back to work as a part-time museum curator, explained:

C: Yeah, and I'd, well I'd always pick up before Laura comes, because I want to maximize her cleaning time, and not have her pick up the stuff, waste her time doing that. And, so, um, and then, when she would come, and I was here, I would feel sort of guilty, so I would help her clean.

*Interviewer:* Why did you feel guilty?

C: Just because, um, I just felt awkward having someone come and clean the house.

*Interviewer:* OK, why was that awkward, do you think?

C: Um, just the dynamic of, um, me being a woman, um, who's perfectly capable of doing what Laura was doing, and I didn't want to have the hierarchical feeling. You know what I mean? Um, so I just wanted to be more on an even keel, and she's, um, my age too, so it's just I didn't want to; I wanted to help out.

While the decision whether or not to be in the house while workers are there might seem like a small one, it has serious implications for the shape of the working relationship. Various scholars of domestic work have illustrated this point. Mary Romero (2002) found in her research with Chicana women working as domestics that the less interaction they had with employers the better their working conditions were. Several women she interviewed even selected employers based on whether or not they worked outside the home. According to Romero, "Supervision and monitoring of workers not only function to control the work process but remind the worker of her subordinate position in society" (Romero, 2002: 184).

Even those participants who were home while domestics were working attempted to be in different rooms or even on different floors of the house, often finding other household tasks to occupy themselves, for instance, laundry. They reported feeling uncomfortable sitting and relaxing while someone else was working in their home. For example, while Jane preferred to be out of the house while Sylvia was working, when she was home she tried to keep herself occupied:

You try, you know what I try to do, I try to occupy myself, I mean I don't want to be sitting there reading a magazine, because you feel like you know, oh, she's cleaning or whatever, so I'm sitting around reading a magazine. So I do like laundry and stuff like that, or I get the hell out of there.

She obviously felt uncomfortable sitting around while her home was being cleaned, which prompted her to stay busy or “get the hell out of there.” These clearly designed strategies can be looked at in terms of both practical and symbolic avoidance. On one hand, it is practical to stay out of the way. However, there is also a symbolic meaning to this as well, coming not only from a logistical awkwardness but also from an emotional awkwardness. Watching someone clean your home makes the inequality within the relationship more visible. “Sitting and reading a magazine” reinforces the privileged position of employers.

### **Emotional Demands on Workers**

Some employers' desire not to be home while workers were cleaning may in turn be creating more positive work environments for domestics by displacing one of the most exploitive aspects of the labor, namely, supervision. Supervision negates workers' autonomy and as mentioned earlier, inscribes workers' subordinate position in the work relationship. Ironically, those participants who chose to be out of the house made this decision not as a means to make workers more comfortable but rather as a means to make themselves more comfortable. The “guilt” that prompted some employers to “get the hell out of there” is arguably a result of the same romanticization of housework that denies standardized wages and labor expectations. Both the difficulty in communicating job expectations and the rejection of supervision are products of a larger rejection of domestic work exchanges as purely professional.

This, coupled with the emotional demands placed upon workers, negates workers' rights; however, it does so not only out of a financial motivation but also out of an emotional one. Emphasizing the emotional and social aspects of cleaning minimizes the appearance of one's home as a workplace. Conceptualizing certain tasks as things a friend or family member would do inscribes this labor with particular emotional demands. Arguably, employers in all types of employment appreciate workers going above and beyond the call of duty; however, in the context of domestic work, this above and beyond is imbued with social expectations of mothering and caring.

Paid domestic work is the meeting place of the home and the market economy, where “women’s work” is given an hourly wage and what were previously functions of families are moved into a capitalist economy. We can see through the following narratives how employers protect the “sanctity” of this care work, even as it is moved into wage labor. For example, through her interview, Francesca, a production assistant, explicitly complained of a previous work relationship in which she perceived workers as viewing her home as simply a job:

They didn’t speak English. Um, they didn’t speak to you. They kind of just . . . I remember one time and they were sitting down on the counter eating lunch, at the counter eating lunch and stuff, and, um, I said, oh, you know, how are you? And they just, um, they looked up. So, there was no interaction. None. I just felt that, um, I just felt that if you’re in my house, have some interaction with me and to feel comfortable in my house. And I don’t know if they just didn’t feel comfortable. If they look at it like, well, you know, we’re just here to clean your house and you don’t really care what we’re here to do or why we’re here. You’re just paying us. Like it’s almost that I felt between them. Right, just a transaction, a monetary transaction and that was it. And, um, with Sandra I feel like she’s, like, my grandmother. She, she can completely take care of everything in the house. And like even the kids get really get really nasty and snippy and she still laughs at them, and she would still, you know, rub their face, and, you know, tell them they were cute. With the other group, I mean, they just didn’t even pay attention.

Francesca compared her current relationship with Sandra to that of the team of workers who used to clean her house. She obviously resented the idea that they were there for a simple monetary transaction; she wanted them to care about her home and moreover her children, which has nothing to do with cleaning. Domestic workers are often expected to be “proto-mothers” and their work is expected to incorporate both skill and affection. By referring to a worker as “one of the family,” employers reinforce gender-specific expectations of domestic work and equate this labor with homemaking (Romero, 2002). Also, language was an important issue for many of the women interviewed. While most insisted that race did not matter, speaking English did, and this was informed by ideologies of class, race, nationhood, and citizenship (see Moras, forthcoming).

While Francesca was one of the few participants who explicitly stated her distaste for her home being treated as a job, this was implicit in the way that many employers talked about being satisfied or dissatisfied with cleaning. Participants had a diverse variety of responses and criteria for what was considered “good cleaning.” Obviously defining “good work” is subjective and has just as much to do with social markers as actual cleaning; various markers of care and deference characterize how one cleans. Illustrating this, Christina explained how her friend first suggested Ruby, a woman her friend had previously employed, to her:

*D:* I asked my friend, and they had Ruby, and said that she was from Poland, and cleaned like an Eastern European. And I had to hire her.

*Interviewer:* What does that mean to clean like an Eastern European?

*D:* Well, she would get on her hands and knees and scrub the floor, and, um, and, you know, just had an incredible work ethic.

Getting “on her hands and knees” seemingly implies a certain quality of labor; however, the symbolic meaning of getting on one’s hands and knees while scrubbing the floor also implies a certain amount of deference or reinforcement of the hierarchal relationships between domestic workers and employers. In addition, several participants commented on the importance of or their appreciation of “extra jobs,” anything done that was unpaid or not actually part of the work requirements. The following comments from Emily, a retired bookkeeper, illustrated the importance she placed on the performance of these tasks:

They, they do an amazing job. They do, they do more than the average. I mean they come in, they clean out my refrigerator. Like all the toilet papers have little rosettes on them. The, the ah, the, um, the afghans are all shaped like, um, little fans. Everything is perfect top to bottom when they come.

Arguably, her toilet paper being folded into rosettes or her afghans into fans does not actually have anything to do with the cleanliness of her home, and her appreciation of these things speaks to an appreciation of Jael and Esmeralda, the women she currently employs, doing something “extra” or “beyond” the normal call of duty. Samantha, a stay-at-home mom who manages her family’s business from her home, also expressed appreciation of workers doing these “extra” jobs:

You know, like I said, she’ll do extra things sometimes, like, you know, do my dishes, or, you know, pick up toys. Um, you know, ’cause I only pay her to do certain things, you know? So anything extra that she does is, you know, is always thrilling to me. So, that’s about it. . . . For what reason? Just because she doesn’t have to do it, but she still does it. So I feel like it’s more of a, you know, like, you know, is more of, like, a something a friend would do as opposed to, you know, if I hired through an agency.

There seems to be more to this appreciation than simply getting more for your money. In many ways, doing something extra signals caring for one’s home, and employers’ emphasis on unpaid work reflects patriarchal ideologies that name housework a “labor of love” (thus negating its formal protections as wage labor).

As reflected in these quotations, for some employers, it was not enough to clean well; rather, the employee was expected to *care* about cleaning well. This demand for the performance of emotional labor exacerbates the ambiguous and unstandardized expectations placed upon domestic workers, adding to them the performance of care. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this romanticizing is the way it rejects domestic work, both paid and unpaid, as “real” labor and as such justifies the poor wages and the absence of labor protections and benefits.



### Networks and Referrals: Navigating an Informal Labor Market

Throughout the interviews, the participants repeatedly emphasized how important referrals were in terms of hiring decisions. Almost without exception, hiring was based on referrals and recommendations from friends, family, and neighbors. In fact, very few participants had hired someone who had not already been cleaning the home of someone they knew. Illustrating these interconnections, although in the analysis domestic workers are identified as different women, in actuality there was a huge amount of overlap. Five of the employers interviewed all hired the same domestic workers, all based on recommendations from each other. Since their original hiring, two women had become dissatisfied and subsequently both hired another woman, who had been referred to them by another family member. In addition, three other women interviewed all hired the same person, again on recommendations from one another. This use of referrals ensures employers a significant amount of power over domestic workers' job opportunities.

Trust was among the most common reasons given for the importance of known referrals. When asked why referrals were important to her, Jennifer, a married homemaker replied, "Just so I know they're reliable and, um, you know, wouldn't steal anything." However, these networks can also be used to police violations of trust. Reese, a married homemaker, explained that

I've never had anything stolen or anything like that. But I've heard stories where people, you know, but it's not worth it for them 'cause like I said, you know, you trust them because they do clean, not only your house, but a few other friends'. So if anything ever did happen, then obviously you're going to tell your friend, and they're going to tell someone else, and, like, you know, then their trust is kind of lost.

Violating this trust has potential repercussions beyond individual jobs. Reese's comment implies recognition of this, suggesting employers' awareness of how referrals might protect them in this way.

Given the emphasis placed on personal recommendations, workers are reliant on employers not just for the income garnered from a particular job but for other prospective jobs. While contractual cleaning may be the most flexible and best paid of domestic work relationships, employees must continuously maintain a certain number of jobs in order to keep their income steady. As Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001: 70) points out, "Breaking into housecleaning work and getting enough casas (houses) to fulfill the workweek is difficult and sometimes takes several years. Unlike the job for a live-in or live-out position, which requires securing only one job, the search for housecleaning jobs is an unending process, as full employment requires numerous casas." Employer networks are extremely instrumental in obtaining these jobs. For instance, Rosita, a married security specialist, who had previously worked as a domestic prior to being an employer, commented:

Yeah, yeah. Well that's how you're, you're always sold on recommendation. I mean, I mean, bottom line, that's where you get your jobs. So, if you suck, you're not going to get any jobs. I mean, who's going to recommend you? You know what I mean? They may keep you because they don't want to say anything to you. But they're not going to recommend you. You're not going to get any other jobs out of it. I mean, and that is how you get jobs.

Daryl, a married painter, spoke of actually being able to pay Julia and Amanda less because of the numbers of referrals she gives them:

I have a very good deal because I have them come twice a week. They always give me a, a very good price. They also know that I get them a lot of jobs, so I pay \$130 for two times a week. . . . I get them a lot of jobs. . . . Well, um, like, uh, a lot of these people from Brazil or Portugal, they'll go home for a month during the summer and stuff, so I always get them my neighbors whose cleaning people are leaving. Um, I can, I can think of at least 10 jobs I've gotten this new group. . . . Yeah, that's why they, that's why, you know, we have a pretty good deal. I mean, I know I don't pay a lot of money, but they, they get other benefits, you know. I think it's fair, yeah. I mean, it's more than \$10 an hour.

She talks of getting a "very good price" both because she has them come twice a week and because she gets them other jobs. This speaks again to how valuable job referrals are for domestic workers, specifically those who work in the house-cleaner position.

Employers not only shared references but also information about wages. Knowing wages allows employers to expect similar standards from their employees, regardless of how long the other work relationships have lasted, and also gives employers considerable power in setting the "going rate," enabling them to secure better deals for themselves. For instance, Dolores recounted the following story:

Well, actually, I just had my, my cleaning lady goes away for the month of August. She goes to Portugal. And I had my girlfriend's, um, cleaning ladies come here, there's two of them. And they, I guess, charge my girlfriend a lot more. And she, when, when I called them they said how much does, you know, your cleaning lady charge, and I told them. They couldn't believe it. . . . So, they actually wanted, I think they wanted to charge me like 80, but they only charge me 70. . . . Yeah, 'cause she knew. You know, she said to me they're going to want to charge you this much, but make sure they don't, you know.

Speaking with her friend beforehand gave her leverage in the negotiation process, enabling her to pay less than she was originally asked. Simone, a married banker, actually spoke of being pressured by other women in her neighborhood not to raise the wages of the domestic worker who was employed in several of their homes:

They all yell at me not to pay her too much. "Simone, don't pay her too much!" You know, um, they're all stay-at-home moms, so they're all living

off of one income although it's not a bad income. Um, but, you know, its almost like they know for me it's a convenience factor, if somebody wants \$10 extra a week, and that means they're going to be cleaning my house and I'm not going to lose them, and I trust them and they've been working for me for a long time, I'm going to pay them. I'm not going to negotiate. It's worth it to me. And their whole thing is, well, you know, you got, if you agree to it automatically, and we don't, you know, she gets mad at us. And they're all like, you're the negotiator by trade. You know, and I'm like, you know what, it's not worth it to me.

Her neighbors' attempts to keep wages lower are exploitive to the women who work in their homes. Employers' sharing of information about wages is potentially detrimental to domestic workers, especially in those situations where employers have not been giving annual raises yet have been hiring the same person for several years. For example, one participant, Lucille, had been employing the same worker, Katie, for nine years, yet paid her the same at the time of the interview as she did when she hired her. Through the years, Lucille had referred her to others and in doing so shared how much she was paying. It is reasonable to assume that over the course of these years Katie's charges would have increased; however Lucille's sharing of wages could make it more difficult for Katie to charge more for her labor.

## DISCUSSION

Employers' failure to see their homes as workplaces has severe structural and interpersonal consequences for domestic workers. When a person fails to see her home as a workplace and herself as an employer, she may not fulfill her responsibilities to workers, thus compromising workers' rights. Conceptualizing one's home as a workplace or oneself as an employer requires the de-romanticization of housework and childcare. These labors are often considered labors of love, most notably because they are often unpaid. I argue through this article that even when this work is transformed into wage labor, employers continue to have difficulty thinking about it in solely professional terms. Traditional ideologies regarding mothering and housework demand a certain amount of care, and employers impose these expectations on employees through paid domestic work.

Paid domestic work is one of many occupations that demand this embodied emotional dimension. However, compounded with the informal labor market structure of domestic work, this requirement has severely exploitive consequences. Given the already asymmetrical relationships between employers and domestic workers, this emotional labor takes on certain aspects of traditional deference rituals. Furthermore, the investment is not reciprocal. While employers may want domestic workers to care about employers' homes and families, they do not necessarily offer the same in return.

Because domestic work in private homes is confined to the informal labor market, the structuring of this labor is of particular importance. As this research demonstrates, employers continue to hold a significant amount of power over domestics' job opportunities, largely through the control of referrals. Employers' complete reliance on personal referrals institutionalizes employers' influence on the exchange of labor. Furthermore, the way these referrals are shared and the types of information that are offered can shape domestics' future job experiences. For instance, employers who share information about wages could actually lower the possible income of workers. While this could be done unintentionally, the narratives here suggest that some participants were highly aware of how sharing information about wages could help them to secure a better "deal."

This research echoes the calls of many other scholars and activists highlighting the need to transform the exploitive aspects of domestic work. This transformation requires multiple structural changes including formalization, expanding the application of Social Security to support more domestic workers, large-scale reforms in immigration laws geared toward attaining legal status for undocumented migrants, and the continued growth of domestic work unions. The formalization of domestic work could substantially improve the working conditions of domestic workers, creating opportunities for labor organizing and holding employers responsible in terms of labor regulations (Meagher, 2002). Standardizing wages and schedules of raises could protect workers against economic exploitation and ideally guarantee a living wage. In connection with this, current Social Security laws require that any employer who pays a household worker more than \$1,700 in wages over a calendar year is required to pay Social Security and Medicare taxes (U.S. Social Security Administration, 2009). While many assume Social Security applies only to full-time workers, in actuality, \$1,700 per calendar year breaks down to include any employer who is paying a domestic worker over \$32 a week. This would include most contractual cleaning arrangements; however, there is a serious deficit in the dissemination of this information.

A recent report entitled "Domestic Workers Working Hard to Sustain American Families, Compromising Their Social Security," published by the National Council of La Raza (Grillo-Chope & Ramos, 2006), points out that because domestic workers are unlikely to have enough private savings to build a "nest egg" for retirement, access to Social Security is critical to their well-being. Furthermore, nearly 96% of domestic workers lack any kind of pension coverage, further emphasizing the urgency of accessible Social Security. Currently, there continues to be a higher threshold level for domestic workers to receive Social Security credit when compared to other workers, representing a difference of over \$500. In addition, in order for domestic workers to actually receive Social Security, employers must pay Social Security tax. Because of the informal structure of the occupation, many employers fail to do so. Therefore, regardless of the threshold, even workers who far exceed the earning requirements may never actually receive Social Security benefits (Grillo-Chope & Ramos, 2006).

Widespread employer adherence to Social Security laws could have positive long-term economic consequences for domestic workers; however most employers do not even realize that these laws apply to them. Domestic workers ultimately suffer the consequences of employers' noncompliance.

As critics may point out, though, paying Social Security tax is not always beneficial for workers, most notably for those workers who are undocumented. From outright exclusionary immigration restrictions based on race, national origin, or sexual orientation to the current criminalization of undocumented migrants, citizenship and its exclusions continuously inscribe notions of belonging with economic consequences. Anti-immigrant sentiments dominate the U.S. media, and racist and sexist xenophobia is repeatedly used to marginalize immigrants. Being undocumented undermines women's agency and exacerbates the exploitive conditions of paid domestic work. Large-scale immigration reform is urgently needed. However, this immigration reform must be geared toward supporting immigrants and their families rather than toward U.S. corporate interests.

In an illustration of a projected reform that was not geared toward supporting immigrants, President George W. Bush argued for "comprehensive immigration reform" to bring "undocumented workers already in the country out of the shadows." In addition to proposing a temporary worker program, he emphasized that under his administration, border security funding had doubled, the National Guard had been sent to patrol the southern border, and the system of "catch and release" had been eradicated (complemented by funding for 6,700 more detention beds). Clearly, an immigration proposal that promises to bring workers out of the shadows while simultaneously celebrating an increase in the number of detention center beds does not have undocumented workers' interests in mind.

Comparing Bush's political policy on immigration to that of President Barack Obama, scholars Dorsey and Díaz-Barriga (2007: 98) argue that in some regards the two are not very dissimilar:

In general, Bush, Obama, and moderate conservatives all advocate similar principles, but the emphases and concepts they use differ. Obama's rhetoric on immigration is closer to that of Bush than other progressive organizations. Both use the image of the porous border and refer to "our southern border." They also use the concept of assimilation and advocate civics and language classes for undocumented immigrants.

The authors argue, however, that President Obama tends to take a "both . . . and" position instead of an "either . . . or" position. For instance, he talks of both securing the U.S./Mexico border and of protecting immigrants' rights. Activists, scholars and policymakers need to construct progressive alternatives that take on the project of protecting immigrant rights while rejecting the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and their children that comes with the militarization of the U.S. border.

Finally, there are undoubtedly serious obstacles to organizing domestic workers into unions. Peggie Smith argues that because domestic work is the “archetypical form of women’s work” it has been ignored by organized labor. Labor organizing strategies have traditionally privileged white male workers in manufacturing fields and largely ignored the needs of low wage service workers (many of whom are women and/or people of color) (Smith, 2000). Domestic workers are explicitly excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, and while state laws could provide potential legal protections, most state statutes also exclude domestic workers.

Given the unique structure of paid domestic work, coupled with this lack of legal protections, the task of organizing is undoubtedly difficult. One example of the structural issues involved is the spatial problems involved in organizing across multiple locations such as private homes. Unlike workers in the manufacturing field, for instance, domestic workers are largely isolated from one another. Likewise, the number of employers is probably as high as, if not higher than, the number of workers. As a result, attempts to organize domestic workers have had to rely on innovative practices. Given the lack of centralization, unions such as the Domestic Workers Association have employed “bus stop activism,” approaching domestics at bus stops on their way to work or at parks where childcare workers might gather (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Smith, 2000).

However, many mainstream feminist organizations have remained largely silent on the issues discussed above. These organizations need to add their resources to this battle. This is especially important given the number of leaders of feminist organizations and feminist academics who are active in the perpetuation of this exploitation. The exploitation of paid reproductive labor is a feminist issue, and as such must be addressed by mainstream feminist organizations and academics. As Chang (2000: 192) points out, “professional women must take a stand for household workers’ rights and be prepared to dig deep into their households’ pockets to support this in practice.” A good place to start would be paying livable wages. In addition, mainstream feminist organizations have significant resources to add to domestic workers’ unions. Time, money, and access to publications and policymakers are all resources essential to organizing. However, the joining of forces must give primacy to the voices of domestic workers, while simultaneously explicating the linkages between all women’s oppression. Privileged feminist voices must not be there to “help” but rather to support, in a realization that a true feminist movement values all women and demands the recognition of all women’s labor.

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