

# Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers: Political (Dis)Articulations

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The aim of this paper is to address the configuration of the dominant identity categories in a Latin American feminine network that has historically claimed a lack of public recognition: the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers. Working from the perspective of political discourse theory presented in the first section, we briefly analyze the discourses of emergence and development of the Confederation, focusing on women's struggles to be recognized as "household workers." Special attention is given to their (dis)articulations, particularly with feminists and Catholic lay sectors, as discourses or meaning configurations that conditioned their development as a collective subject. From our perspective, these processes of (dis)articulation established specific meanings for household workers' practices, instituting their limits in relation to other political projects available, including those held by feminists. The dominant meanings of identity categories have not only enabled specific ways to be identified "as a household worker" but also imprinted the limits and possibilities of their political practice.

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El objetivo de este artículo es abordar la configuración de las categorías identitarias dominantes en una red femenina de América Latina que históricamente ha reclamado la falta de reconocimiento público: la Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar. Trabajando desde la perspectiva de la teoría del discurso político, que es presentada en la primera sección, analizamos brevemente los discursos de emergencia y el desarrollo de la Confederación, centrándonos en las luchas de las mujeres para ser reconocidas como "trabajadoras del hogar". Se presta especial atención a sus (des)articulaciones, especialmente con las feministas y los sectores laicos católicos, como discursos o configuraciones de sentido que han condicionado su desarrollo como sujeto colectivo. Desde nuestra perspectiva, estos procesos de (des)articulación establecieron sentidos específicos a las prácticas de las trabajadoras del hogar, instituyendo sus límites en relación a otros proyectos políticos disponibles, incluidos los sostenidos por las feministas. Los sentidos dominantes de sus categorías identitarias no sólo han habilitado maneras específicas de ser identificada "como una trabajadora del hogar", sino que además han impreso los límites y posibilidades de su práctica política.

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**Key words:** discourse analysis, feminists, household workers, identities, politics

## Introduction

Women's and feminist movements have a proven history of rebellions and political resistance in Latin America. Organized around political parties, unions, and autonomous groups, thousands of activists have been mobilized toward a greater political and social inclusion of women, but public institutions have not included all groups equally. Some have been recognized legally and institutionally, whereas others are still invisible. To understand the complex processes that conditioned the public emergence of some political subjects, in this article, we address the configuration of the dominant identity categories in an organized women's network in Latin America that has historically claimed a lack of public recognition, the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Household Workers (CONLACTRAHO).

Some approaches presuppose an identity substrate previous to the instance of political organization, evaluating strategies, successes, and challenges of the collectives they analyze as if they were discrete elements, independent of each other in their logic and definitions. By contrast, we propose addressing the identity configuration that emerges from specific meaning practices and (dis)articulations. Working from the perspective of political discourse theory presented in the first section, we will briefly analyze the discourses of emergence and development of the Confederation, focusing on the struggles of its members to be recognized as "household workers." Special attention is given to the household workers' (dis)articulations, particularly with feminists and Catholic lay sectors, as discourses or meaning configurations that conditioned their development as a collective subject. From our perspective, these processes of (dis)articulations established specific meanings to household workers' practices, instituting their limits in relation to other political projects available, including those HELD by feminists. The dominant meanings of the identity categories sustained by the CONLACTRAHO members have not only enabled specific ways to be identified "as a household worker" but also imprinted the limits and possibilities of the Confederation's political practice.

## Politics and Rhetoric: Performative Signifiers

Despite numerous studies that have questioned the category of "women" as a foundation of the subject in feminisms, the ways in which dominant social sciences think women's movements do not question the constitution of collective identity; the cases analyzed under these perspectives are often viewed as already constituted social agents who must be evaluated on their successes, failures, progress, and setbacks with respect to society or the state. Fundamentally based on dominant narratives on social movements and collective action, these approaches continue to address the achievements of women's movements and effects on the public agenda (e.g., the design or implementation of public policies) as consequences of their repertoires of action or the structure of political opportunities. Assuming a particular notion of agency in terms of instrumental rationality: first, there are women's interests, followed by supporting decisions (choices), which then guide actions. Even though many works seek to distance themselves from essentialist assumptions, recognizing the intersection between gender, class, and race, for example, they fail to prevent these categories from

being conceived as tight compartments in topographical terms, as differential homogeneous categories, transparent and with immediate effect on the definition of the interests they represent.

In this paper, we present an analytical perspective that questions the theoretical assumption of a constituted subject, which views collective actors as organized and mobilized from identities, interests, or both *prior* to action. We recognize the centrality of the process of identity formation from a differential and nominal logic. Differential, because it is understood that identities emerge only due to differentiation from prior identities. There are no positive terms or inherent characteristics that allow us to identify and place the actors definitely in the social spectrum; there are only formal differences that emerge in relation to other social actors. As Ernesto Laclau indicated, relations between actors will not be an “interaction/determination between fully formed social areas, but a field of semi-relational identities” (Laclau, 1990, p. 41). This approach is also nominal, because it sustains that “signifiers of ‘identity’ produce effective and rhetorically the same social movements that they seem to represent” (Butler, 1993, p. 296). It is the same process of representation and nomination that retroactively creates the represented collective.

Although we reject conceptions that presuppose preformed identities as the basis of mediation logic between elements—interests that are *present* and *expressed* in action—we do not suggest that nomination practices are configured in an empty space; the constitution of any identity is configured from, or in spite of, preestablished identities. As Judith Butler has noted, the nomination instance does not have an original, transcendental, or controlling authorship of the signifying chain it represents; “it is an iterable practice which shows that what one takes as a political signifier is itself a sedimentation of prior significant” (Butler, 1993, p. 309). In Derridean terms, even if it is argued that the person who is represented does not preexist the relationship of representation, performativity of the operation is not completely pure and is contaminated by a *constatative*.<sup>1</sup> There is continuity and discontinuity, citation and performativity.

If we consider the collective’s configuration as a performative instance that articulates differences behind a name that installs new meanings, but only from a citation reference of what was already instituted, it leads us to question the processes that have installed certain identity signifiers, for example, in this case, in the women’s movement. Our way of understanding these processes stresses that the nomination operation is essentially a *political* and *hegemonic* operation. It is political because there are no objective criteria or rational bases to sustain the meaning inscription with any of the forms it takes being equally arbitrary. It is hegemonic because the signifiers are not equally qualified to represent a collective as this operation takes place on a field that is already partially “sedimented,” constituted with some alternatives having more legitimacy and credibility than others.

With these theoretical assumptions, we are interested in analyzing how certain names have been installed in female political practice, specifically among domestic or household workers; we attempt to recognize their dominant meanings and their incidence in their political definition. In this process, we will not focus on the identities that the organizations are given—as if they represented *a priori* defined groups, autonomous of other groups—but on the names and political

practices that articulated certain mobilized sectors, the assigned meanings of their identity categories, and the processes of dispute and redefinition that the performativity of their practices has been (dis)enabling some of the questions we ask are: How did they become recognized as “household workers?” What meanings are usually assigned to the “domestic” or “household” worker? How has that category been resignified? What articulations—with other organizations and collectives—have their identity categories enabled? Which have been disabled or excluded?

### **Struggles for Recognition: CONLACTRAHO<sup>2</sup>**

After briefly reviewing the narratives of the emergence of the Confederation, this section will focus on what we regard as the main significant configurations that have given a particular sense to the workers’ claims and identity, one from women’s activism, which resembles a specific tradition within feminists, and the other from a lay Catholic activism, which resembles labor and third-world activism and is known as the Young Catholic Workers (JOC, for its Spanish initials).

### **Emergence Narratives**

CONLACTRAHO was created in 1988 as the first regional organization of domestic workers worldwide. It followed the First Meeting of Latin American and Caribbean Household Workers, held in Bogotá, Colombia, which was organized by three women, Aida Moreno Valenzuela, from Chile; Adelinda Díaz Uriarte, from Peru; and Jenny del Carmen Hurtado, from Colombia.

According to the organizers’ narratives, the emergence of the Confederation was intimately linked to the stimulus and support of Elsa Chaney, a U.S. feminist scholar of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) who organized a panel between researchers and domestic workers to disseminate the few studies on this field that circulated in the early 1980s (Chaney & García Castro, 1993; Weisman, 2001).<sup>3</sup> According to some versions, the Confederation was actually an initiative of Elsa Chaney.<sup>4</sup> Although the difference between a project generated as a workers’ claim and another that had encouragement from a feminist academic is not subtle, without Chaney’s commitment, CONLACTRAHO’s development would not have been possible. After organizing the LASA Panel, Chaney was the main person responsible for fund-raising for the 1987 preparatory meeting and the First Latin American and Caribbean Household Workers Meeting held the following year. At this First Meeting, held on March 30, 1988, 35 domestic workers, delegates from 19 organizations from 11 Latin American countries, agreed on the creation of CONLACTRAHO. Elsa Chaney, Mary García Castro, and Alejandro Cussianovich, a Peruvian priest who had been working with domestic workers in that country, helped “draft the agreements and resolutions of the Congress” (Díaz Uriarte, 1993, p. 340; Moreno, 2012, p. 123). The logo that emerged from the First Congress and that still identifies CONLACTRAHO not only reflects the dominant conception of the workers’ claims but also outlines the priorities of those who accompanied them: “It is not enough to have rights. We must have consciousness. We must organize ourselves to defend them.” This

concept was also present in the title of the study on the specific situation of domestic workers, which it was agreed would be developed at the Second Congress, held in Santiago, Chile, in 1992: "Humanizing domestic work, making the invisible visible."<sup>5</sup>

### **Making the Invisible Visible: "Work" and Its Meanings**

Six CONLACTRAHO Congresses have been held since its creation in 1988,<sup>6</sup> and the workers have participated in many international events, including the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, the IX Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting, and a variety of seminars on migration and against child labor and human trafficking.

However, twenty years after its foundation the organization of household workers does not seem to have changed much. Although the Confederation has grown in subsidiaries, activities, and experiences,<sup>7</sup> and most of its member countries have achieved legislative reforms favoring domestic workers,<sup>8</sup> its objectives continue to focus on making society and the workers themselves aware of household work as "dignified work," equal in rights and obligations to other paid work. Their demands still claim for "the right to dignified work" and to "stop ignoring us."

As pointed out by Mary Goldsmith, there is a "discourse of dignity" that has been guiding the struggle of CONLACTRAHO and has been "enriched" with "human rights" discourse (Goldsmith, 2010, p. 10). From our perspective, this discourse has materialized not only in slogans ("for a dignified job," "for the dignity of domestic workers," "household workers with pride and dignity") but also in the meaning of the concept of "work" itself. Although the claim for "dignified work" is a demand repeated and reproduced in many of the labor mobilizations in Latin America, not all of the claims have the same meaning. Among domestic workers, the narratives that persist seem to be those begging for "better treatment," "humanization" of their person, and a "valuation" of their work, all of which deserve a particular analysis.

The most extensive analyses in this field tend to explain the persistence of such claims in the continuity of objective conditions of precariousness and informality of a historically relegated sector. By contrast, our perspective is oriented toward questioning the conditions of possibility that enabled these singular ways of identification. How was the identity of the "household worker," of the "domestic worker," constituted? What meanings are assigned to the category of "worker," of "dignified work?" From what traditions of thought have those categories been configured? What are the boundaries of these meanings? Regardless of the structural conditions that have favored the exploitation of this sector, we are interested in recognizing how their claims came to be interpreted one way and not another. For example, considering the differences with the Marxist tradition and implications in the definition of political (im)possibilities.

Having noted individuals and institutions unrelated to the exercise of domestic works stimulated and supported the organization process of workers in CONLACTRAHO, and recognizing the complexity of identifying significant patterns that have shaped the category of "work" in CONLACTRAHO, in this article, we intend to point out three aspects that are repeated in the Confedera-

tion's brochures, internal documents, and analyses that have been written about household workers as constituent elements of the discourses of the identity configuration of the Confederation and of the household workers. These aspects are the linkages of the Confederation's discourse to "human dignity" discourse, which was later rearticulated with "human rights" discourse; the assumptions of household workers' discourses about the relations between capital and labor, defined in terms of "patronage"; and the differences between categories that usually accompany the category of "work": "household," "private homes," and "domestic." Specifically, we sustain that there are two configurations of meaning that articulate household workers' claims for "dignified work" and their recognition as people, as "human beings." In each of these perspectives, represented by those who have collaborated with the household workers during their organization, the link between dignity and human rights discourse, the relationships between capital and labor, and the differences between "domestic" and "household" work take on a particular meaning, which will be analyzed in the following sections.

### *Jocistas*

We traced the origin of the organizations that participated in the meeting that generated the Confederation and found that several of them emerged from the Young Catholic Workers (JOC). Although there are household workers that come from organizations linked to the more conservative doctrine of the Catholic Church, such as the *Opus Dei*, most CONLACTRAHO participants come from one of its lay branches that deals with labor and third-world activism. Aida Moreno, the first general secretary of CONLACTRAHO, noted the importance of JOC in the emergence and consolidation of the movement of workers in Chile, leading to the National Association of Employees of Private Homes in 1964 (Moreno, 2012). The same influence was involved in the emergence of the Training and Support Center for Domestic Workers and the Luisa V. Cardijn Institute of Training and Promotion of Domestic Workers in Peru. In Brazil, JOC was also present in the formation of associations of domestic workers and at the first Congress of Young Domestic Workers in 1961 (Goldsmith, 2010; Soneira, 2008) and in the organization of the Union of Household Workers (SINPECAF) in Córdoba, Argentina (A. Burgos, personal communication, March 8, 2014, Córdoba, Argentina). Some of the representatives of CONLACTRAHO, from Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, were also formed in JOC (Díaz Uriarte, 1993; Goldsmith, 2010; Moreno, 2012). The presence of JOC was not only important in the training and motivation for the organization as "household workers" but also provided meeting spaces, mostly churches and parishes. Currently, its presence is still visible, institutionally accompanying the actions of CONLACTRAHO and its initiatives, such as the International Labor Conferences of the International Labour Organization (ILO), at the last 100th Conference held in June 2011 (Bautista, 2011).

It is important to draw attention to the proximity of an association such as JOC in the conformation and current performance of CONLACTRAHO because JOC is an entity that influences the spaces in which it participates. Unlike other religious groups, such as *Opus Dei*, or the congregations of the Sisters of the

Immaculate Conception, or Scalabrini Missionaries, who have also been near CONLACTRAHO workers, especially in job training (Goldsmith, 2010), JOC intervenes from a “social re-Christianization integralist project” (Blanco, 2008, p. 91). It is an integral form of Catholicism that proposes an active role of lay people in committing to religion in all aspects of their life, not only to the liturgical rites. As the current CONLACTRAHO Human Rights Secretary stated when narrating her understanding of religion, “Faith and life go together; you cannot separate the cult from life” (A. Burgos, personal communication, March 8, 2014, Córdoba, Argentina).

In a study of the JOC project in Argentina,<sup>9</sup> Jessica Blanco indicated that its integral perspective was mainly directed to making effective among workers what is now recognized as the “social doctrine of Church,” established from the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). According to Blanco, this doctrine is based on charity and justice, understood as the Aristotelian perspective of “giving each his own.” This view holds that inequality and property are natural and that they arose from differences in talents between people. Its purpose was

to promote collaboration between classes and between capital and labor through charity and “social justice.” From this emanated the duties of workers (working well and not damaging capital or resorting to violence) and employers [*patrones*] (not enslaving workers or interfering [with them] so that they could care for their family and save money). Blanco, 2008, p. 90

From this tradition, a particular relationship between capital and labor was made, with specific effects on the identity of the category of “worker” and “employer” (“*patrón*”), sometimes also called the “capitalist.” Blanco recognizes the configuration of a particular identity of the “worker” based on the JOC’s differentiation from the liberal and communist imagery. Regarding liberalism, the JOC doctrine differentiated from the principles of *laissez-faire* and business ambition ideas that promoted the exploitation of workers. Regarding communism, the JOC criticized the communist doctrine’s will to transform violently a reality that was naturally unequal through the organization of the proletariat from a hierarchical political party, whose objectives were defined *a priori*. By contrast, JOC has defended an organicist social order from a harmonious conception of the social dimension. Similar to communism, the emancipation of the working class has been sought, although this does not implied a radical change of society but the search for the humanization of capitalism. JOC’s objective is to “deproletarize the worker,” in the sense that he or she should not be an instrument of exploitation; at the same time, the worker is held as a privileged identity of the popular sector, an identity that should not make anyone ashamed (Blanco, 2008, p. 99). In *jocismo*, reconciling employers and workers is promoted in a new Christian social order that seeks to integrate the working masses without transforming the “natural” hierarchies, and a particular mode of sustained unionization is promoted, based on the integral promotion of workers, organized with no ties to political parties or personal interests. Workers are represented by figures of sacrifice, humility, selflessness, and a service-oriented belief, all of which are linked to the concept of “dignity of work” related to “human dignity” (Blanco, 2008, p. 101).

From this view, the concept of “working women” is somewhat disruptive. The concept is essentially of working within a home, on an unpaid basis, looking after

the house, children, and husband. This figure bears the image of self-denial, self-sacrifice for love of others. The woman who leaves the house to work and receive remuneration disrupts “household harmony” and her “naturally” feminine functions. The female branch of the JOC fails to *stimulate* female labor but contemplates it secondarily, trying to improve labor conditions for women so that they may have more time for their natural functions and roles. As Blanco pointed out, “*las jocistas*” (JOC women) are not challenged to play the *main character* in the change processes; they only work out of necessity (Blanco, 2008, p. 96). The protagonists are men, but women are called on to mobilize against their exploitation as it affects the development of their natural roles. They are encouraged to organize themselves autonomously in unions and claim the same rights as men: “a dignified work.”

### Feminists

Feminists had an undisputed role in the promotion of women as protagonists in public spaces, but the articulation of feminist and domestic workers has not been a feature with them. Rather, the opposite has been true.

The presence of feminist scholars has defined the emergence and persistence of CONLACTRAHO. As just noted, the Confederation came to fruition, thanks to the unwavering commitment of Elsa Chaney. In addition to her involvement in operational issues for the daily functioning of CONLACTRAHO—which were essential for its existence, including the acquisition of travel funding for household workers—Chaney, along with other feminist scholars such as García Castro, Goldsmith, Figueroa, and Anderson, actively participated in technical and policy advice to workers (Chaney, 1998). This support helped not only in linking CONLACTRAHO to specific international agencies—the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Ford, ILO Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, to name the most important—but also in a particular way of understanding their situation as “female” household workers and in the formulation of specific claims.

Feminist narratives, particularly the “feminist scholars” who have researched and worked with domestic workers in Latin America,<sup>10</sup> focus on several points. First, they highlight the “feminization” and “devaluation” of domestic work, understanding that both categories are significantly related (Chaney & García Castro, 1993a; Goldsmith, 2010; Valenzuela & Mora, 2009). They denounce historical “naturalization” of the exclusive responsibility of women in domestic work and the assumption that it takes no great skill or training to do it (Chaney & García Castro, 1993a; Rodgers, 2009). They highlight how domestic work is part of a devalued couple of hierarchizing dichotomies, resulting from the sexual division of labor, public–private and productive–reproductive.

The relative isolation of the private sphere and the devaluation of domestic work gave rise to a second group of factors that affected domestic workers: their loneliness, and difficulty in organizing collectively (Chaney & García Castro, 1993; Gálvez & Todaro, 1993; Goldsmith, 1993). The fact that household workers work alone in homes or private houses hindered their visibility as well as their collective communication and organization. The fact that household work is socially devalued also influenced the underestimation by other organized and



unionized workers. This “devaluation” and “invisibility” of domestic workers are also reflected in their legal “vulnerability.” These studies insist on how domestic work is outside the protections afforded to other paid workers under “special” legislation, which does not allow the workers to enjoy the same rights in their working conditions, such as workday, wages, social work, vacation, and more.

Another factor is the poverty of workers. In these studies, there is constant reference to the lack of resources for domestic workers, which in turn results in or is linked to other factors that add to their identity as a source of greater discrimination and social vulnerability. Studies stress the lack of formal education; the provenance from the most marginal sectors of society, such as rural areas, remote provinces from the capital cities, or the ghettos of large cities; and their possible origin from indigenous communities (Chaney & García Castro, 1993; Valenzuela & Mora, 2009).

Finally, these studies recognize the ambiguous relationship between domestic workers and their “*patronas*” (mistresses), who are also “women,” and, in some cases, can also be feminists. The ambiguity comes from the fact that, in opposition to “women sisterhood” preached by some feminists, workers “were deeply suspicious of those who should be their natural allies”<sup>11</sup> (Chaney & García Castro, 1993a, p. 14). The interpretation that dominates the understanding of this apparent contradiction is supported by the privileged identity of belonging to a “class,” which is present on both sides, in domestic workers, because they usually recognize themselves collectively as part of the “working class,” above that of “women,” as their employers, and in the “*patronas*” because before being supportive of their “gender sisters,” they take advantage of their class to pass on “their” housework to less-privileged women. Besides enjoying the time available for other activities—paid work outside the home, leisure activities—they avoid conflicts between couples that come from the sexual division of labor (Duarte, 1993; Goldsmith, 1993; León, 2008; Pereira de Melo, 1993).

From this interpretive framework, which is present in most of the feminist research analyzed in this article, the representation of domestic workers takes on a particular meaning; it becomes “emblematic of the subordination of women, [because] it intersects ethnic, national, race and class inequality” (Goldsmith, 2010, p. 7). The domestic worker embodies the figure of women’s oppression, and feminism stands as the perspective from which to achieve emancipation. Persuading household workers of this “fact” has been a main goal and a challenge of feminists in their practices.

## Political Troubles

### Feminine Workers and Feminist Struggles for (Mutual) Recognition

There are multiple factors that explain the emergence and consolidation of a collective organization. As noted in previous sections, our perspective for the analysis differs from prevailing approaches in the fact that we do not take the constitution of the collective for granted. Our perspective starts by questioning its configuration; therefore, we are interested in the conditions of possibility that enabled the collective organization to emerge the way it did, understanding that

those conditions also printed the identity meanings and the horizon of political opportunities. This perspective holds a discursive configuration of the social dimension, which does not mean that reality does not “exist” independently of discourses but that what we call “reality” depends on the structure of a particular discursive field that gives specific meanings to social objects or practices that articulate discursively within a totality.<sup>12</sup>

Social discourses that conditioned the collective organization of domestic workers in CONLACTRAHO come from very different traditions of thought, although they are articulable in specific categories. Claims to “value” domestic work, “humanize” it, make it “visible,” and “dignify” it do not all have the same meaning for Christian and feminist traditions, yet they have been articulated in concrete practices. Both traditions have been articulated in promoting women workers in their own struggle, in the recognition of their “work” as a “dignified paid work,” which must be equal in rights and obligations to that done by men. Both traditions agreed in the Confederation’s identifying slogan, “It is not enough to have rights. We must have consciousness. We must organize to defend them,” but their differences are not insignificant. They point to the kind of “consciousness” they advocate, defining the different political meaning of their practices and the horizon of future possibilities.

### Feminist Consciousness

The feminist political project is aimed at mobilizing domestic workers by emphasizing two points: Workers should understand the importance of their “female subordination” in society (i.e., that they not only denounce unfavorable market relations and capitalist oppression but also recognize the particular oppression of patriarchy) and that domestic work should be valued as “work,” not in the sense of “dignified work,” of which they should not be ashamed, as has been claimed by *jocismo*, but as “paid work,” “done by women,” which should be recognized in the same way as paid work done by men (and that this recognition could translate into equal rights to insurance). In other words, by recognizing the privileged class identity formation of domestic workers, feminists have sought to incorporate male dominance as a transversal axis through the capital–labor relationship; their exploitation as domestic workers is not only the result of capitalism but also of patriarchy. They insist that it is men who benefit from the sexual division of labor, a division that relegates *all* women to the domestic sphere, making it less valuable than paid work done outside the home. The privileged categories that these analyses use, which are often articulated as “dignified work,” or more recently, “decent work” (Valenzuela & Mora, 2009), are “Paid Domestic Work” (TDR) (León, 2008) and “human rights”; “women’s rights are human rights.”<sup>13</sup> From these interventions comes the claim for “humanization” of domestic work, which are harmoniously articulated with the “human dignity” concept held by JOC, its “visibility,” and its “value” as a paid job, just like any man’s paid job.

“Making it visible” and “valuable” became the priority actions on domestic work that feminists have sought to convey to society, including household workers and feminists themselves, who, paradoxically, mostly still do not seem to recognize the importance of articulation for mutual emancipation. Despite the

efforts of some sectors to prioritize the struggles of domestic workers in the feminist agenda, common fronts have been exceptional. If household workers are the “emblem” of female subordination, why does that not translate into a common political project?

One of the difficulties in the articulation of feminists and domestic workers comes from the ambiguous relationship that feminism has had with the “value” of domestic work. On the one hand, feminists have tried to make housework socially valuable, making the importance of their “social role in the daily reproduction of the family unit” visible (Chaney & García Castro, 1993a, p. 16). On the other hand, they also have suggested, more or less explicitly, that feminists cannot support the reproduction of domestic work and must proclaim its abolition (Duarte, 1993; Pereira de Melo, 1993). Some feminists have insisted that hiring a domestic worker

reinforces, rather than challenges, patriarchy and the subordination of women in the society (. . .) [because] a new chain of hierarchical subordination is established in the family: husband/wife/domestic worker (. . .) it places the *pequeño-burguesa* woman in a position of protagonist-executor in relation to the subordination of another woman. (Duarte, 1993, p. 178)<sup>14</sup>

In the case of live-in domestic worker hiring, it would also favor “the development of a welfare-providential type of labor relations” between them and housewives, promoting “consumer expectations” and preventing them from developing an “advocacy consciousness” (Duarte, 1993, p. 188). Goldsmith also refers to

forms of domination (. . .) within the *patrona*-worker relationship [which would be] particularly humiliating [having] negative implications for (. . .) the development of class consciousness, and the creation of labor organizations. (Goldsmith, 1993, p. 202)

Even if the working conditions of domestic workers can be improved, the long-term goal is the occupation of these women in alternative jobs and equitable sharing of unpaid housework among family members, services by the state, or both. In this sense, contradictory statements seem to occur within feminism in relation to domestic workers. On the one hand, they proclaim the need to “value” their work, like any paid work; on the other hand, they denounce the constitutive patriarchal conditions that place women in a relationship of mutual domination, which questions their natural bonds of sisterhood. Behind this tension, the dilemma that became recognized in terms of “practical” vs. “strategic” interest posed by feminists in the mid-1980s arises again (Molyneaux, 2003). If feminists support domestic workers’ struggles for better working conditions, unaltering the gender relations that exclusively assign domestic work to women, then they are not questioning the system of male domination that maintains the distribution of this type of work *among women*. But if they attack domestic work in terms of the oppression relations that it originates, they end up attacking the most important female labor offer in the region. Moreover, the intermediate options—attempting to improve labor conditions and at the same time raising sensibility and mobilization in workers, housewives, and “*patronas*” from a “gender

consciousness”—the most widespread options in practice, do not seem to overcome the difficulties of common articulation.

### Final Reflections: Workers' Political (Dis)identifications

Public recognition claimed by Latin American domestic household workers organized in CONLACTRAHO has been mediated by the incidence of two traditions of thought: *jocismo* and feminism. Although both traditions have influenced the process of identity configuration, in this article, we have focused on identifying the difficulties of common articulations with feminists. From our perspective, much of the obstacles found in feminist practices with household workers come from some old assumptions about politics that are still present in some feminists.

Despite the many discussions on essentialist and illustrated assumptions sustained by certain feminisms, which occurred during the “third wave,” these sectors we refer to are still holding “gender consciousness” as an undisputed source of mobilization and emancipatory political practice. They assume that a critical perspective based on knowledge is needed to act politically. Unlike this epistemological privilege in the conception of politics that stresses the need to “know” before “acting,” we propose recognizing the categories that have actually (dis)identified and politically mobilized workers in the process of their collective organization.<sup>15</sup> This process does not imply a collective emancipatory horizon predefined by knowledge (*somewhere* to go, feminist or any other); this teleological scenario would eradicate politics, which is the operation by which political subjects (dis)identifies with some categories (not any categories), and define their radically contingent horizon of (im)possibilities of action.

If we paid attention to these (dis)identificatory processes, before assuming a “household worker”-given identity, naturally linked to a certain predefined feminine condition, we would recognize the importance of their historical articulation to Catholic and Christian circuits in relation to decisions and interest definitions. Let us recall that since the early 20th century, the Catholic Church, especially through its lay organizations, has been close to household workers. Emphasizing training focused on their “vocation of service,” this proximity mutated to most progressive conceptions tied to a particular interpretation of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Thanks to JOC intervention, this conception came to create a unique labor apostolate that prioritized the organization of workers in autonomous unions, without party interference. Ecclesiastically advised by a priest, household workers were encouraged to meet and reflect on their problems as part of the “working class,” becoming aware of their oppression inspired by the social doctrine of the church. Although from this perspective household workers were urged to become protagonists of their own struggles and not be subject to decisions of other people, the fact is that JOC has had considerable weight in the definition of their claims, as well as in the political and organizational outline of CONLACTRAHO. Even feminists recognize this (Chaney & García Castro, 1993a; Goldsmith, 1993, 2010). In the case of Chilean workers, their proximity often led to addressing veto power in decision making, with the presence of a lay “advisor” in their meetings whose “proposals” were always accepted (Moreno, 2012, p. 92). More important, the *jocista* conception of the capital–labor relation-

ship in organic and complementary terms seems to have had an important effect on the preference of the identity category of “household worker” rather than “domestic service.” The demand for recognition as “workers” is based on the refusal to be identified as “servants,” not in the devalued sense attributed to the apparent “feminine” nature of this work but because of their lack of recognition in employment and contractual terms, as “vestiges of feudal relations and servitude” that exclude them from the working class (Castillo & Orsatti, 2005, p. 100). Without underestimating the resignification of the status of “*trabajadora*” as “female” worker, achieved through articulations with feminists, the most widespread interpretation emphasizes the desire to be part of the community of workers (men and women) *as humans*. As Casimira Rodríguez, the former General Secretary of CONLACTRAHO, used to say: “Dogs are domestic”, disdaining the inhuman condition of “domestic.” Moreover, “household” workers, as a preferred identity term, also account for the preeminence among workers of the configuration of the “family,” the “home,” predicated upon a harmonious heterosexual relationship as the integral core of society historically supported by Christianity. As another household worker said to mark her differences with feminists, “We understand that men and women go hand by hand, in the same struggle.” (A. Burgos, personal communication, March 8, 2014).

Having recognized this affinity with the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, we can better understand the difficulty of coordination with Latin American feminists. The Catholic institution is opposed to most feminists in the region, given its dominant perspective about the feminine role in society—exclusively in heterosexual terms—relegated to motherhood and family sustainment.<sup>16</sup> From the viewpoint of this articulation, we could also understand the reluctance of household workers to support feminist claims to legalize abortion or gay marriage.<sup>17</sup>

From our approach, this mutual reluctance that seems to operate in the articulation between feminists and household workers stems from the printed senses in the emergence and identity formation of the “household workers” as intimately linked with the signifying chain that historically sustained these names—“workers,” “household,” and “women”—in catholic circuits. By analyzing household worker discourses, we can appreciate how the meanings of those identity categories can be understood as carried-over sediments from a thought tradition that made possible and conditioned their appearance. If we are suggesting that the nomination and identification as a “household worker” carries, in this case, some of the dominant meanings assigned to women and their work as it is sustained by the Catholic stand point—or by the JOC—as a *citation* of its hegemonic perspective about women’s role in society, we are also signifying that it is not a mere repetition but a performative act. This also means that there is something new about it, something that cannot be predicted or controlled and that can disrupt what is supposed to be repeated. The political dimension of this performative is precisely the unpredictability of its effects, which in this case can reinforce the usual meanings about womanhood, female worker, or household worker, in the jocista’s terms, or destabilize the margins of what was expected from them.

The articulation between the JOC and feminists has also had other repercussions on CONLACTRAHO’s actions. Unlike the emergency period of

CONLACTRAHO, where household workers appreciated a priest or a lay referent of the Church's advice exclusively in terms of "collaboration," we can now perceive some shifts in the workers' positions that seek to warn them against "manipulation" and the importance of "autonomy" (Moreno, 2012, pp. 92–93).<sup>18</sup> Further analysis would be needed to better understand the meanings of these displacements, to what extent these new perspectives can be explained by the articulation between Catholic lay sectors and feminisms, and their implications on the definition of claims and political alliances of household workers.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to John Austin (1962), speech acts can be differentiated into constative and performative, where the former refers to language that describes something, and the latter regards language employed to get a response, to provoke or undertake an action, to "get something done." Jacques Derrida (1971) did a critical reading of these categories, and Judith Butler (1997) did another.

<sup>2</sup>I want to thank Alcira Burgos from SINPECAF of Argentina for providing much of the material used for the preparation of this section; I am also very grateful to Cecilia Re and Romina Lerussi for their support and encouragement throughout the development of this research.

<sup>3</sup>Chaney and García Castro organized a panel at the Mexico LASA Congress in 1983 and invited Adelinda Díaz (Peru), Reyna Solis (Mexico), and Aida Moreno (Chile).

<sup>4</sup>This is the version of Aida Moreno, one of the founders of CONLACTRAHO (Moreno, 2012, p. 120). Chaney's version insists that the creation of the Confederation was a claim from domestic workers. See Weisman (2001, p. 8).

<sup>5</sup>This study was conducted in seven countries in the region and was initiated and funded by an initiative of Chaney, who died before its first publication. It was finished with technical advice from Mary Goldsmith and Mary García Castro, among other people and institutions involved, including the Ford Foundation, UNIFEM, and ILO.

<sup>6</sup>The third congress was held in December 1995, in Guatemala; the fourth in 2001, in Oaxtepec, Mexico; the fifth in 2006, in Lima, Peru; and the sixth in Mexico again.

<sup>7</sup>Currently, CONLACTRAHO represents approximately 30 associations and unions in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, and Uruguay. Among its activities are advisory visits to member organizations, radio programs, and labor training.

<sup>8</sup>See Goldsmith (2010), Blofield (2009), Pereira and Valiente (2007), Macassi León (2008), and Valenzuela and Mora (2009).

<sup>9</sup>Despite the specificity of JOC's actions in each of the countries of Latin America, this analysis can be extended to the understanding of JOC intervention in the region. For studies that identify some of the peculiarities of the performance of the JOC in Latin America, see Mainwaring (1983), Soneira (2008), and García Mourelle (2011).

<sup>10</sup>In this section, we consider the most widely disseminated studies on domestic workers in Latin America, recognizing that not all of them have worked with the organizations of CONLACTRAHO.

<sup>11</sup>In a latter work, Chaney herself spoke of "almost total rejection" (Chaney, 1998, p. 11), and other studies mention "resentment" toward feminists (Pereira de Melo, 1993).

<sup>12</sup>See Laclau and Mouffe (1990); Laclau (1993).

<sup>13</sup>This topic has become dominant among Latin American feminists since the mid-1980s, especially in Argentina, which the United Nations Conference incorporated in 1993. For research that addresses the emergence of the Human Rights Movement in Argentina, see Barros (2013).

<sup>14</sup>This quotation was extracted from the English edition. See Duarte (1993).

<sup>15</sup>To better understand our conception of the limits of a feminist epistemological perspective around politics, see Martínez Prado (2014).

<sup>16</sup>Although Catholics for Choice (*Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir*) is a consolidated feminist network in the region, known for its work on defending sexual and reproductive rights, Latin American feminist activism is mostly against any initiative from the Catholic Church.

<sup>17</sup>Although there are associations of household workers who now hold such initiatives, CONLACTRAHO has preferred to abstain from taking a public position.

<sup>18</sup>These shifts were also present in the position of the CONLACTRAHO when the eviction of the spaces that the Chilean household workers used to gather and organize, previously given by the church, took place (Moreno, 2012, pp. 92–94). This experience was understood as “a lesson for us all, in the sense of taking responsibility for our goods without relying on third persons who claim to protect us” (Rodríguez & Moreno, 2003, p. 3).

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