

Comparative Perspectives on Domestic Work in Latin America (Argentina and Brazil)

Déborá Gorbán

Conicet/Universidad Nacional de General
Sarmiento

Ania Tizziani

Conicet/Universidad Nacional de General
Sarmiento

The field of studies focusing on paid domestic work has been particularly dynamic in recent decades. Most such studies have focused on the characteristics that these occupations take on in the global north (where migrant workers play a significant role) and how these activities are organized at the global level. In this article we are seeking to articulate these dominant approaches with the perspectives that have been privileged in analyses carried out in Latin American countries. To do so, we explore the particular dynamics of domestic service in some countries in the region (especially Argentina and Brazil), focusing on three dimensions: the characteristics and impact of migratory dynamics on the occupation; the development of state regulations and the recent transformations in these; and the importance of spaces for socializing and the collective organization of domestic workers.

In June 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted Convention 189 concerning decent work for domestic workers. This standard brought to the forefront the problems faced by millions of women whose occupation has historically been undervalued and made invisible at the global level. The convention, which to date has been ratified by twenty-two countries (most of which are in Latin America), is part of a process that reveals the spread of public regulatory initiatives for this area of work in many regions, one which largely takes place outside of any legal framework and is closely tied to the private sphere.

This process has coincided with the energetic growth of this field of study in the social sciences over the last fifteen years. Although for years paid domestic work remained in the shadows, since the 1990s the working conditions and experiences of domestic workers have become firmly established in public and academic debate. Following the growth of the gender perspective in studies on international migrations, the flow of large numbers of women from the global south to the global north has become increasingly

important.¹ The vast majority of these women find work in their destination countries in care-related activities and domestic service, usually of an informal nature. This prevailing form of integration into the labor market is articulated with a second problem: the so-called care crisis in developed countries. This is connected to the withdrawal of the welfare state, women's growing participation in the labor market, aging populations, and the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities between men and women within homes (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Brites, 2013 among others).

In some studies, this process has been analyzed as the creation of "global care chains," in which middle- and upper-class women from developed countries relegate part of their reproductive work to vulnerable migrant women. In their countries of origin, these

¹ The dichotomies implicit in the terms "north," "south," "developed countries," and "developing countries" have been the subject of numerous debates. However, in this paper they have enabled us to categorize the different analyses within this field of study, although by using them we are not trying to suggest that the regions and countries they cover are in any sense homogeneous.

women in turn transfer their domestic responsibilities to other women, thus reinforcing the international and gender division of reproductive work and the emotional resources that these entail (Hochschild, 2002, 2008).

The labor conditions and career paths of Latina workers in large US cities that have been studied by Mary Romero (2002) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007), the workers from the Ivory Coast that Caroline Ibos (2012) met in a square in Paris, the Filipina migrants in Rome and New York analyzed by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001), or the Bolivian and Ecuadorian women in Spain and Germany studied by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) have, among many other factors, helped shape the debate on domestic service in recent decades. These women make up what has been defined as the new “globalized proletariat,” a particularly vulnerable urban proletariat, one that is feminized, unlikely to organize itself into collectives, hidden behind the walls of homes in the global north. This market brings women into contact across borders, forming relationships that are marked by hierarchies determined by issues of ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002, Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010).

Most of these studies focus on the characteristics that these occupations take on in the global north. Although this has given rise to valuable analyses on the effects of these global dynamics on the countries of the south, in general these are thought of as being the suppliers of this labor that circulates in the global market for domestic services and care. As a result, some such studies have explored the characteristics of transnational homes, the readjustments within families and gender relations brought about by female migration, and the “care deficit” that these are leading to in the countries of origin of female migrants (Salazar Parreñas, 2002; Marchetti, 2010; Oso Casas, 2002).

However, in the global south, there is a specific dynamic to an occupation that does not automatically fall into these organizational categories for global care. In Latin America,

although the role these female migrant workers have played within such occupations has been important, historically speaking, the role of international migration is generally considerably less significant than in the global north.² Instead, most such migrations are internal and intraregional. These movements of women between the countries of the global south respond to complex logics related to labor, family relations, and mobility (Borgeaud Garcíandía and Georges, 2014), that have been less visible in this renewed debate around domestic service (Brites, 2013).

Until the 1980s, the profile of the Latin American domestic worker was a young woman with a low level of formal education, from the poorer sectors of society, of African descent or belonging to indigenous communities, who had moved from a rural area towards an urban center (Rodgers, 2009). This way of starting work in the sector was characterized by the literature at the time as an initial, transitory integration into the urban labor market that would eventually lead to other forms of salaried work (Jelín, 1976; Chaney and Castro, 1993; Avila, 2008). Paid domestic work was characterized as being “live-in,” that is, the women employed in this sphere lived in their employers’ houses.

In recent decades, domestic service has undergone significant changes in large urban centers. At present, the prevailing internal migration pattern is urban–urban and the workers in question generally have higher levels of education (ILO, 2012). Domestic service is absorbing increasing numbers of non-migrant women and international migrants. Especially in the 1990s, economic crises and differences in standards of wellbeing in the different countries of Latin America were a cause for intraregional

² This proportion may vary among the different countries of Latin America: in Argentina, international female migrants (the vast majority of whom come from neighboring countries and Peru) represent only 10 percent of domestic workers; in Costa Rica, in contrast, workers from Nicaragua and El Salvador account for nearly 50 percent of this workforce (Goldsmith, 2007).

migration. The nature of these flows has changed: Bolivian, Paraguayan, and Peruvian women in Argentina; Peruvian women in Chile; Colombian women in Venezuela; Nicaraguan and Salvadorian women in Costa Rica. The 1990s also marked the start of migratory flows outside the region (such as Ecuadorian women going to Spain) (Rodgers, 2009).

Another important transformation in domestic service has to do with the diversification of working arrangements. In the last twenty years, residential domestic work has decreased significantly in all countries. The vast majority of workers are employed in “live-out” service, full time, or part time and by the hour, for several employers, often carrying out tasks requiring a higher level of specialization (ILO, 2012). Similarly, numerous studies have shown that these are not transitory forms of integration into the labor market—instead, the mobility of domestic workers towards other forms of salaried work is limited (Lautier, 2002; Gogna, 1993; Tizziani, 2011). These activities instead constitute a long-term form of employment for urban women from the popular sectors. In this way, despite the transformations that have taken place in the sector, one of its major areas of continuity is that this work continues to be performed by the most disadvantaged women in Latin American societies and persists as a space in which various dynamics of inequality intersect (Brites, 2013, Gorbán and Tizziani, 2014; Gorbán, 2013).

The papers in this special issue explore the particular dynamics of domestic service in two Latin American countries (Argentina and Brazil) and how they have evolved in recent years. In this introductory article, we intend to compare the perspectives that predominate in analyses carried out in Latin American countries with studies from the global north. As low-income, low-skilled female workers in cities on the periphery of the global economy, Latin American domestic workers share the experience of subordination with their migrant counterparts in the large metropolises of the global north. Their paths are also marked by structural inequalities related to class, gender, race, and ethnicity. How much overlap and how

many differences can be found in the experiences of these workers, who are in the same subordinated position, but in different contexts within global capitalism? What regulations come into play in the profoundly unequal relationships between them and their employers? What margins of action are available to them, what forms of resistance and questioning?

To answer these questions, in the first section of this article we will analyze the role that migration plays in the labor history of women who enter employment in this field, based on the experiences of a domestic worker in Argentina and another in France. The aim of this comparison is to highlight the particular features of the sector in Latin America. This section will function as a trigger for identifying certain central issues that have played a key role in Latin American research on domestic work, which we will then develop in the following sections. The first such issue, which we analyze in Section 2, has to do with the recent transformations in the regulatory frameworks for these occupations. We consider the scope and limitations of numerous public policies that have been developing over more than a decade to improve labor conditions for domestic workers. We observe how the effects of these public policies are ambiguous and appear to be insufficient to counterbalance the role of personalization in the labor relationship. However, these legal frameworks are not the only collective regulations that influence the dynamic of these occupations. As we examine in Section 3, the social relations among domestic workers, the networks which they form, and their spaces for collective organization have been conceptualized as a set of informal regulations which have important effects on the way that workers position themselves when negotiating with employers and in the labor market.

The reflections that follow are based on our review of the literature (which does not intend to be exhaustive) and on research into these activities that we have been carrying out in the

city of Buenos Aires since 2008.³ They focus on Argentina, although we attempt to broaden the scope of our analysis by contextualizing it in relation to the dynamics in other countries in Latin America, particularly Brazil, which is the focus of two of the other articles that make up this special issue.

Starting Out in Domestic Work: A Point of Arrival or a Point of Departure?

The point at which women first start to work in domestic service is a key moment in the narrative they construct of their experience in the sector. Nevertheless, it also allows us to observe how these workers' personal paths intersect with and are reconfigured by different situations that are characteristic of work in the domestic service sector. In this section we will analyze the role that different migratory situations play in the labor histories of domestic employees. As we mentioned above, contrasting the cases of two workers—one who lives in the greater metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, Dora, and another in Paris, Safia—will allow us to shed light on some of the particular characteristics of paid domestic work in some Latin American countries. There follows a brief description of each worker's history.

³ In the context of this research, we carried out qualitative fieldwork in different stages. These included in-depth interviews with domestic workers and employers. We contacted the workers through different organizations that play a role in this sector (unions, associations, training centers), where we also interviewed authorities and observed the activities taking place. We also carried out informal observations and interviews in different city squares, where we were able to make contact with domestic employees who were (generally, but not exclusively) engaged in childcare tasks. Parallel to this fieldwork, as part of a research trip to Paris, we carried out an exploratory study of domestic workers and their female employers in Paris. We carried out in-depth interviews with members of both groups and undertook observations at playgrounds in squares in two Paris neighborhoods where domestic workers take the children they are looking after.

Safia is originally from Morocco, in her fifties, and migrated to France in 2005 with her ten-year-old daughter, trying to escape the violence she suffered at the hands of her partner. With the help of her siblings, she was able to travel to Paris and set herself up there. Through her sister-in-law, she began to work looking after a little boy. From that point on she has worked in domestic service, alternating between looking after children and cleaning private houses by the hour for different employers. She divides her days between her work and looking after her daughter and her home. She has recently obtained legal residency in France after marrying a man with French nationality.

Dora is 57. She is divorced, has no children, and lives with her mother and one of her nine siblings in Monte Grande, in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. She was born in Entre Ríos province but moved to Buenos Aires with the rest of her family when she was eight years old. As is the case with many of the women we interviewed during our fieldwork, paid work appears early in Dora's account of her life. She started her first job in the sector when she was 14, but clarified that she had worked from when she "was little," since she first arrived in Buenos Aires, when she would help her mother, who also worked in domestic service. This early integration into the world of work is how Dora explains the fact that she had to leave school after finishing sixth grade, when she was eleven years old. She later managed to continue her education and finish elementary school, but even today she says that she would still like to finish high school.

Dora's history reveals certain key aspects of the ways in which women start paid domestic work in Argentina. One feature that is often stressed by the literature on domestic service in Latin America is how many women start work in the sector at an early age, which coincides with the interruption of their formal education (Chaney and Castro, 1993; Ávila, 2008). At the same time, in Dora's case, the fact that her mother and two of her sisters were working in domestic service made this the

closest employment option at hand for her. As a result, she began work at the age of fourteen performing domestic tasks and looking after three children for a family that lived nearby, with which she would develop a long working relationship. She has always worked as a live-out employee (that is, she has never lived within her employers' homes), mainly working full time for a single employer, with the exception of a few brief stretches of working by the hour for several employers.

Integration into the labor market at an early age, migration from the provinces to large urban centers, and leaving school are all factors that function as a label of origin for the women who work in domestic service in Argentina, and also in many other countries in the region. As Ávila (2008) has showed in the case of Brazil, paid domestic work is a near horizon in terms of employment options for women from the popular sectors. This reflects recent data published by the ILO (2016) in which domestic workers are shown to have a relatively higher share in the labor market in developing regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean, where women who work in domestic service represent 27 percent of the female labor force (ILO, 2013a, cited in ILO, 2016).

For women from the popular sectors, such as Dora, domestic service is a naturalized and available source of employment, in that it is a highly accessible job opportunity. At the same time, for those who work by the hour, it is a job that offers greater flexibility, which is valued by women who are heads of households or who have small children to look after, in comparison with other jobs that provide similar income levels but imply similar or worse working conditions and longer or stricter working hours (Pereyra and Tizziani, 2013). These characteristics are often what determine these women's choice of this type of work over others that are more socially valued, but that also imply higher levels of training. Indeed, with regard to the group of jobs that are available to women from the popular sectors⁴,

⁴ In the city of Buenos Aires, non-domestic cleaning jobs, working as assistants in geriatric homes or day-

training and experience in jobs that enjoy greater social recognition do not necessarily lead to better working conditions than domestic service.

However, as we anticipated in the introduction, a key factor in how this sector is configured is migration, which, as we will explore, unfolds differently depending on the region in question. As a result, the labor histories of the workers analyzed in our research reveal different migratory situations with different characteristics, as can be observed in the cases mentioned in this text. In the city of Buenos Aires, domestic workers are frequently women from other provinces in Argentina who come to the capital at a very young age, often with the rest of their families, or who are sometimes sent to live with other members of the extended family who reside in the city or on its outskirts. This sort of internal migration does not imply a change in the women's citizenship status, in contrast to the situation for migrant women in European countries (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010; Marchetti, 2010; Parreñas, 2001).

This migratory pattern also emerges, to a lesser degree, in movement from neighboring countries to major cities in Argentina. Up until 2004, legal issues that restricted and prevented them from obtaining legal residency seriously affected the migrant population that entered Argentina from neighboring countries. However, in 2003, a new law was passed (no. 25.871) that allowed migrants from MERCOSUR countries, Chile, and Bolivia to remain in Argentina, obtain residency, and work permits.⁵ The resulting initiative, which began in 2005, to regularize the legal status of those who had entered the country prior to the law included authorizing temporary and

care centers, and personal services (as beauticians and hairdressers, among others) frequently appear in domestic workers' accounts as past or desirable labor experiences (for more on this, see Tizziani, 2011).

⁵ For more on this topic, see Pavecchia and Courtis (2008).

permanent residency permits and making the requirements for these more flexible. These initiatives led to a decrease in the problems many migrants faced in relation to their legal status.

The fact that domestic work is configured in this way in Latin America, together with the characteristics of the region's migratory flows, and clearly differentiates the work-related experiences of Latin American domestic employees from those that work in other regions. Safia, the Moroccan worker mentioned above, is an example of such women, who are of a different migratory and racial/ethnic origin than potential employers in their destination country. Studies such as Lan's (2006), Marchetti's (2010), and Parreñas's (2001), which focus on migrant women in developed countries, pointed to how one of the key features of this population is the dislocation that arose in their lives as a result of migration. Indeed, the women in question often belonged to the middle classes in their countries of origin, and often hired domestic workers themselves. In these cases, migration also implies shifts in social position. Safia's experience reflected this, as she was part of the middle class in Morocco and did not perform paid domestic work there. The fact that she became a domestic worker is closely related to her situation as a migrant in France. That was where paid domestic work first became a viable option for her, given her status as a migrant "with no papers" (as she described it), through her sister-in-law, who helped her get her first job looking after children. In Safia's case, her "illegal" status prevented her from obtaining work in the formal labor market. As Sassen argues (cited in Parreñas, 2000), and as Sotelo et al. (2011) analyze with regard to Mexicans living in Los Angeles, in France, like other countries in the global north, the large demand for low-wage labor, generally in occupations that are considered "women's work," is directly linked to the demand from richer sectors of society to maintain their living standards. For women trying to work there, their status as migrants is an impediment to obtaining better paid, more protected work. At the same time, the fact that it is easy to obtain

(informal) paid domestic work makes it "attractive" to workers who need to obtain an income quickly.

These shifts in the social position of migrant workers employed in domestic service in the global north can also be observed in terms of their high levels of education, which may include complete high-school education (as was Safia's case) or even university education, as was pointed out by Marchetti (2010), Salazar Parreñas (2000), Lan (2010), and Gutiérrez (2010). In one of the paradigmatic texts from the renewal of studies on domestic service that took place at the end of the 1990s, Salazar Parreñas (2001) analyzed different "dislocations" (or "narratives of displacement") that shape the experiences of Filipina migrant domestic workers in two cities that are economic centers of global capitalism: Rome and Los Angeles. The author identifies different dislocations that explain the similarity of the experiences of Filipina workers in such dissimilar contexts. One such dislocation is related to what we observed in Safia's case: the contradictory experience of class mobility (the high levels of education among the Filipina migrant workers that Salazar Parreñas studied did not correspond to the social status they were able to attain through their integration into the labor market).

Despite the differences in the histories of the two women described in this paper, there is significant overlap, which is related to the serious restrictions that configure the women's integration into the labor market and their everyday experiences. In Safia's case, these restrictions are related to her status as an illegal migrant, which is articulated with ethnic and geographic discrimination (Ibos, 2012). In Dora's case, the restrictions originate in the fact that she comes from a highly vulnerable social sector, in conjunction with her integration into a labor market that is strongly segregated by gender and socioeconomic sector. These dynamics lock both Safia and Dora into unstable, "feminized" activities characterized by low levels of social recognition, low salaries, high levels of informal work, and limited job security. At the

same time, the work that they carry out places them in profoundly unequal relationships with their employers, ones that take place behind closed doors and that have historically been hard to regulate. In the following section we will analyze how the collective state regulation of paid domestic work has evolved in Argentina, within the more general context of Latin American countries as a whole.

Legal Transformations and Work History

The historical lack of protection for domestic workers throughout the world has been extensively analyzed and reported on in the literature (ILO 2009, 2010, and 2012; and Chaney and Castro, 1993, and Brites, 2013, on Latin America). Domestic work is an occupation that is excluded from the general framework of labor law in most countries and is subject to different regulations. In general, these recognize rights and benefits for domestic employees that are limited in comparison with those of other salaried workers. Furthermore, accessing these minimal levels of protection is a source of conflict for many workers. In the global north, different studies have shown how the irregular migratory status of many such workers prevents them from accessing formal employment that is regulated by different legal mechanisms (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010, among others). In the case of Latin American countries, the high levels of informality that affect their labor markets (and this occupation in particular) hamper workers' access to social protection. According to ILO data, in 2004, only 23 percent of domestic workers were registered with social security institutions in the fifteen Latin American countries included in the study (ILO, 2009).

However, as we mentioned at the start of this paper, in recent decades these problems have become more visible and have come to occupy a central position in the agendas of different political and social players, both in the region and at the international level. This new context has given rise to transformations in the legal framework and a diverse range of public initiatives to formalize employment in

this sector. The scope of these transformations varies from country to country. In 2011, the countries with the highest levels of formal domestic employment were Uruguay and Chile, with over 40 percent; Panama, Costa Rica, and Argentina were in intermediate positions, with around 20 percent; while Colombia and Peru (with 10 percent), and Paraguay (with less than 1 percent) were the countries with the lowest such levels (ILO, 2012). Although the scope of these improvements is still limited and unequal, it is worth asking about the effects this transformation process has had on the ways in which workers organize their day-to-day work.

In Argentina, the most important such transformation was the establishment of a new labor regime that in 2013 replaced the discriminatory legislation that had governed the sector since the 1950s. The new *Special Hiring Scheme for Employees in Private Homes* (Law 26.844) brings nearly all working conditions in line with what the general legal framework stipulates for other salaried employees. These modifications affect the length of the working day, rest hours, holidays, and compensation and severance pay, among other things. It also establishes the right to birth and maternity leave and family allowances, and includes domestic workers in the Occupational Hazards Law (which they were excluded from under the previous regime).⁶

One of the most significant aspects of the new legislation is that it anticipates the creation of a joint commission for collective bargaining made up of union and government representatives whose objective is to regulate salaries and working conditions by negotiating collective labor agreements. This is no small matter, given that there are only a handful of countries whose national legislation allows domestic workers to collectively negotiate their working conditions. These negotiations have

⁶ Francisca Pereyra (2012) has undertaken a detailed analysis of the extent of the improvements that the new regime entails in comparison with the previous one.

been introduced very recently in different Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, but they have a long history in certain European countries (France, Belgium, and Germany, among others). They are a crucial part of the process of improving working conditions and revaluing an occupation that is strongly stigmatized, a process that is highlighted in ILO Convention 189 concerning decent work for domestic workers. According to various studies, the introduction of collective bargaining contributes to strengthening labor unions that represent workers in this sector and helps them to become more independent. It also raises the profile of the problems experienced by domestic workers and leads to the adoption of legal instruments that put these workers on an equal footing with those in other types of salaried employment (Pereyra, 2012; Goldsmith, 2015).

Various programs promoting formal employment and the “professionalization” of the sector, which together led to significant improvements to domestic employees’ living and working conditions, accompanied the enactment of the new regime in Argentina. However, it also reproduces some of the discrimination that characterized the prior regime, particularly in relation to part-time workers. These workers, who are becoming increasingly important in Argentina, Brazil, and other countries in the region, depend on a different regime in terms of employer contributions to health services and pension schemes. In the case of these workers, employer contributions are insufficient to cover the amount necessary for workers to have the right to access these services. Being able to do so thus depends on a supplementary contribution from the worker herself or the possibility of combining contributions from various employers, which the worker must organize. This unequal treatment depending on working hours means that those who work part time or by the hour only partially benefit from

the new legal framework (Pereyra, 2012; Tizziani and Pereyra, 2014).⁷

The growing importance of part-time work and work by the hour is not unique to Argentina but rather is representative of a trend that is affecting all the countries in the region, as we mentioned above. Many of the new legislation programs, including Argentina’s, are based on a typical salaried employment model (that is, full-time live-in or live-out work for a single employer), which neglects the issues faced by those who are employed under other arrangements (Poblete and Pereyra, 2015). This is also true in Brazil, where the legal definition of domestic service (which underlines the continual nature of the work carried out within employers’ homes) does not acknowledge the nature of the work performed by “diaristas,” that is, those who work by the hour for more than one employer (Brites, 2013: 19).

More generally, our research in Argentina has shown that the sector has become much more heterogeneous in recent decades, as it has in other countries in the region, in terms of the multiplication of legal frameworks (the regimes which cover workers), working arrangements (in terms of whether they are working full time, part time, or by the hour, and how many hours a week they work), and their relationship with the legal system (workers who are formally employed in one of their positions but who work cash-in-hand for other employers, among other situations of overlap between formal and informal employment) (Pereyra, 2013; Pereyra and Tizziani, 2013).

These situations show the ambiguous effects of this process of transformation in state regulation of the sector. On the one hand, formal employment remains limited for these workers. On the other hand, access to formal employment is not sufficient to transform a

⁷ In 2012, only 5 percent of workers who worked less than sixteen hours per week for a single employer were enrolled in the system.

position in domestic service into a formal job “like any other,” nor to eliminate the highly personal nature of the labor relationship. However, labor law is increasingly present in workers’ accounts of their jobs, as is revealed by the testimonies of Dora and the other women we interviewed throughout our research:

“I work eight hours a week at this new job, but for now it’s only cash-in-hand. I said to the girl, I can’t go on like this, one day the inspectors are going to turn up and I’m going to wash my hands of the whole thing. Either they pay me more, or they stop paying cash-in-hand and do things properly” (Dora, 57).

“Nowadays my bosses really recognize what I do, but it wasn’t like that before. I’ve been working for this lady for a year and a half, and she’s been good with me because after a month they started paying my health insurance contributions, annual bonus, paid vacations, the lot” (Margarita, 27).

As in Margarita’s statement, the allusion to labor law is connected to the recognition of the material and symbolic value of the work they carry out. Furthermore, their references to what is laid out in the law, even when this is not being adhered to, plays a part in modifying their criteria of what is and is not acceptable within a job and is a factor that workers can use to their advantage in their negotiations with employers. The issue of the state monitoring whether employers are fulfilling their obligations, which Dora mentions in the passage transcribed above, is one of the largest remaining challenges in this process of change within the world of paid domestic work. It entails many difficulties, given the fact that it takes place in the private sphere, which is subject to the law of the inviolability of the home (Pereyra, 2012). Despite the fact that it is now compulsory to employ domestic workers on a formal basis, the lack of supervision or audits makes this less effective and more connected to the willingness of “good” employers to fulfill their obligations, thus reinforcing the highly personal nature of this labor relationship (Pereyra and Tizziani, 2013).

These problems and ambiguities within the process of changing the legal framework show how difficult it is to integrate this occupation (which receives little social recognition and is carried out by the most vulnerable women in society) into institutionalized systems that are collectively regulated.⁸ This does not mean that domestic workers are isolated. As we will see in the next section, through the relationships that they establish with other workers within informal social spaces and spaces for collective organization, domestic employees build a shared frame of reference that has a major impact on both the way that they carry out their work and their position in the labor market.

Towards the Construction of a Collective Dimension of Domestic Work

Many studies have focused their analysis on the relationship that is established between domestic workers and their employers as a strategy through which to approach the way that multiple mechanisms of social differentiation and hierarchical are structured and reproduced, transcending national borders. However, another group of studies have underlined how the relationships that are established between domestic workers affect

⁸ All labor relations are marked by inequality, which is why systems of collective regulations are so important in how these relationships are configured. As Robert Castel argues: “the worker, left to his or her own devices, does not ‘possess’ almost anything, other than the vital need to sell his or her labor. This is why the pure contractual relationship between the employer and the employee is a profoundly unequal exchange between two individuals, in which one can impose conditions on the other because he or she possesses resources that the other totally lacks and which can be used to sway things in his or her favor. In contrast, if there is a *collective convention*, it’s no longer the isolated individual who is negotiating. Instead, he or she is supported by a set of rules that were collectively negotiated in advance and which are the expression of a commitment between collectively constituted social agents” (Castel, 2003: 37).

the way in which these carry out and conceptualize the day-to-day practices that make up their work. These studies have focused on two aspects of work in the sector that have been less well studied: the importance of personal networks and the social spaces shared by workers.

The former is connected to the importance of personal relationships in finding work in the first place, and in mobility between different jobs within the sector (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Romero, 2002; Lautier, 2003; Gogna, 1993; and Chaney and Castro, 1993). Information circulates within these networks regarding employment opportunities, the different salary employees receive, and the working conditions they experience. In this way, even when the labor relationship is established through personal negotiations that take place behind closed doors, it benefits from the information that circulates through the social networks and personal relationships among workers and among employers. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1994) study on the experiences of Latina domestic employees in Los Angeles, workers' involvement in these social networks contributes to the construction of a specific labor culture (made up of shared labor practices and the transmission of knowledge) that workers can turn to in order to improve their working conditions.

Social spaces where workers come together also play a role in configuring this collective dimension of labor practices. Parks and squares, train stations, restaurants and cafés, churches, and other spaces where workers spend their free time all enable them to meet up with other employees and exchange information about their jobs (Lan, 2003, 2006; Salazar Parreñas, 2001). In these spaces, which Pei-Chia Lan describes as "backstage areas,"⁹

⁹ In her analysis of the experience of Filipina workers in Taiwan, the author takes up the notions of the "front region" and "backstage" put forward by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959: 112). During the week and in the employers' residence, which constitutes the front region, workers

employees can temporarily revert the patterns of domination that mark their daily work. On their days off, the deferential treatment that employees must maintain during the week gives way to criticism, observations, and humor about the people that they work for, which emerge as strategies of resistance through which they construct autonomy (Lan, 2003: 152).

Domestic workers do not only develop these intense social relationships in their free time. The very structure of domestic service allows them to extend these networks and their exchanges with other workers during their working hours and within their employers' territory. Although the majority of the workers' tasks take place within the employers' homes, there are a series of activities that spill out of the physical space of the domestic sphere. Hallways and lobbies, school gates, playgrounds and sandpits, and shops are all spaces in which domestic employees perform part of their responsibilities and enable them to establish more diverse social relations than those that connect them with the employer group. This is the case of those workers who look after children, who often "work together" at parks and sandpits. Amanda Armenta's study of Latina nannies in Los Angeles who spend time together at Peeble Park shows that these women "create a community," a collective identity, by collectively watching the children that they care for (Armenta, 2009: 290). Caroline Ibos also located her study of African domestic workers in Paris at a playground, and analyzed the group of women that met there as the playground "labor union," in the sense of a "space for shared dialogue" (Ibos, 2012: 132).

This issue of social relations and interactions between workers in informal spaces is not as present in the Latin American

have to "act like maids," showing deference and submission to those that hire them. This behavior contrasts with the identity that these workers construct with their peers "in the wings," that is, outside their employers' territory.

literature on domestic service. However, throughout our research we have seen that the spaces for socializing and the personal networks identified by authors that focus on the global north also emerge as relevant social spaces for workers in the city of Buenos Aires. These spaces that workers pass through and which they meet up in form part of the day-to-day nature of their jobs, just as the personal networks that they are part of become key mechanisms through which they circulate information. During these encounters, the information that circulates is mainly related to the way in which workers carry out their tasks: salary, working hours, the workplace, how many people are in their employer's family, whether or not there are children or pets. This socialization among peers allows these workers to conceive of themselves (and their jobs) as existing within a framework that is defined as collective and that is constructed through the way in which other workers account for their experiences. It thus enables them to collectively interpret these work-related situations and to construct a representation of the global labor market which they are part of (Gorbán and Tizziani, 2015).

Although the collective aspect that centers on personal networks and social spaces has not often been addressed in Latin American studies, this is not true of the more institutionalized spaces for collective action on the part of domestic workers. Indeed, numerous studies have considered the functioning and importance of domestic workers' labor unions in different countries in the region. In Elsa Chaney and Mary Castro's (1993) pioneering compilation, various studies look at the scope and limitations of collective organization among domestic workers (in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, among other countries). These studies underline the difficulties of collectively organizing domestic workers due to different factors: their isolation in the workplace, the pervasiveness of informal working arrangements, and the fact that workers do not really identify with such a highly undervalued occupation, among other factors. Despite these multiple difficulties, there are domestic worker organizations in

most countries and these often have a long history.

Brazil's labor unions have been analyzed extensively, for example. Through biographical approaches, these studies have looked at the particular features of activists' lives, in which forms of identification that are based on class origin, gender, and race all overlap (Brites, Monticelli, and De Oliveira, 2012; Bernardino-Costa, 2012; Castro in this issue). Dominique Vidal, in turn, stresses the political role that Brazil's labor unions play. As is the case in Latin America as a whole, these unions occupy a subordinate position in the field of collective organization and face many obstacles when trying to ensure the ongoing participation of the workers they represent. However, unions are vital agents in the spread of labor laws and the shaping of a new sense of justice among domestic workers. They play a role in building a new cognitive context in which those who start work in the sector conceive of this labor relationship, a relationship in which individualized negotiations between workers and employees take a back seat and which is instead based increasingly on legal standards (Vidal, 2007 and 2009).

In our research on the functioning of labor unions in the city of Buenos Aires, we also found this to be the case. In general, workers turn to the union to solve conflicts with their employers or ask questions about labor law. Access to such information redefines their criteria of what constitutes a "good job" within their occupation. In this sense, the information provided by the union functions as a legitimate and legitimizing discourse which can strengthen employees' positions when negotiating their working conditions (Gorbán and Tizziani, 2015).

Finally, Mary Goldsmith's studies from the late 1980s analyzed the importance and potential of transnational spaces of collective organization, such as the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers (Conlactraho). The author tracked this organization's involvement in international negotiations, including those that led to the

ILO adopting Convention 189 concerning decent work. Not only did the involvement of bodies representing domestic workers in this process contribute to their being recognized as legitimate political interlocutors, but also the physical presence of activists at ILO conferences in Geneva subverted the space to which domestic employees are often relegated as part of their day-to-day experience at work. Merely considering an International Labour Conference as a place where a domestic worker belonged was undeniably significant at the political level (Goldsmith, 2013).

If, as we observed in the previous section, existing regulations on domestic service appear to be insufficient to counterbalance the subordination of workers in their negotiations with their employers, social spaces, personal networks, and labor unions reveal the importance of the collective dimension, through which strategies of resistance and questioning are deployed. This collective dimension is constructed differently in the experiences of workers in the global north and in Latin American countries, depending on how their migratory and employment statuses come together. As we have observed throughout this section, the interactions between workers in developed countries are based on their shared national or regional origins and the shared experience of migration. In Argentina, it is workers' experiences within their jobs that lie at the heart of the collective dimension. The issue of migration remains present in the way the sector is configured, but it is the information that workers share on their day-to-day experiences of work (both at unions and in social spaces) that brings them together. The importance that this collective dimension takes on in their experience of work in domestic service, which is built on different forms of identification in different regions, tempers the image of isolation that is frequently associated with these workers. It also allows them to raise the profile of the practices and collective actions through which they seek to counteract the structural inequalities that shape their daily lives.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to show (without intending to do so exhaustively) the diversity and richness that characterize the analyses that have revived studies on domestic service in different regions in recent decades. In many countries in the global north, such analyses seek to situate the experiences of domestic employees—most of whom are women who have migrated from other countries—within the dynamics that configure the global market of domestic work and care. In the context of such dynamics, which reinforce the sexual and international division of reproductive work, this form of employment connects women across borders, within a relationship that is marked by the hierarchies of gender, class, ethnic background, and citizenship status. These dynamics help shape this particularly vulnerable, feminized “globalized proletariat,” which carries out unstable and informal activities on which society places little value.

In this article we have tried to create a dialogue between such analyses and the specific dynamics that have been observed in some Latin American countries, particularly Argentina and Brazil. Indeed, the same restrictions mark the experiences of domestic workers in these societies, although they are organized differently. Problems in connection with experiences of migration and citizenship are not so significant in these contexts. However, the fact that domestic workers tend to come from poorer sectors of society, leave school early, and start work at a young age in a labor market that is strongly segmented by gender and socioeconomic status puts them in similarly vulnerable and subordinate positions.

In recent decades, studies in Latin American countries have paid particular attention to a series of state-led initiatives that focus on this occupation. The resulting process of change has raised the profile of the problems faced by women who work in such jobs and has contributed to improve their living and working conditions. Similarly, although respect for the legislation in question is far from

widespread, this process has helped create a new conceptual framework through which domestic workers conceptualize their jobs, strengthening their position in negotiations with their employers.

All the same, the effects of these transformations remain ambiguous and are not enough to counterbalance the highly personal nature of these particular labor relationships. This does not mean that domestic workers are isolated. As many studies have shown, there is another set of informal regulations that also play an important role in the way their day-to-day experiences of work are configured. Socializing among domestic workers, which is based on shared experiences of migration in the case of employees in the global north, contributes to the construction of a labor culture through which strategies of resistance and questioning are deployed. In the case of Latin American countries, this collective aspect of work in the sector is, according to many studies, linked to labor unions and is based on similar employment experiences.

This reflection on the experiences of paid domestic work in the global north and some Latin American countries reveals the rich variety of analytical perspectives that seek to incorporate these experiences into the processes that so often mark the lives of women from the popular sectors. Both the mechanisms of hierarchy (of gender, class, citizenship, and ethnicity) that define the subordinate position of these workers and the forms of identification that give rise to strategies of resistance converge differently in workers lives and labor histories, depending on the dynamics that shape the domestic service sector in each region.

References

Armenta, A. (2009). "Creating Community: Latina Nannies in a West Los Angeles Park". *Qualitative Sociology*, (32) 279 – 292
DOI: 10.1007/s11133-009-9129-1

Ávila, B. (2008). "Algumas questões teóricas e políticas sobre emprego doméstico". In Ávila B. et al. (Eds) *Reflexões feministas sobre informalidade e trabalho doméstico* (pp. 63-71). Recife: SOS CORPO.

Bernardino-Costa, J. (2007). *Sindicatos das trabalhadoras domésticas no Brasil: teorias da descolonização e saberes subalternos*. Tese (Doutorado) , UNB, Brasília.

Borgeaud Garcíandía, N. y Georges I. (2014). «Travailleuses en migration dans "les Suds" », *Revue Tiers Monde*, (217) 7- 24
DOI : 10.3917/rtm.217.0007

Brites, J.; Monticelli, T. y Oliveira, E. (2012). "Serviço Doméstico, Participação Política e Cidadania - um estudo a partir da inserção política", In: *Anais da 28ª Reunião Brasileira de Antropologia*, São Paulo

Brites, J. (2013). "Domestic Work: Issues, Literature and Policies", *Cadernos de Pesquisa* 43 (149) 422-451.

Castel, R. (2003). *L'insécurité sociale*, Paris: Seuil.

Chaney E. y García Castro, M. (Eds.) (1993). *Muchacha, cachifa, criada, empleada, empregadinha, sirvienta y...más nada*. Caracas: Editorial Nueva Sociedad.

Ehrenreich, B. y Russell Hochschild, A. (2002). *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Esquivel, V.; Faur, E. y Jelin, E.(eds) (2012). *Las lógicas del cuidado infantil. Entre las familias, el Estado y el mercado*. Buenos Aires: IDES.

Gogna, M. (1993). "Empleadas domésticas en Buenos Aires". In Chaney, E. y García Castro, M. (Eds.) *Muchacha, cachifa, criada, empleada, empregadinha, sirvienta y más nada* (pp. 81- 98). Caracas: Editorial Nueva Sociedad.

- Goldsmith, M. (2007). « *Disputando fronteras: la movilización de las trabajadoras del hogar en América Latina* », *Amérique Latine Histoire et Mémoire. Les Cahiers ALHIM* [En línea], URL : <http://alhim.revues.org/2202> Visitada en: abril 2016.
- Goldsmith, M. (2013). “Los espacios internacionales de la participación política de las trabajadoras remuneradas del hogar”, *Revista Estudios Sociales*, (45) 233-246. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7440/res45.2013.20>
- Goldsmith, M. (2015). “La negociación colectiva como instrumento para defender los derechos de la trabajadoras del hogar remuneradas: el caso de Uruguay”, ponencia presentada en *XI Reunión de Antropología del Mercosur*, Montevideo, Uruguay.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. United States: Anchor Books
- Gorbán D. (2013). “El trabajo doméstico se sienta a la mesa: la comida en la configuración de las relaciones entre empleadores y empleadas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires”, *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, (45) 67 - 79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7440/res45.2013.06>
- Gorbán, D. y Tizziani, A. (2014). “Employers in the domestic service: between estrangement and tension”, *Women's Studies International Forum*, (46) 54-62. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2014.01.001
- Gutiérrez Rodríguez, E. (2010). *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect*. London: Routledge
- Hochschild, A. (2002). “Love and Gold”, in Ehrenreich, B. y Russell Hochschild, A. (eds.) *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (p. 15-30). New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Hochschild, A. (2008). *La mercantilización de la vida íntima*. Madrid: Katz.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2007). *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994). “Regulating the unregulated: Domestic workers’ social networks”. *Social Problems*, (41) 201–215.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. y Avila, E. (1997). “I’m here but I’m there”. The meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood. *Gender & Society*, 11 (5) 548-571.
- Ibos, C. (2012). *Qui gardera nos enfants ? Les nounous et les mères*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Jelin, E. (1976). “Migración a las ciudades y participación en la fuerza de trabajo de las mujeres latinoamericanas: el caso del servicio doméstico”. Recuperado de: http://www.cedes.org.ar/Publicaciones/Est_s/Est_s04.pdf
- Lan, P. (2003). “They Have More Money but I Speak Better English!’: Transnational Encounters Between Filipina Domestic and Taiwanese Employers”. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, (10) 132–61. DOI: 10.1080/10702890390214347
- Lan, P. (2006). *Global Cinderellas. Migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan*. London: Duke University Press.
- Lautier, B. (2003). “Las empleadas domésticas latinoamericanas y la sociología del trabajo: algunas observaciones acerca del caso brasileño”, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 65, (4), 789 -814. DOI: 10.2307/3541583
- Marcchetti, S. (2010). *Paid domestic labour and postcoloniality. Narratives of Eritrean and Afro-Surinamese migrant women*. Utrecht: All Print.

- OIT (2016). *Protección social del trabajo doméstico : tendencias y estadísticas* / Oficina Internacional del Trabajo, Departamento de Protección Social (SOCPRO) en colaboración con INWORK, (Documentos de política de protección social ; No. 16). Geneva: ILO
- OIT (2009). *Trabajo decente para los trabajadores domésticos*, Ginebra: ILO.
- OIT (2012). *Panorama Laboral 2012. América Latina y el Caribe*, Lima: ILO.
- Oso Casas, L. (2002). « Stratégie de mobilité sociale des domestiques immigrées en Espagne », *Revue Tiers Monde* 43 (170) 287-305
- Pacecca, M. I. y Courtis, C. (2008). *Inmigración contemporánea en Argentina: dinámicas y políticas*. CEPAL. Recuperado de: <http://www.cepal.org/publicaciones/xml/9/34569/lcl2928-p.pdf>
- Parreñas Salazar, R. (2002). "The care crisis in the Philippines: Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy" in Ehrenreich, B. y Russell Hochschild, A. (eds) *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (p. 39-54). New York: Metropolitan Books
- Parreñas Salazar, R. (2000). "Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor". *Gender & Society*, 14 (4) 560-580. DOI: 10.1177/089124300014004005
- Parreñas Salazar, R. (2001). *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, Domestic Work*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Pereyra F. y Poblete L. (2015). "¿Qué derechos? ¿Qué obligaciones? La construcción discursiva de la noción de empleadas y empleadores en el debate de la Ley del Personal de Casas Particulares (2010-2013)", *Cuadernos del IDES*, (30) 73-102.
- Pereyra, F. (2012). "La regulación laboral de las trabajadoras domésticas en Argentina. Situación actual y perspectivas". En Esquivel V., Faur, E. y Jelin, E. (eds.) *Las lógicas del cuidado infantil. Entre las familias, el Estado y el mercado* (pp. 165-200) Buenos Aires: IDES.
- Pereyra, F. y Tizziani, A. (2013). "Usos y apropiaciones de la regulación laboral por parte de las trabajadoras domésticas en Argentina. El impacto de las transformaciones recientes y los desafíos pendientes". *Revista del Trabajo*, (45) 65-90.
- Pereyra, F. y Tizziani, A. (2014). "Experiencias y condiciones de trabajo diferenciadas en el servicio doméstico. Hacia una caracterización de la segmentación laboral del sector en la ciudad de Buenos Aires", *Revista Trabajo y Sociedad*, XV (23) 5-25.
- Rodgers, J. (2009). "Cambios en el servicio doméstico en América Latina", en Valenzuela, M. E. y Mora, C. (eds.) *Trabajo doméstico: un largo camino hacia el trabajo decente*. Santiago de Chile: Organización Internacional del Trabajo.
- Romero, M. (2002). *Maid in USA*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Tizziani, A. (2011). "De la movilidad ocupacional a las condiciones de trabajo. Algunas reflexiones en torno a diferentes carreras laborales dentro del servicio doméstico en la ciudad de Buenos Aires", *Revista Trabajo y Sociedad*, XV (17) 309-328.
- Tizziani, A. y Gorban, D. (2015). "Circulación de información y representaciones del trabajo en el servicio", *Cuadernos del IDES* (30) 108-125.
- Vidal, D. (2007). *Les bonnes de Rio. Emploi domestique et société démocratique au Brésil*. Lille: Septentrion.

Copyright of Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies (JOLLAS) is the property of Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.