

Voices: migrant domestic workers and civil society

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Abstract

Empirical research at two immigrant organizations engaged in mobilizing and representing domestic workers provides the foundations for a reflection on the struggle of the underprivileged to act collectively. The fluid motion of civil society organizations between agents of mobilization and producers of policy advice amplifies the importance of examining their operation. Renowned elaborations on public sociology, feminist ethnography, and symbolic violence are convened. The dispute for inclusion and representation in this particular case is shown to take place at two distinct though interconnected fronts: one pertaining to the value and legitimacy of domestic work, the other pertaining to regulatory frameworks.

Keywords: Civil society; domestic workers; gender; migration; political action.

Introduction

We are sitting together in a circle.¹ One of the group organizers is encouraging a woman who is present for the first time to speak. The organizer suggests that she starts by saying her name, what country she comes from, and what she currently does for a living. The first two steps are accomplished; the last one is the hardest. The organizer tries to help her: “You work as... as a domestic...” But the newcomer is unable to finish the sentence. “Well”, she eventually sighs, “I do what I can to survive”.

And so begin the efforts of welcoming a new member into the group of activist domestic workers in a local immigrant organization. Still, mobilization does not exhaust difficulties. Especially since the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention at the International Labour Organization (ILO 2011), the two grassroots initiatives that I have been actively engaged with in the city of Lisbon, in Portugal, are increasingly consulted by public institutions and mass media seeking information about the local situation of migrant domestic workers. They are thus pushed into the muddy ground of politics, that in which “spokespersons, being granted a monopoly over the legitimate political expression of the will of a collective, speak not only in favour of those whom they represent but also very often in their place” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 147). This fluid motion between agents of mobilization and producers of policy advice amplifies the importance of examining the role of civil society

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organizations in representing migrant workers. Acting in a context of increasingly narrow channels and structures for political participation, they become strategic players just as they are experimental ones.

The objective of this article is to reflect on how the dignification of domestic work is collectively construed in the course of activities conducted by civil society organizations and thereby connect the dots between political agency and political subjectivity. Various levels and units of analysis – institutions, self-organized groups, individuals – are necessarily at stake, and the very dialogue between them requires attention. From a theoretical standpoint, the expectation is that scrutinizing the emergence of particular activist groups, in this case based on occupational peerage, contributes to further our understanding of the forms and limits of immigrant participation in civil society. As shown below, empirical evidence propels an exploration of the argument that the dispute for inclusion and representation – within and beyond grassroots organizations – takes place at two distinct though certainly interconnected fronts: one pertaining to the value and legitimacy of domestic work (the symbolic level), the other pertaining to regulatory frameworks (the institutional level).

Public sociology and feminist ethnography: selected notes on the study of domination and resistance

The conceptual framework supporting much of the present effort is the one of public sociology, or, to be more precise, “organic” public sociology, which builds on the premise of situating the researcher within civil society rather than outside looking at it. “Between the organic public sociologist and a public”, Burawoy (2005: 8) writes, “is a dialogue, a process of mutual education.” Such approach intersects with the utility of participant observation in countervailing “the ‘unnatural’ setting of the interview or laboratory”, as well as with the strategy of the extended case method “which examines how the social situation is shaped by external forces, or, in the terms of C. Wright Mills’s sociological imagination, tries to connect «the personal troubles of the milieu» to «the public issues of social structure»” (Burawoy 1991: 2, 6, 10).

In the particular case of domestic work, it is notable that the inconvenient nexus between its position at the lower end of professional value hierarchies and the development of knowledge societies – of which scientific work itself often serves as a fine representative – remains unaddressed in much of the scholarship (Abrantes 2012). Considering the notable advancements in the understanding of gender and ethnic relations impelled by a voluminous body of research on paid domestic labour, one should remember Sassen’s (2005: 403) comment that “part of having a vigorous public sociology is that we can work at theorizing with our publics, accepting that they also can theorize – can see, and may indeed see what we cannot see, because we are blinded by the enormous clarity of our theories.”

Endless efforts can be devoted to unveiling and valorising the actual experience of people who are construed as an object of intervention by actors from civil society. Authors engaged in feminist ethnography propose placing narratives of marginality at the very core of the debate (Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007). Documenting the local contexts and meanings attached to migrant domestic labour under the overarching pressures of globalization remains a crucial task if one is to grasp the dynamic interplay between everyday experience and systemic trends.

Drawing on her close interaction with the members of two cooperatives of Latina domestic workers in San Francisco, Salzinger (1991: 140) argues that “it is within the context of the constraints and opportunities they encountered here [rather than the human capital resources brought from the home country] that we can understand their occupational decisions, their attitudes toward their work, and ultimately their divergent abilities to transform the work itself.” Cantor (2010: 1062) examines a later local campaign in the state of Washington and stresses the innovative features of self-organization by immigrant domestic workers, among which a flexible and complex interpretive construction of the problem. In London, Anderson (2010) shows how foreign domestic workers asserted citizenship claims and won legal status in part through turning their constraints (as women forcefully confined to the private sphere) into opportunities.

Various risks are documented in the existing literature. Auspicious radical takings can be diluted by the logic and practices of state sovereignty (Anderson 2010: 69-73). Lack of trust jeopardizes the advantageous collaboration of immigrant and labour movements (Marchetti 2012). Domestic workers too, face the evidence that civil society at large “is riven with conflicts, hierarchies, and exclusions, many of them deriving from the invasion or colonization by market and state” (Burawoy 2009: 468). The following analysis contributes to this debate by focusing on the symbolic and regulatory elements permeating the struggle of the two initiatives examined on the ground.

This letter is based mainly on fieldwork notes and interview transcripts assembled between 2010 and 2012. The two initiatives that I have integrated began their official activities in 2008 and 2009 respectively. The first of them, conducted by a migrant women’s organization, aims at tackling irregularity and exploitation in employment with a focus on domestic services. The second initiative was launched with the main goal of promoting the dignification and social recognition of domestic work in a joint undertaking of three organizations: a migrant organization, a feminist organization, and a social science research centre.² Both are commanded by principles of self-organization and have been able to attain recognition and funding from local, national, and international institutions.

² The research centre that participates in such initiative is incidentally not the one that I am affiliated with.

Perceptions and regulations

Before proceeding into the core of the exploratory analysis, a brief description of the measures developed by the two initiatives under study is expedient: it shows the actual channels through which activist immigrants present their claims to the wider society. One of the initiatives comprises the elaboration and publication of an information leaflet, the provision of both technical and peer-to-peer support to domestic workers in need, and the organization of regular activities promoting mutual information and awareness. A precondition for workers to enter the recruitment system operating within this initiative is to attend a workshop in which the rights of domestic workers are discussed and the importance of collective mobilization is underlined. The other initiative maintains an information desk specialized in domestic service issues, a safe employment service ran by voluntary staff, regular activities to inform and raise awareness among domestic workers and society at large, and the diffusion of an easy-read brochure on the rights and duties in domestic service employment. The participation of an academic research centre offered this project scholarly expertise and greater perspectives of networking with partner organizations abroad. In turn, a team of researchers was given favourable conditions to work on the topic and, indeed, conduct the first extensive survey ever done in Portugal about working conditions in this sector. Despite important exceptions, activities across the two initiatives are thus remarkably similar and they overlap to a large extent, raising the concern among activists that effort is duplicated and profit divided.

Open-ended interviews conducted during fieldwork illustrate at once the wide range of factors and the substantial degree of self-conscience permeating the personal narratives of migrant domestic workers. The two following quotations are exemplary. It is noteworthy that they are extracted from interviews with domestic workers *before* they have had any active contact with immigrant organizations or any other political organization (e.g. a trade union).

“Well, how can I explain you...? My dream has always been to become the help of a professional cook in a restaurant. It's still not out of the question. But for now, I like to be where I am. [...] I had a chance in a restaurant once with a woman I know, but then I was afraid it wouldn't work out. And money for me is... I need it. I need it. I have expenses to pay and if this amount doesn't get home by the end of month...”

“I don't have any trouble with working. You must work, you work in what you must! A lot of people here need a live-in domestic worker. There are old people, living alone... The problem is: you see, I was a doctor in Russia, alternative medicines, appointments, people would seek me, and here I work as a live-in domestic worker, my level has dropped, do you understand what I mean? But here I'm more independent. Back there, I always had people knowing what I do, where I go, to do what... [...] I usually say: I sell my hands to work, I don't sell my heart, nor my mind. Do you understand?”

The compelling suggestion is that “those suffering from multiple forms of subjugation have the greatest insight into the social structures that oppress them” and “even the devastated ghettos of our nation are no mass society of deceived and ignorant people who need to have their understanding brought to them from the all-knowing sociologist” (Burawoy 2008: 373). In particular, the second quotation resonates the theoretical debate about what is actually sold in the relationship between domestic worker and employer – the labour power or the power to command, the whole person, the self (Anderson 2000, 112-3).

How is the dignification of domestic work collectively construed in the course of such activities? First of all, dignification extends much beyond any increase in remuneration or the enforcement of standard labour rights. The paramount obstacle to the improvement of working conditions in domestic service – the gatekeeper of all remaining obstacles – is the resistance from various social agents in acknowledging this category of work as an *occupation*; and, secondly, as the occupation of *somebody*. This “somebody” can be one of us. The episode presented at the very beginning of this letter refers to the most critical manifestation of such resistance: the one offered by domestic workers themselves.

Another eloquent piece of evidence documenting the problem of self-identification as a domestic worker is drawn from my fieldwork notes. As I progressed with the individual interviews, it became apparent that most of the women interviewed during the research project would rather provide me with general accounts of their life than focusing on their experience as a domestic worker – even if the two things were impossible to disentangle in many respects. As long as you speak about your life and address your job as one – only one – of the elements that make part of it, you can control the distance that separates you from such activity; you can regulate its marginality in your autobiographic narrative. You can look at it as an incident along the way; a part of life that is less joyful; a matter of luck, even. Instead, if you undertake the enterprise of telling your story *as* a domestic worker, it is likely that the core of such story will be stained with frustration, despair, devalorization – imposed by others, but to which you eventually surrender. Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992: 167) elaboration on the compliance of the underprivileged as a pillar of symbolic violence resonates clearly with the case of migrant domestic workers as the statutory conditions of migrant, woman, and domestic worker accumulate and mould each other.

On the other hand, the pride of being a domestic worker – this phrase comes up during group meetings and individual interviews, either as a personal feeling or a personal wish for the near future. Such pride, nevertheless, is accommodated in distinct manners across empirical contexts. Responses from employers, husbands, sons and daughters, or society at large, expose how this pride is disdained. It is disdained with daily, relentless, methodical efforts. This is what illuminates the very resilience of pride, its need, its urgency.

Social movements promoting the rights of immigrants and the rights of women have so far played a dubious role in this regard. In the light of empirical circumstance, they are quick to reject the devalorization of domestic work; but the question is whether they do so while subscribing to the notion that a woman, and a migrant woman in particular, must break with domestic work. Domestic work itself can thereby become the enemy. Academic scholarship, even when politically engaged, contributes to this problem insofar as it construes “domestic” in opposition to “work”, “skilled” in opposition to “unskilled”, “women” in opposition to “men”, etc. Orthodox emancipatory discourses are accurate in one respect though: many women, both immigrant and native, are employed in domestic service as a result of – and only while – failing to get a different type of job, a different route for personal autonomy. This heterogeneity of feelings is expected to pervade many occupational groups. A certain sort of activity can be, for some people, degrading, unnecessary; for others, it is a source of joy and respect. It is certainly not a task of sociologists to decide who is right or wrong, but our work is a likely contribution to discern the empirical forms of relations that can render a given activity more or less degrading, more or less respectable. It does not suffice to say that domestic workers never wish the same occupation for their daughters, although this observation is very significant as far as identity and political action are concerned. A regime of paid domestic labour with upgraded working conditions and social status is required before imperative assessments on what one wishes for one’s daughters can be taken at face value.

A normative challenge remains to be overcome in discourse and practice, as well as in political and academic debates. It is the nexus (most often presented as an either/or type of option) between struggling for the improvement of working conditions and abandoning the occupation altogether. For many domestic workers, preference unsurprisingly falls on the second option, even if “abandoning the occupation” may in reality never happen. The centrality of this normative challenge is apparent in the following quotation – see especially the perception of live-in domestic service as an antonym of “normal life”:

“When you hire a domestic worker, you don't need to think. This was a couple with three children, and when I told them I was going to quit the job the lady even said: «No, you're not! If you want your husband here, bring your husband, bring your family!» And that way I would stay as a live-in housekeeper, right? But I said: no, that's not what I want; I want a home, I want a life, a normal one.”

Going through the transcripts of interviews, I am often reminded of the time-honoured formulation of this dilemma in Marguerite Duras’ (1955) *Le Square*. One of the leading characters in the novel, a young live-in housemaid, explains how she accepts all burdensome demands from employers without resistance so that she shall never lose the feeling of “horror” for her work. As much as her main wish in life is to “belong to herself”, she is convinced that neither the state nor trade unions – nor herself, in fact – can do much about

it. Instead, she longs for a man to marry her so that she becomes a full-time housewife.

Thus, dignification emerges as a collective endeavour in opposition to the threatening solitude of everyday experience: the solitude of the domestic worker under stringent paradigms of male domination, racism, liberal economy, and asymmetrical professionalization. The importance of atomized workplaces and linguistic difficulties is not to be downplayed. Secondly, the migrant domestic worker is confronted with an additional level of solitude as greater sections of the world are incorporated in globalized networks of transactions (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1996; Sassen 2007; Castillo 2008). And not the least, a third cumulative level of solitude is experienced by the migrant domestic worker who is proud of what she does for a living, separated as she is from her class peers in space, time, and spirit.

The dichotomous construction of two possible trajectories – with a sort of bifurcation between the improvement of working conditions and the abandonment of the occupation – is to a large extent a theoretical product. Whether improving working conditions concerns valorization and respect in daily interaction, higher pay, greater enforcement of standard labour rights, or mobilization and collective representation, all of these elements are bound to equip workers with larger supplies of self-esteem, time, energy, economic resources – precious capitals to move into a different sector of activity. The overstatement of such bifurcation is not only false but also dangerous as it encourages inaction and consent *vis-à-vis* the way things are.

The solitude of the migrant domestic worker has also a different type of manifestation: the marginal, underprivileged position that she is granted in legal frameworks regulating labour and migration. Despite substantial developments, full inclusion in the general accomplishments and claims of the working class is still far from reality. Plain incorporation in social security systems, adequate norms for live-in recruitment, clarification of dismissal procedures, written contracts, effective labour inspection or collective bargaining are some of the critical aspects. While the state of affairs in these diverse fronts naturally varies across countries, it is significant that they remain problematic in a large part of the globe (ILO 2010). At the same time, as employment rights are pressed for reduction under the agenda of the “total market” and neoliberal responses to the economic crisis (Supiot 2010), it may be that approximation is accomplished less by the inclusion of domestic workers in labour standards applying to the overall workforce than by the reduction of those labour standards – or, to be more accurate, the exclusion of a greater number of workers from that area of security and benefits, increasingly to be understood as a privilege. This discussion resonates Beck’s (2000) claim that despite the generalized notion that Europe is setting the standards for what the other parts of the world should be like, in the sphere of employment the opposite may be taking place. Considering recent thrusts to expand flexibility in the labour market, one may then wonder if despite the generalized notion that standard wage labour is setting the standards for what domestic service

employment should be like, a *domestic-workification* of the labour market is actually underway.

Final remarks

Considering the holistic approach of local immigrant organizations to the vulnerability of migrant women, they remain in a privileged position to host the “transformation of domestic work itself from unskilled to skilled, from humiliating to respectable, from minimum wage to its double, from employer-controlled to worker-controlled, from «dirty» work to «clean»” (Salzinger 1991: 158). Empirical research is much required to document interpretive and contextual struggles, especially if one concedes that sustainable empowerment in the political arena depends on developments in ground floor mobilization, often far from the public eye. Reversing a long record of exclusion and solitude requires the growth and the multiplication of the voice – the voices – of migrant domestic workers.

The present analysis has covered two fronts at which the dispute for inclusion and representation in civil society takes place. One pertains to the symbolic level, the other one to the institutional level. Institutions, self-organized groups and individuals are engaged in a constant process of shaping each other. Examining this process requires attention to the observation that political agency is interwoven with subjectivity and intersubjectivity. To be sure, expanding the study of such interaction calls on the incorporation of other key agents and analytical levels. What is happening to migrant domestic workers as national and international workers’ movements gain, loose, or regain momentum? What is happening to migrant domestic workers in times of dramatic political change? What is happening to migrant domestic workers as technological revolutions and knowledge societies are proclaimed? What is happening to migrant domestic workers as social movements and social sciences reclaim their role in the construction of collective trajectories and global possibilities? These are some of the questions that may animate future research.

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