

Jobs for Latina immigrants as domestic workers in the United States

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A Chinese saying affirms that women hold up half of the sky. It could be added that in many countries they perform about half of the paid labor as well, and do almost all of the housework, which is neither paid nor recognized as work but without which the rest of the economy could not function. In industrialized countries women's growing labor force participation has brought with it – in addition to the double workday – a greater commodification of household chores, which were previously considered to be outside the realm of the market.

In the United States this commodification process has two distinct but complementary facets. One is technological, whereby the production and sale of a wide range of appliances and artifacts makes doing housework much easier whether it be performed by family members or employees.

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There are machines to wash the dishes, wash the clothes and dry them – so that they hardly require any ironing – vacuum and shampoo the rugs, wax and polish the floors. There are special liquids to clean windows, others for removing dust from shelves and furniture, others for hard to clean spaces in the bathroom or the kitchen. Refrigerators and freezers make it possible to store food for considerable periods of time. There are kitchen gadgets designed to cut, chop, beat, blend, make bread, cook rice, etc. In other words, the market place offers an innumerable supply of objects, which are supposed to make washing, cooking, cleaning and all the other household chores easier. However, with or without any or all of these "labor saving" devices, housework never ends.

The demand for domestic workers

The other means of commodifying domestic work is by hiring someone else to do it. Slave labor was commonly used on plantations in the southern states, until it was abolished at the end of the civil war in 1865. There were household slaves as well and they generally

had a status that was superior to that of the field hands. In other states indentured servants – whose passage to America was paid in exchange for three to five years or more of obligatory labor – often performed household chores.

By the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century these practices had disappeared but the ability to have someone else do the domestic work was still largely an attribute of the upper classes, who generally had live in servants. As the 20th century progressed more open relationships between employers and heretofore servants evolved and hiring domestic workers on a weekly or daily basis became more and more generalized throughout the 1930s and 40s. Domestic workers themselves viewed this change as an important step forward. They were no longer obliged to carry out orders at any hour of the day or night. Their workday had a beginning hour and, what's more important, it now had an end. They could now live with their own families and to some extent separate their lives from those of their employers. This change made having domestic workers a less elitist phenomenon because it allowed for hiring someone to perform such tasks once or

twice a week, or even less, rather than every day.

However, the purchase of labor saving domestic appliances became much more widespread than hiring domestic employees. The number of homes with washers, dryers, refrigerators, freezers, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, etc. is still far greater than the number employing others to do the housework on a regular basis. Nevertheless, over the past two decades, there has been a new surge in the demand for domestic workers, especially in certain parts of the country where there are large settlements of Latino immigrants. The feminist movement of the seventies and the neo-liberal economic policies of the eighties both motivated – although for different reasons – increased participation by women in the economically active population (EAP), thereby creating an induced demand for domestic workers on the part of those joining the paid labor force.

While many feminists joined the labor force in pursuit of personal realization, many middle class women were motivated to do so in order to contribute to the growing level of expenditures required to maintain their family's socioeconomic status. With the rising divorce rate many women became heads of households and thereby the main breadwinner of the family. For any number of reasons, ranging from economic need to personal satisfaction, more women than ever before now participate in the paid labor force. Women make up almost half of the EAP in the United States (46.5% in 2000) and their rate of labor force participation is around 60%. Even though the participation rate for women is still somewhat

lower than it is for men – which is approximately 75% – the former has grown tremendously over the past fifty years (it was only 33.9% in 1950). (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, 2000: p. 351).

There are not only more women than ever participating in the labor force but also more married women. In 1920 when 20% of the female working age population was in the EAP, 66.2% of those participating were single, 15.4% were married and 18.4% were widowed or divorced. In 1950, of the 33.9% of working age women who were in the EAP, 31.9% were single, 52.2% were married and 16.0% were widowed or divorced. With a participation rate of 60% in 1998, 26.8% of the women in the EAP were single, 53.1% were married and 20% widowed or divorced (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, 2000: p. 166). Furthermore, more married women with children are now in the paid labor force. The participation rate for all women between the ages of 25 and 44 is approximately 75% while that for mothers who have at least one child under 18 is 71% and the majority of them work full time (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, 2000: 168–169).

Stay at home mothers seem to be a thing of the past. Around the year 1900, eighty percent of the children in the United States lived in families with both parents and the mother, or stepmother, only worked either on the family farm or in the home. At the beginning of the 21st century, two parent families where the mother does not work outside the home make up less than one third of all families in the US (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, 2000, 165–6). The proportion of families conform-

ing to the traditional pattern of a male breadwinner and a female housewife has dropped from 67% of the total in 1952 to 27% of the total in 1999. In contrast, two parent families where the wife works outside of the home, represent approximately one half of all families in the US today. Furthermore, the percentage of such families in which both spouses work full time rose from 32% in 1968 to 48% in 1998. At the same time the number of families with only one parent present has risen from 13% in 1949 to 23% in 1999, eighty percent of which are female-headed families. The percentage of single mothers or fathers who work full time rose from 56% in 1968 to 67% in 1999 (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, 2000: 172–3, 190–1).

In spite of all the gadgets and appliances designed to make housework easier none of these can solve certain problems confronting women who work outside of their homes. Many appliances must be operated or activated by someone and there must be someone on hand to take care of children. The use of day care facilities has not been a very generalized practice in the United States and many women still prefer to hire someone to take care of infants and young children at home. Since the school day usually ends at around 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon and the workday may last till 5 or 6 pm someone needs to be there when the children come home from school.

Therefore there has been an increase in the demand for domestic workers in general, and particularly live in help, among certain middle and upper middle-income families. In fact the practice of paying some-

one to take care of the children is no longer limited to the middle and upper strata of the population. Many working class Latina women have to hire or make arrangements with other Latinas – who have probably arrived in the US more recently than they – to take care of their children so that they themselves can do some sort of paid work outside of their homes – which often means cleaning someone else's house and taking care of someone else's children.

Whether it be by choice or out of necessity – or somewhere in between as in the desire to attain a higher standard of living – more and more women are turning towards paid employment and at the same time opting, according to their means, to hire someone else to do all or at least part of the housework. Consequently women's increased participation in the labor force brings with it a renewed demand for salaried domestic workers. Nevertheless it is quite likely that official statistics will not clearly reflect this trend because most of the hiring is done informally. Most of such workers are paid in cash and neither pay taxes nor receive any benefits or legal protection as workers.

The supply of domestic workers

However as new occupational perspectives opened up for women, the supply of domestic workers waned because there were other better paying and less stigmatized options. During the first half of the twentieth century private household service was an occupation

largely dominated by African-American women. As a result of the civil rights movement they now have access to other jobs and most of them shun this type of work. African-American women constitute only 14.9% of those employed in private household domestic service and Latinas make up 31.7% even though the latter group generally has a much lower labor force participation rate than the former. Therefore this niche of the labor market is turning into an ideal space for Latina immigrants – who arrive in the United States with little or no money, only a few years of schooling if any, and little or no knowledge of English – especially in those geographic regions where they are highly concentrated.

It was already mentioned that women make up 46.5%, that is almost half, of the economically active population in the United States which was 135.2 million persons in 2000. African-Americans constitute 11.3% of the total labor force and Latinos 10.7%. However, in certain parts of the country, such as southern California for example, more than 30% of all workers are Latinos. Furthermore Latinos are highly concentrated in certain categories of the occupational spectrum, most of which pay low wages, as is the case for domestic service. When the overall median weekly earnings level was \$576.00 dollars in the year 2000 – with a median of \$646.00 for male workers and \$491.00 for females – the median for domestic workers, 95.5% of whom are women, was \$264.00. (Employment and Earnings, January 2000, pp. 178–183, and 212–217).

According to official data domestic service in private households is a declining occupational category that employed only 792 thousand persons, or barely 0.6% of the EAP, in the year 2000. Close to two percent of all Latino workers (1.7%) were employed in this category and almost three times more worked for cleaning companies serving office buildings, hotels, shopping malls etc. and even private residences. Labor Department statistics divide domestic service into two subcategories: cleaners and servants which employs 500 thousand workers – 94.8% are women, 16.9% are African-American and 37.7% are Latinas – and childcare providers – of these, 97.5% are women, 11.6% African-Americans, and 19.9% are Latinas (Employment and Earnings, January 2000, pp. 178–183).

An additional 457 thousand persons are employed as childcare providers, outside the realm of private households, by daycare centers and the like – 97.7% are women, 14.8% are Afro-American and 13.3% Latinas (Employment and Earnings, January 2000, pp. 178–183). Childcare like many other tasks is becoming another occupation in the growing list of personal services – that substitute for the work of housewives and even of paid domestic workers – and are now realized outside of the home rather than within it. Many of these commodified services – such as food preparation, washing and ironing of clothes, and caring for children, the elderly or the sick – are now performed by Latina immigrants who earn very low wages.

In spite of the recent proliferation of a great number of services

that are taking the place of domestic work carried out in the home, this is still an important source of employment for Latina immigrants. For many it is their first paid job in the United States. Employment as a live-in domestic worker can provide food and a place to live for a newly arrived immigrant women with no other means for meeting her basic needs. Furthermore, official data cannot adequately measure the volume of employment generated by this sector because most of the hiring takes place outside of the formal economy. The work relationship is based on verbal agreements between employer and employee and the payment is in cash. Generally income tax is not withheld, nor are there contributions to the social security system. In other words, there is no official record of such employment.

Some characteristics of paid domestic work

Due to the informality of the work relationship, paid domestic work has certain specific characteristics. First of all the women who employ domestic workers do not really conceive of themselves as employers. As Pierrette Hondagneau-Sotelo explains, referring to women she interviewed, "While they obviously did not deny that they pay someone to clean their home and care for their children, they tend to approach these arrangements not as employers, with a particular set of obligations and responsibilities, but as consumers." (Hondagneau-Sotelo, 2001, p. 12). Or as Mary Romero points out, many women who work have "difficulty thinking of their

homes as someone's work place" (1992, p. 14). Furthermore, "This problem of paid domestic work not being accepted as employment is compounded by the subordination by race and immigrant status of the women who do the job" (Hondagneau-Sotelo, 2001, p. 12). The fact that many of them are undocumented is another factor that allows for ambiguity and abuse.

While there are labor regulations that cover private domestic work, as Hondagneau-Sotelo points out, practically no one knows about them. "It's almost as though these regulations did not exist." (Hondagneau-Sotelo, 2001, p. 21). Therefore, practices regarding working hours, days off, wages, etc. are established according to the customs of each neighborhood and the socioeconomic level of the employer. In general formal benefits such as paid holidays and vacations or employee contributions to the social security system simply don't exist. In practice, any payment for days not actually worked or any economic support to meet medical or other types of emergencies, or days off to attend to personal or family affairs depends entirely upon the goodwill of the employer.

One of the most difficult contradictions of paid domestic work is that those who perform these jobs usually have to take time away from their own home and family to clean other people's homes and take care of other women's children. "While middle-and upper-class women entrust their children and homes to undocumented immigrant women, the immigrant women often must leave their own children to work." (Chang 2000, p.

58). Those who suffer most from this situation are the live in workers who are only free to go home one or two nights a week. "Some leave their children with family in their home countries, hoping to earn enough to return or send money back to them." (Chang, 2000, p. 58).

This is just one of the factors that makes live in work the least desirable. Since it is assumed that the employer provides room and board for the employee, the monetary pay is usually quite low. In many cases neither the room nor the food is adequate. Few houses in the United States are built with servants quarters, thus the domestic worker may have to share a room with one or more of the children or sleep in some small space adapted for that purpose, which probably has inadequate lighting and poor ventilation. Access to food may be somehow restricted and often only certain foods, usually those the children like and request, may be consumed by domestic workers.

Another enormous disadvantage to live in work is that in many cases the workday never ends. Household members may require the employee's services at any hour of the day or night. Where there are small children, it is usually the domestic worker, rather than the parents, who must attend to them if they wake up during the night. Nevertheless one of the major complaints is isolation. Even though live in workers are almost never alone and have almost no time for themselves, they have no one with whom they can really communicate. Their presence in the house, and where family mem-

bers are gathered, may be at the same time required and ignored. Although the treatment may not necessarily be overtly abusive – as it is in far to many cases – live in domestics are usually ignored and simply not considered or respected as persons.

In spite of these problems, live in domestic employment may be the best option for recently arrived immigrant women who do not yet have other alternatives. As soon as they have acquired some experience, these women usually try to change their status by seeking work on a daily basis, either in a single household or in various, on different days of the week. Each of these arrangements has its own advantages and disadvantages, but in both cases the working conditions and the wages are usually better than for live in workers. However the supply of recently arrived immigrant women willing to withstand the conditions of live in employment seems to be inexhaustible.

Furthermore the demand for their labor, as well as for that of those who have achieved a situation which allows them to accept only day work, is also growing. Undoubtedly, any woman who can find someone else to do her housework, and is in a position to pay for it, will continue to do so as long as the sexist character of such work remains intact. As Mary Romero explains "housework is ascribed on the basis of gender, and it is further divided along class lines and, in most cases by race and ethnicity." (1992, p. 15). "Therefore", she affirms, "domestic service accentuates the contradiction of race and class in feminism, with privileged women of one class using the labor of another woman to escape aspects of sexism." (1992, p. 15). It becomes much easier for them to do so where there is a seemingly unpleasurable supply of immigrant women who are not only willing, but even glad, to do such work for low wages and with no formal contract.

Summary

This article refers to how a renewed demand for domestic workers in the United States has created a labor market niche for newly arrived immigrant women from Mexico and Latin America (commonly called "Latinas" in the U.S.). The wages and working conditions prevailing in this type of employment are usually substandard and hiring most often takes place in the informal rather than the formal sector of the economy. The first part of the article describes how this rising demand for domestic workers was generated over the past two decades. The second part explains why these jobs are avidly sought by Latina immigrants, in spite of the seemingly undesirable working conditions.

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