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THE ROLE OF AFFECTION IN DOMESTIC WORK STUDIES

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Abstract

The article examines the role of affection in the literature on domestic work in Brazil. Through a literature review, we explore how different theoretical frameworks have addressed issues of inequality and/or emancipation through this analytical category. Specifically, we highlight studies grounded in Marxist feminism, anthropological analyses of gender and family dynamics, and decolonial perspectives. Our findings indicate that affection is conceptualized either within theories emphasizing structural oppression or perspectives examining power asymmetries, agency, and negotiation strategies employed by domestic workers. Lastly, we discuss some of our own case studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate these dynamics.

AFFECTION • DOMESTIC WORK • SOCIAL THEORY • POLITICS

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OS SENTIDOS DO AFETO NOS ESTUDOS SOBRE TRABALHO DOMÉSTICO

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar como o afeto é articulado no campo de estudos sobre trabalho doméstico no Brasil. A partir de uma revisão bibliográfica do tema, destacamos como cada corrente teórica evidenciou os processos de desigualdades e/ou de emancipação por meio dessa categoria analítica. Ressaltamos os estudos embasados no feminismo marxista, as análises antropológicas sobre gênero e família e os estudos decoloniais. Compreende-se que o afeto é interpretado ora a partir de teorias que enfatizam as bases estruturais de opressão, ora por perspectivas que englobam as assimetrias de poder e as possibilidades de agência e negociação das trabalhadoras domésticas. Finalmente, apresentamos estudos de caso durante a pandemia da covid-19.

AFETO • TRABALHO DOMÉSTICO • TEORIA SOCIAL • POLÍTICA

LOS SENTIDOS DEL AFECTO EN LOS ESTUDIOS SOBRE EL TRABAJO DOMÉSTICO

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo el afecto es articulado en el campo de los estudios sobre el trabajo doméstico en el Brasil. A partir de una revisión bibliográfica del tema, resaltamos cómo cada corriente teórica destacó los procesos de desigualdades y/o de emancipación a través de esa categoría analítica. Resaltamos los estudios basados en el feminismo marxista, análisis antropológicos sobre género y familia y los estudios decoloniales. Se entiende que el afecto es interpretado ya sea a partir de teorías que enfatizan las bases estructurales de la opresión, o desde perspectivas que abarcan las asimetrías de poder y las posibilidades de agencia y negociación de las trabajadoras domésticas. Finalmente, presentamos estudios de caso durante la pandemia de covid-19.

AFECTO • TRABAJO DOMÉSTICO • TEORÍA SOCIAL • POLÍTICA

LE RÔLE DE L'AFFECTION DANS LES ÉTUDES SUR L'EMPLOI DOMESTIQUE

Résumé

Cet article vise à analyser le rôle de l'affection dans les études sur l'aide ménagère au Brésil. À partir d'une revue bibliographique, nous montrons comment chaque courant théorique a mis en évidence les processus d'inégalité et/ou d'émancipation à travers cette catégorie analytique. Sont soulignées en particulier les études basées sur le féminisme marxiste, les analyses anthropologiques du genre et de la famille et les études décoloniales. L'affection est interprétée soit à partir de théories qui mettent l'accent sur les bases structurelles de l'oppression, soit à partir de perspectives qui englobent les asymétries de pouvoir et les possibilités d'agencement et de négociation des travailleuses domestiques. Finalement sont presentées des études de cas réalisées pendant la pandémie de covid-19.

AFFECTION • EMPLOI DOMESTIQUE • THÉORIE SOCIALE • POLITIQUE.

DOMESTIC WORK[1] SERVES AS A PARADIGMATIC PROFESSION FOR REFLECTING ON CLASS, race, and gender relations in Brazil. This profession has been integral to Brazilian society since its inception and has evolved alongside the nation's social and political changes. Examining the foundational aspects of domestic work that have endured over time, alongside those that have evolved, allows us to gain deeper insights into the complexity that entangles labor relations, intimacy, and inequality.

In this article, we explore how the notion of affection has been addressed in the literature on domestic work, viewing it as a crucial element for understanding the complexity of these labor relations – which encompass intersecting inequalities of class, race, and generation, alongside hierarchies, distinctions, intimacies, selfhood, care, and emotions.[2] Within this intricate mosaic, affection has received considerable attention in analyses of both the structural factors perpetuating inequalities and the resistance strategies employed by domestic workers. Theoretical reflections, as we know, are inherently intertwined with the sociopolitical contexts of societies. Therefore, the various analyses that illuminate the embedded power dynamics in employment arrangements are shaped by the political and cultural trends of society, within which "intellectuals, political activists, politicians, journalists, researchers, unionists, and workers intersect . . . to produce new meanings that necessarily evolve alongside shifts in social practices" (Sader & Paoli, 1986, p. 53, own translation). By revisiting key theoretical frameworks in the social sciences to explore the intrinsic relationship between domestic work and affection, we stem from the premise that academic discourse not only mirrors but actively engages in a reciprocal relationship with society, shaping societal representations, discourses, and moralities, thereby contributing to the formation of shared meanings.

Scholarly works rooted in Marxist feminism from the 1970s and 1980s emphasized affection as a significant element in "paternalistic" relationships, which posed traps for class identity and the assertion of rights, masking inequalities and vulnerabilities. In contrast, decolonial studies have further explored the intersectional systems of inequality and the political resistance of workers, viewing affection as a primary expression of colonial domination. Studies from a socio-anthropological perspective have similarly examined these relationships within intimate spaces, highlighting the emotional ambiguities and the potential for resistance among workers. Drawing from practice theory (Ortner, 2006), we posit that affection can be understood as a category that intertwines the tensions between oppression and agency, thus revealing the intricate dynamics of work relationships in domestic settings where various social markers of difference converge.

This article is based on a literature review of works published in Brazil, but it does not include bibliometric methodology or temporal bibliographic classifications. Additionally, we do not delve into the significant contributions from studies on care work, emotional labor, and the sociology/anthropology of emotions, which have undoubtedly enriched the debate within the field.[3]

We also emphasize that our framework aims to make the theoretical axes used to classify the analyzed works as clear and instructive as possible. Drawing on Weber (2006) and Leach

1 The term "domestic work" is employed in this article to refer to paid domestic work offered in the market. It does not include unpaid work performed within the family. Over time, this term has evolved due to political stances from social movements, workers' unions, and academia, which have increasingly avoided using terms such as "domestic employment" or "household maids".

2 We sincerely appreciate the valuable feedback received during the internal seminar "Domestic work: home, market, politics", which involved the authors of this dossier.

3 On these topics, refer to: Guimarães and Hirata (2020), Soares (2003), Carrasco et al. (2011), and Víctora and Coelho (2019).

(1954/1995), we recognize that all models we create are ideal conceptual tools designed to organize specific elements and facilitate comparisons. However, these models may manifest differently and more comprehensively in actual study contexts. Therefore, our goal is not to exhaust all theoretical and political propositions in the field but to explore, articulate, and contrast different theoretical approaches.

In this article, we have chosen not to discuss the theoretical constitution of affections/emotions in abstract terms. Instead, we base our analysis on observations and descriptions of everyday practices among individuals in these relationships. Therefore, our analysis stems from our own reflections with theoretical trends in the field and our perceptions of the analytical limitations posed by empirical complexities. Additionally, we have integrated empirical data from semi-structured interviews conducted by ourselves during the pandemic with both employers and domestic workers. We conducted our fieldwork with employers between September and October 2020, involving 12 women from the cities of São Paulo (SP) and Rio de Janeiro (RJ). In turn, our research with domestic workers took place between August and October 2020 in the Metropolitan Region of Recife (PE), where 10 workers were interviewed.[4]

This article is structured into two parts, followed by the concluding remarks. The first part focuses on the existing literature on domestic work, highlighting the dual movement in conceptualizing affection in this field – between oppression and agency. In the second part, we explore how affection can be defined from a non-dichotomous perspective, drawing on field research conducted with employers and domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and considering emotional ambiguities and the State's conflicting roles.

The dichotomous nature of affection

To begin our discussion on the significance of affection as a key explanatory category in the field of domestic work studies, we draw from the foundational works on this topic in Brazil. The earliest studies on domestic work were closely tied to the rise of feminist studies in the 1970s and 1980s, with a primary focus on analyzing enduring inequalities in this occupation and incorporating the category of gender into discussions on social class (Brites, 2013). In her book *Emprego doméstico e capitalismo*, Heleieth Saffioti (1978) analyzed domestic work from the perspectives of workers, employers, and housewives (potential employers), emphasizing the "paternalistic" nature embedded in this contractual relationship.

Saffioti (1978) described and denounced paternalism in domestic work, describing it primarily through verbal agreements and non-wage compensations, such as donations of medications, clothing, food, dental and medical treatments, and covering the domestic worker's taxes under a formal contract (Brites & Monticelli, 2023). The author argued that affection was closely intertwined with paternalism, which domestic workers recognized through activities such as accompanying their employers to the supermarket, watching television together, traveling with the family, and the employer's sympathetic approach to the worker's daily challenges, along with the provision of non-monetary donations. However, the author found that 40.5% of interviewed domestic workers stressed the importance of "being treated like family members" as a requirement

4 Thays Monticelli conducted the research with employers as part of her postdoctoral fieldwork (Faperj Note 10/Process SEI: E-26/202.008/2020). Cecy Bezerra de Melo conducted the research with casual domestic workers as part of her master's fieldwork (Capes – PPGS-UFPE).

for their ideal job, and that "having a good relationship with the employer" mattered more than a good salary. Saffioti (1978) also examined "paternalism" through the narratives of employers, revealing that they did not acknowledge the labor rights of domestic workers but claimed to provide necessary support in response to their material vulnerabilities. Thus, it is noteworthy how the author identified paternalistic traits in both the narratives of employers and those of domestic workers themselves.

Alda Britto da Motta (1977) highlighted how affectionate relationships reflected the challenges and hardships faced by domestic workers migrating from rural to urban areas, where many lived in the households where they worked and longed for primary connections such as family. In this direction, the author underscored the significant role of "conversations with the employer" in these work relationships, which provided domestic workers with a sense of self-worth and validation, reaffirming their expressed preference to be treated "like family members" (such as daughters or sisters). This "emotional dependence" ultimately fostered strong bonds, particularly when employers were described as "kind-hearted", "nurturing intimacy", "offering advice", and "open to sharing personal issues with one another".

Mary Garcia Castro (1988), in her reflections on the reality of domestic work, also emphasized the value placed on "good treatment" as a crucial dimension in the employer-employee relationship for domestic workers, understanding this emphasis on interpersonal relationships as a "cultural imposition" arising from a patriarchal society and a gender system that shapes ideological frameworks. Castro (1988) further explored how this paternalistic relationship is directly tied to the social class of the employers: greater social inequality tends to intensify perceptions of affection and loyalty.

These analyses underscore the importance of understanding a reality traversed by pronounced class inequality, social vulnerabilities, ethnic-racial discrimination, dependency, and consequently, challenges in collective mobilization and State recognition of labor rights. During the 1970s and 1980s, domestic work in Brazil predominantly involved workers residing in employers' homes, with no fixed working hours, vacations, holidays, or weekends off (Bruschini, 1988; Melo, 1998). The authors' central argument focused on the "professionalization" of this employment relationship, echoing the discourse of the domestic workers' social movements, as the optimal pathway for addressing and mitigating inequalities and vulnerabilities.

From this perspective, affection was perceived as the primary element of oppression in these relationships insofar as it obscured the class consciousness of domestic workers and masked the absence of employer responsibility and contractual duties. Consequently, the argument posited that "professionalism" should not involve emotional connections but instead emphasize impersonal, objective relationships that strictly adhere to legal regulations. As such, affection was regarded as an "obstacle" to reducing inequalities and ultimately impeding the political emancipation process of the workers themselves.

The "anachronism" of domestic work, seen as incompatible with capitalist labor norms, was thus described through the "personalistic, paternalistic, and patriarchal" attributes that dominate this sector. While these analyses do not stray far from theories of backwardness, they advance analytically by proposing that, rather than relying on the paradigm of "development", capitalist "advancement" can incorporate and coexist with archaic conditions and more sophisticated forms of exploitation (Brites, 2000).

However, these feminist critiques did not immediately resonate within the broader moral consciousness of Brazilian society. During that period, feminist theoretical production faced numerous obstacles to institutionalization and social acceptance (Moraes, 1990; Pinto, 2003). The analyses and criticisms regarding unequal relationships within households did not dislodge the paternalistic discourse or lead to formalized contractual arrangements, as Brazil entered the 21st century with alarmingly high rates of informality in domestic work (approximately 70%), indicating that the critique of its forms of exploitation had found limited traction (Monticelli, 2021).

The emergence of decolonial theory in the 1990s opened new analytical avenues through the notion of oppression, marking a significant epistemic shift that challenged the construction of modern knowledge established through the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2005), whose economic, political, cognitive, and racial precepts continue to impact myriad aspects of life in Latin America (Mignolo, 2017). The "decolonial turn" brought to light various approaches to understanding the resistance of Latin American populations, particularly Indigenous and Afro-diasporic communities, against broader colonization processes (Bernardino-Costa et al., 2019).

Joaze Bernardino-Costa's work (2007), rooted in a process of dialogue and recognition of the role played by domestic worker union activists, serves as a cornerstone for comprehending this analytical perspective. By tracing the political evolution of Brazil's Domestic Workers' Unions and shedding light on the histories of its activists, the author underscores the development of knowledge intertwined with progressive social movements addressing issues of class, gender, and race – structured through Gilberto Freyre's premises of "racial democracy" and the "myth of the good master".

The representation of "affection", prominent since Gilberto Freyre's works, suggests that Colonial Brazil shaped its social relations through intimacy, marked by a blend of racial antagonisms and fusion fostered by affection and cultural exchange. However, this ideal contrasts sharply with the stark and deep-seated rifts caused by racial and class inequalities (Bernardino-Costa, 2007). For instance, in the narratives of union activists, one finds a consistent emphasis on the necessity of emotional separation from employing families to disrupt patterns of subordination and, consequently, colonial legacy. Historical activist Lenira de Carvalho, associated with the Union of Domestic Workers in Recife, illustrates this relationship:

> The relationship between two women, employer and employee, was complex and deeply intertwined with both work and affection. This enduring affection, still present today, complicates efforts to advocate for rights and cultivate a sense of class consciousness. . . . For instance, we found that around 70 domestic workers were earning less than the minimum wage. The Union calculated the amount owed by employers. . . . But many workers hesitated to demand these payments from their employers. Where is the sense of class consciousness? Many workers prioritize kindness and affection towards their employers. Another example: some domestic workers become feverish and ill when they leave their jobs because they miss the children, just as some children also fall ill. (Carvalho, 2008, p. 104, own translation).

Decolonial studies reinforce affection as a pivotal component in asymmetrical power relationships, framing this dynamic within the conceptual framework of experience to underscore its complexity and political significance.

Within the context of our article, one of the most significant implications of the decolonial perspective is its capacity to empower those engaged in resistance processes, enabling them to share their experiences and assert themselves as active participants (Costa, 2020). Union activist Creuza Oliveira highlights this potential by discussing the role of domestic workers in shaping the 1988 Constitution, where they could articulate their demands in their own voices: "That moment was crucial in our political decision to take charge of our struggle, organize more effectively, and openly address our challenges" (Oliveira, 2008, p. 111, own translation).

It is also important to note that, alongside decolonial thought and the political journeys of union activists, affirmative action policies have also reverberated within this broader landscape, expanding and enriching analyses on the intersections of gender, race, and class inequalities, while also fostering contributions from authors intimately familiar with the realities of domestic workers.

Juliana Teixeira (2021), the daughter of a domestic worker, is among the intellectuals who have emphasized this process, noting that "affection" is laden with contradictions that exacerbate vulnerabilities and inequalities, while also reinforcing these women's dependence on their profession. Such analyses are crucial for revealing the emotional and political contradictions among employers who, paradoxically, suppress labor rights under the pretext of familial bonds.

The emerging relationships between domestic workers and their employers are notably complex and ambivalent. Marxist feminist authors and decolonial studies scholars identify affection as an element heightens inequalities, oppression, and subordination within these relationships. Early studies associated "affection" with the unique nature of this labor relationship, entrenched a within capitalist framework, while simultaneously impeding the "professionalization" of this occupation by fostering the desire for emotional bonds. In contrast, the decolonial perspective views affection as exposing the endurance of colonial logics and practices, reinforcing racial, gender, and class inequalities while obstructing the political emancipation of domestic workers.

Affection, understood as such, intersects with power relations as a cornerstone that underpins the oppressions experienced in this labor relationship. However, this structural perspective encountered a significant theoretical counterpoint in relational analyses, which have sought to understand affection as one component within the interplay of specific power dynamics.

Ambiguous affections

In the late 1980s, social sciences in Latin America actively sought new theoretical approaches to comprehend the complexity of the evolving political landscape. This period witnessed a surge in interest in multiculturalism, multidisciplinary approaches, cultural studies, and critiques of singular rationality and universalism (Gohn, 2015). In Brazil, the end of the military dictatorship (1964-1985) marked the emergence of new social actors who reshaped academic interpretations of social classes. Various disciplines, particularly history and anthropology, pursued alternative paths to counter overarching theories that justified or analyzed inequalities by focusing on the vulnerabilities of lower social classes. While social class remained an important explanatory concept for social asymmetries, scholars moved beyond theories of domination to emphasize the resistance strategies of subordinate groups (Sader & Paoli, 1986). Gender studies, as a relational category that transcends universalist approaches to "womanhood", have consequently emerged as crucial conceptual tools for understanding the diverse forms of agency among subordinate subjects (Sorj, 2019; Brites, 2013).

Suely Kofes was a pioneer in this new analytical framework. Her work (Kofes, 2001) demystifies the notion of complicity among women within the domestic sphere. According to Kofes, "domestic" extends beyond a mere adjective defining private versus public spaces; it is where identities and femininity are established. In the relationship between employers and workers, this social bond is fraught with tensions and hierarchies. Employers assume social roles traditionally associated with women – mother and wife – and perform tasks traditionally defined as feminine – the roles and functions of housewives. Meanwhile, the worker fulfills her roles within her own household as a woman, yet as an employee, she will perform the same tasks in another person's home without assuming the same social roles (Kofes, 2001, p. 11). In this context, the concept of femininity, which could potentially serve as common ground between employers and workers, is reshaped through interactions between women occupying socially unequal positions.

Affection plays a crucial role in this dynamic. According to Kofes (2001), the expression "almost like family" operates as an ideological mechanism within this relationship, although neither the employers nor the workers truly believe it. For employers, this phrase justifies and normalizes the presence of a stranger sharing intimate family routines. Meanwhile, for domestic workers, being "almost like family" serves as a strategy to access opportunities that are structurally closed off, enabling them to find solutions to everyday problems and hardships through these relationships.

Jurema Brites (2007) explored the interaction between employers and domestic workers through the concept of "ambiguous affections", as proposed by Donna Goldstein (2003). In her ethnographic study conducted in households of both employers and domestic workers, Brites (2007) argued that the clientelist arrangement (where services are exchanged for extra-salary payments) is sustained through strong emotional bonds and distinct class dynamics. The workers perceived these exchanges not only as acts of "kindness" from employers but also strategically sought to benefit from a highly unfavorable situation, since these extra-salary payments and "assistance" – essentially the "leftovers" from the employer's household – were crucial for addressing the extreme survival challenges faced by these workers. During her fieldwork, the author observed a flow of items exchanged – or sometimes allegedly stolen – between employers and domestic workers. On one hand, there were extra-salary payments, gifts, and used items changing hands. On the other hand, there were reports of minor thefts and small acts of retaliation from the more vulnerable side. These exchanges reflected a blend of affection and hostility, unveiling asymmetric relationships of legitimacy and power, as well as subtle acts of resistance against subordination (Brites, 2000).

Daily nurtured affection, especially in caring for and tending to the employers' children, plays a significant role in these relationships. Brites (2000) found photographs of the employers' children in domestic workers' homes, heard narratives of mutual trust between them, as well as stories of emotional distress when the work relationship ended. However, this strong emotional bond did not erode hierarchical relationships and distancing strategies. For instance, domestic workers were not allowed to sit on the family's living room couch to watch television, even while caring for the children. These studies contend that affective relationships are not immune to being perceived as forms of domination; the focus, however, is on revealing how the actors involved in this dynamic rationalize and justify the perpetuation of inequality in domestic work.

In Lélia Gonzalez's (1984) analysis, the affection between domestic workers and the children they cared for exemplified the sharing and internalization of "Brazilian cultural values", where the primary language – the *maternal language* – is "*pretuguês*". In other words, the "white mother"

distanced herself from raising her own children, delegating this task to Black women, thereby relegating them to the role of the "other" in this relationship. Since Black women were the primary caregivers and the "true mothers" of these children, the values and culture of the Black population were transmitted through this relationship. However, as the author notes, the affection nurtured in this context was not an example of genuine love and total dedication, as desired by white people.

> What we mean is that she isn't some extraordinary example of total love and dedication that white people want, nor is she a sellout or traitor to her race, as some quick-to-judge Black individuals might think. She is, simply, the mother. That's right, *the mother*. The white woman is, in fact, the other. If that were not the case, we may ask: who breastfeeds, bathes, cleans the poop, puts them to sleep, wakes up at night to take care of them, teaches them to talk, tells stories, and so on? The mother is the one who does all that, right? Exactly. She's the mother in this crazy thing called Brazilian culture. As a *mucama*, she's the woman; so, "bá" is the mother. The white woman, the so-called legitimate wife, is the other who, as unlikely as it may seem, is only there to give birth to the master's children. She doesn't fulfill the maternal role. The Black woman does. That's why the "Black mother" is the mother. . . . And that explains why today nobody wants a Black nanny anymore, only a Portuguese nanny. But it's a bit late for that, isn't it? The blow has already been dealt. (Gonzalez, 1984, pp. 235-236, own translation, original emphasis).

Luiza Bairros (1995) also analyzed the "strategic position" of domestic workers, emphasizing the analytical and political limitations of liberal white feminism. She explored the perspective of differences among women to challenge fundamental feminist concepts such as experience, motherhood, sexuality, and "the personal is political", emphasizing that the identity and experience of being a woman emerge from socially and historically determined contexts. This framework enables us to understand the particular, yet intersecting, experiences of gender and race. To illustrate this, Bairros discusses the "place" of domestic workers in Brazil, noting that this work has allowed Black women to perceive and understand the white elite in ways that no man (whether white or Black) can access. Employers expect affection and care from domestic workers while simultaneously exploiting their precarious conditions. However, Bairros argues, this relationship should not be interpreted solely as subordination.

> At its core, and ultimately, this unique marginality fosters a distinctive viewpoint among Black women, [enabling] a distinct perspective on the contradictions within the actions and ideologies of the dominant group. The primary challenge is to actively empower this perspective through reflection and political action, as one cannot exist without the other. (Bairros, 1995, p. 461, own translation).

As discussed above, domestic work in Brazil has evolved alongside political and social changes over the years (Pinheiro et al., 2019). It is worth remembering that once-strong bonds between domestic workers and their employing families have "loosened", giving rise to more dynamic institutions and relationships. Among these changes is a significant trend: the decline in polyvalent workers or babysitters, with an increasing reliance on schools and daycares for childcare, especially among the middle class (Sorj, 2019). Furthermore, there is a growing number of casual domestic workers (paid per working day) who do not have daily interactions with their employing families and lack protection under current labor laws, thereby (re)shaping relationships of both affection and informality (Bezerra de Melo, 2021).

Thays Monticelli (2013) explored the affective relationships among casual domestic workers to determine if their limited – and sometimes non-existent – interactions with employers altered the dynamics of affection and subordination. She found that affective relationships were the primary criterion for "choosing" to work on a day-to-day basis.

Between 2005 and 2010, Brazil experienced significant economic growth and the emergence of the so-called "C and D classes". During this period, the income of casual domestic workers – who worked in multiple households throughout the week without forming daily relationships and ties with a single employer – also increased. Additionally, they gained easier access to credit and consumer goods. One frequently mentioned advantage among the interviewees in this type of work was the ability to choose their employers. They also gained easier access to credit and consumer goods. One frequently mentioned advantage among the interviewees in this type of work was the ability to choose their employers. Despite not having daily contact with their employers, they preferred working in homes where they were "treated well". They prioritized good communication with employers, where they could easily negotiate issues such as delays, absences, arrival and departure times, and salary advances, over factors such as "smaller houses", "lighter workloads", or places where they "earned more". They also mentioned a preference for working relationships in homes where they could sit at the table and eat with the employers, be respected by the children, and feel trusted in both their person and their work (Monticelli, 2013).

In this context, affection was understood as a relationship built on respect, indicating that even in a predominantly unequal society, domestic workers were increasingly unwilling to accept servile relationships. Affectionate bonds served as a decisive factor in avoiding degrading and subservient conditions. However, the author also highlights a paradox faced by casual domestic workers regarding inequality: while this type of employment relationship liberates them from potential hierarchical relationships and demeaning situations, its informal nature exacerbates precarious conditions due to the lack of full labor protections and rights in the country (Fraga & Monticelli, 2021).

These analyses do not deny that affection often serves as a tool of power wielded by employers to evade providing dignified labor contracts. However, they also shed light on other dynamics, processes, and strategies through which workers assert their emotional needs by utilizing the arena of intimacy-sharing to negotiate and address specific demands, while at other times seeking to "sidestep" hierarchical relationships, forging new forms of agency and resistance.

Analyses of affection within studies of domestic work have sometimes framed the debate in a dichotomous or polarized perspective. Drawing from the references in this article and through a socio-anthropological process of critical reflection, we propose that affection may be understood within the system of oppression without overlooking the agency of workers who employ various strategies of resistance. By analyzing hierarchical processes such as negotiation, our aim is to avoid essentializing feelings or romanticizing asymmetrical relationships. Instead, we seek to understand these dynamics within a framework where different forms of oppression intersect and articulate, while also fostering spaces for resistance and individual subjectivities (Brah, 2006).

According to Sherry Ortner (2006), theorists of practice such as Bourdieu, Giddens, Sahlins, and Ortner herself were influenced by significant theoretical shifts in the concepts of power, history, and culture. One of the central questions in their studies is the extent to which power can permeate or infiltrate consciousness. Ortner (2006) outlined a spectrum of the theories (and their limitations) that have displaced the classical focus of structural coercion theories. At one extreme

is the Foucauldian perspective, suggesting that power is omnipresent and ubiquitous (completely invasive). At the opposite end is James Scott, who argues that even in contexts of intense power dynamics, individuals remain conscious of these relationships; resistance to power always exists, even if covertly. Raymond Williams occupies a middle ground, proposing that hegemonies are never absolute, either because new ideologies replace old ones or because individuals comprehend, to some extent, the dominant relationships they experience. It was precisely this conceptual shift in the understanding of domination and its underlying conditions which sparked studies on affection and domestic labor with a particular emphasis on the agency of marginalized groups.

Building on this approach, we will draw on examples from semi-structured interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic with domestic workers and employers to explore how agreements and negotiations unfold in domestic work. The dialogue between our field research and the aforementioned literature on domestic work and affection forms the social reality explored in this article, which, lest we forget, extends far beyond the timeframe of our fieldwork.

Affections, benefits, and rights

Social crises, by disrupting and denaturalizing societal dynamics, offer compelling avenues for investigation in the social sciences. With this in mind, we present our research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to shed light on our earlier analytical framework, underscoring the aggravation of structural inequalities, the potential for agency and negotiation among domestic workers, and the reconfigurations involving the ambivalence of both the State and affection.

Domestic work received significant attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, as social distancing measures brought caregiving and life maintenance roles to the forefront of everyday social and political dynamics (Pinto et al., 2021). Concurrently, media outlets brought visibility to longstanding inequalities that have structured domestic work in the country, exposing vulnerabilities related to informality, working conditions, transportation challenges, and more. Additionally, domestic work became pivotal at the intersection of two pressing issues: the political classification of "essential work" and the injustices stemming from "class-based infection". In other words, governmental decisions that domestic work should continue during the pandemic raised questions about the dependency of the middle and upper-middle classes on domestic and caregiving tasks. This dependence, politically shaped by both "elitist" and "subordinate" assumptions, endangered the lives of domestic workers, who were disproportionately affected by deficiencies in healthcare infrastructure.

Furthermore, the Brazilian federal government did not enact any specific public policies for domestic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These workers relied on broader policies implemented during this period: the emergency income benefit and Medida Provisória [Provisional Measure] (PM) n. 936 (2020). The emergency income benefit, approved on April 2, 2020, under Lei [Law] n. 13.982, provided R$ 600.00 to informal workers, unemployed people, and low-income individuals, with the amount doubling for female heads of households (Marins et al., 2021). MP n. 936 (2020), on the other hand, aimed to assist employers for 8 months by allowing them to suspend work contracts, reduce work hours and wages, with workers compensated through unemployment benefits (Matos, 2021). However, this measure only encompassed domestic workers with formal employment contracts, who constitute a minority within the category. As a result, decisions and negotiations regarding the implementation of paid quarantine leave or

any restructuring of domestic work during the COVID-19 crisis were not handled through public channels, but continued to be negotiated within the domestic settings of employers.

In response to this scenario, civil society launched a mobilization in which the Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [National Federation of Domestic Workers] (Fenatrad) played a prominent role. Two campaigns stood out: "Cuida de quem te cuida!" [Care for those who care] (Fenatrad, 2020a) and "Essenciais são nossos direitos" [Our rights are essential] (Fenatrad & Themis, 2020). These campaigns called for the distribution of food parcels and hygiene kits for workers who had lost their jobs, while urging employers to provide paid leave during the quarantine period (Fenatrad, 2020b). They also exerted pressure on public authorities to refrain from classifying domestic work as "essential". Simultaneously, children of domestic workers organized and penned the manifesto "Pela vida de nossas mães"[5] [For the lives of our mothers], directed at government officials, employers, and civil society at large. Published by *Periferia em Movimento*, the manifesto accrued approximately 131,000 signatures. The Ministério Público do Trabalho [Public Ministry of Labor] (MPT) echoed these positions in Nota Técnica Conjunta [Joint Technical Note] n. 4 (Ministério Público do Trabalho [MPT] et al., 2020), advocating, among other measures, for the health protection of domestic workers and paid leave during quarantine, aligning with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), institutions, companies, and individuals who expressed support to these initiatives.

This scenario revived previously studied practices in domestic work, involving arrangements and negotiations between employers and domestic workers. During our research in the pandemic, the first issue that emerged concerned negotiations surrounding paid quarantine, the emergency income benefit, and what Mauss (1974) referred to as "gift-culture".

The social mobilization advocating for paid quarantine initially raised awareness among some employers about the importance of continuing to pay daily wages or full salaries to domestic workers during social isolation. However, this sense of responsibility soon faded as workers began receiving assistance from the State. Since there was no legal requirement for paid quarantine, these measures relied on the individual conscience of employers, who often considered continued payment an act of "benevolence". Moreover, many employers treated these payments as advances, expecting workers to repay the amount later on.

> Casual domestic worker: *She paid me during the first few months, but then I began receiving the government benefit . . . I then asked her to stop paying me because I'd have to pay her back by working it off.* (Casual domestic worker, Recife, 45 years old, married, two children).
>
> Employer: *When we stopped our work activities, she stopped coming to work too. She lives with her elderly mother, who has health issues, so I let her stay at home but kept paying her. What was my agreement with her? That I would pay her, and when she returned, she would clean without payment until it balanced out. At first, I paid her without deducting anything. Then, she came back. She was away from work during about two or three months… I deducted payments for about three months, but there were about two months when I paid her without expecting her to pay me back. I paid her without her having to repay anything.* (Employer, São Paulo, 35 years old, lives with her husband and a four-year-old daughter).

5 "Pela vida de nossas mães": O manifesto de filhos de domésticas sem quarentena. (2020, 19 março). *Periferia em Movimento*. https://periferiaemmovimento.com.br/pela-vida-de-nossas-maes-o-manifesto-de-filhos-de-domesticas-sem-quarentena/

Within this framework, domestic workers perceived paid quarantine as anchored in a principle of "future debts". The emergency income benefit[6] came to be seen as a way to settle these debts, which would later be repaid through additional work. Brites (2000) and Coelho (2006) emphasized the role of gratitude as a crucial element in systems of exchange and dependency, underscoring the subordinate position of domestic workers. During our field research, we found that reciprocity during quarantine was understood in terms of performing unpaid labor; in essence, wages paid during periods of social isolation were expected to be reciprocated later through domestic work. Most employers did not consider such payments as a "responsibility" or even a matter of "rights", but rather a donation expected to be repaid in the future.

Clara Han (2014) has comprehensively integrated these two spheres, benevolence and debt. According to the author, the notion that benevolent acts do not require reciprocation, as gifts, does not apply in everyday relationships marked by class inequalities. In this context, the domestic workers' refusal to receive such payments is meaningful as it implies a rejection of this potential "debt", thereby reframing the situation not as one of "gratitude" and "dependency", but rather as a stance against precariousness and exploitation.

> Employer: *So, what happened? Since I received this benefit from the company and my salary wasn't affected, I felt I should do the same for her, even though I'm the one working and she's not. So, I paid for March, April, June, and July. But then at one point I said: "No, this isn't right. I'm putting in a lot of work* [with household chores]*, and I need to value every cent I earn". She has helped me in various situations, you know? I don't want to leave her hanging; far from it, really! I wouldn't have the heart to do that. But since she has the government income benefit, why not, right? I mean, if she's not working. They pay a minimum wage, R$ 1,045. I'm not sure if that's the minimum, but it's what she's earning. I don't want to leave her without support, but I also don't want... I put up with a lot of hassle to earn every penny in my account*. (Employer, São Paulo, 51 years old, married with two teenage children).

In this "game" between informal employment relationships and access to government policies, the State[7] acts as a potential "ally" for domestic workers, helping them break free from precarious work arrangements. As previously mentioned, some workers did not see paid quarantine as their employers' responsibility but rather as a favor. By receiving minimal financial support from the State to sustain themselves during the peak of the pandemic, they could negotiate from a stronger position with their employers and avoid becoming "indebted" to them.

Therefore, we understand that the workers' requests to cease wage payments were part of a strategy of resistance during that period, enabling them to liberate themselves from "debts" to their employers while recognizing the State as a potential "support base". These actions suggest a potential pathway to effectively challenge the servile and precarious aspects of domestic work (Fraga, 2013). Furthermore, they reinforce the argument that broader public policies for social

6 A revealing statistic illustrating the social inequality typically faced by domestic workers is that they were the second professional category to benefit the most from emergency income benefit in 2020, with their incomes experiencing a temporary increase of 61% (Gonzalez & Barreira, 2020; Bruno, 2021). During this period, 52.4% of domestic workers were heads of families, qualifying them to access the higher benefit value (Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos [Dieese], 2021).

7 Our understanding of the State draws on the perspectives of Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2008) in "'El estado y sus márgenes. Etnografías comparadas en Anthropology in the Margins of the State, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe (NM), 2004".

and gender inclusion directly impact this "game", offering support to vulnerable women to resist unfair negotiations and break away from subordinate dynamics.

However, amid the (re)configurations of inequalities and resistances during the pandemic, one characteristic regarding paid quarantine remained prominent: affection. Our research shows that the narrative of unconditional support, without concerns about indebtedness or the fear of being "abandoned", is deeply rooted in longstanding relationships, in which both employers and workers emphasize the notion of being "almost like family".

> Employer: *You know, I didn't really have much trouble with the house itself; the main difficulty I faced when the pandemic began was with F.* [domestic worker]*, who has been working with me for 20 years and she's like family. We're a bit like mother and daughter, a bit like sisters, you know? When the pandemic began, I allowed her to stay home, continued paying her salary, we never stopped paying her, and she does have a good salary. . . . We're very close, we enjoy rural things together, like baking cornbread to eat with our coffee, to talk about things, reminisce about life. So, what I missed the most about F. was her presence, you know? The house can stay chaotic for a while, you know? Of course, F. makes all the difference in the world. She cooks delicious meals, she tidies everything up with care, my cats adore her, I trust her; when I travel, I ask her to look after the pets and everything else. We consider F. as part of the family, you know.* (Employer, Rio de Janeiro, 62 years old, lives with her husband, and her daughter who returned home during the pandemic).

Some employers emphasized their commitment to ensuring domestic workers had income to care for their families, provide food and protection for children, elderly, and other relatives. This support extended even to some employers who were aware of the importance of paid quarantine but felt burdened by additional housework responsibilities. Out of the 10 casual domestic workers we interviewed, 4 had access to paid quarantine, while the remaining 6 did not. Among those who did not have access, 2 were dismissed, while the other 4 continued working. From the workers' accounts, it became clear that the decisive factor between losing their jobs and keeping them came down to the nature of their relationship with their employers.

When relationships lacked close ties and meaningful interactions between domestic workers and employers – with little dialogue or mutual understanding of each other's lives and needs – domestic workers were often abruptly let go during the pandemic and "without justification".

> Casual domestic worker: *None of the extra cleaning jobs I had called me, but I still have my regular clients. Here's what happened: Mr. C. hired a motorbike taxi for me. Then he said, "If you can't use the bike taxi, it has to be an Uber. We can't do without you. You just be careful not to bring the disease here, and we'll be careful too". He sat down with me, talked, and said: "Listen, I'll pay for the bike taxi. I'll draw up a document, and I'll sign it". It's like a contract. Then he said: "He'll pick you up at home, bring you here, then pick you up here and take you home because I don't want either of you taking the bus and risk becoming infected".*
>
> Researcher: *Did they give you a mask? Those things?*
>
> Casual domestic worker: *They did*.
>
> Researcher: *What about your other jobs?*
>
> Casual domestic worker: *For the other jobs, I take the bus.*
>
> (Casual domestic worker, Recife, 48 years old, single, three children).

While affective relationships can foster various forms of subjugation, our investigation during the pandemic revealed, paradoxically, that continued payments during leave took on political dimensions. Nevertheless, we also observed situations where labor relations were not always regulated in alignment with social justice. Some employers believed that merely complying with labor laws was sufficient and that they were fulfilling their obligations. This contractual framework absolves employers of any responsibility to address social disparities, as it removes inequality and social justice from the realm of morality. Equality thus becomes a formal condition rather than a real one, mandated by contract (Brites, 2000). Another contentious issue in this arena is the discourse of "professionalism" in domestic work. This perspective aligns with the argument that these relationships should not be driven by emotional factors, which are often seen as remnants of hierarchical and dependent practices. Instead, it advocates for more objective and supposedly "fairer" frameworks governed by labor law norms.

Undoubtedly, our intention is not to romanticize or essentialize affection within labor relationships marked by myriad inequalities. Rather, our aim is to explore how these narratives evolved during the pandemic, reflecting foundational tensions within Brazilian society regarding issues of security, protection, and rights.

The impacts of the State's actions have proven crucial, often assuming meanings unintended by administrative rationality. On one hand, the federal government's health policies induced insecurity, fear, and physical and emotional distress among domestic workers, restricting their rights to isolation and vaccine prioritization. These challenges were compounded by difficulties in accessing State programs introduced during the pandemic. On the other hand, it was precisely such economic assistance policies that minimally empowered workers to reject "benevolent" arrangements and precarious agreements (Ortner, 2006).

These ambivalences of the State have fostered notions of affection that have ensured not only the application of benefits and rights, and security, but also the fundamental principle of humanity (Kofes, 2001).

> Researcher: *You mentioned earlier that you were deeply affected by the death of the cleaner.*
>
> Employer's daughter: *Yes… I realized how lacking in affection I was towards her, you know? A total lack of affection because... I think it's a broader social issue because most of my friends also kept someone working at home, you know? And there's this script for how I should interact with someone who works in my home, you know? Like... I don't know, I felt really bad because I remember when she passed away... I was in therapy, and the only reason I could think about this again is because I was in therapy. If it weren't for that, I would have just carried on with my normal life, right? But it was COVID, so: oh, it was COVID, okay, she passed away. It happens, people pass away . . ., but, um... I didn't really talk much with her, you know? We had a pretty superficial relationship, and I think that's why I wasn't too affected. I believe we're affected when we know someone's story, right? I remember... it was actually quite surreal because the only time I sat down to talk with her happened to be the last time she came to our house. It was kind of crazy. She showed me photos of her kids... I had never seen her kids' photos before, and I didn't even know where she lived, to give you an idea. I think that says a lot, right? She lived in Pavuna, but until the last time I saw her, I still thought she lived in Rocinha, I don't know why. So, I mean, I was disconnected from the person I interacted at home with, you know? It made me think a lot. In the end, we had someone who worked here at home and who died from COVID.* (Employer's daughter, Rio de Janeiro, 18 years old, lives with her mother).

Concluding remarks

The analysis of affection within the realm of domestic work reveals one of its most complex issues: the direct correlation between affection and the protection of labor rights. Scholarly literature suggests that work relationships rooted in affection frequently result in the suppression of labor rights. This reality manifests through informal "agreements and negotiations" that bypass labor legislation, which often seek to "solve problems" for both parties, on an individual and private basis, involving favors, loans, donations, medical emergencies, educational expenses for children, etc., retributed through a framework of gratitude and dependency. These dynamics are amplified in domestic work, where employers and workers interact closely amidst social inequalities. On one hand, daily interactions expose the social needs and vulnerabilities of domestic workers, who find in their employment relationship a possible avenue to address these challenges. On the other hand, employers exploit established bonds and worker gratitude to perpetuate subordination and dependency.

Our research during the pandemic revealed that affectionate ties ("just like family") did not automatically translate into security and respect for the workers' needs. On the other hand, it was precisely in households where affectionate relationships coexisted with an awareness of rights that employers expressed concern about maintaining salaries during this critical period. Thus, the pandemic scenario underscores and reverberates the complex ambiguities in the interplay of inequalities, hierarchies, and affections, sometimes reframed as protection, indifference, the assurance of rights, and a recognition of "humanity" within a politicized affective relationship, echoing the insights of Sherry Ortner (2006).

In conclusion, we recognize that affection has long served as a tool within the game of domination and resistance in domestic work relationships. However, it is unrealistic to assume that affective bonds can or should be severed and suppressed. Like all aspects of reality, intimate relationships inherently involve power dynamics. Politicizing these relationships does not mean excluding or denying their contradictions; rather, it involves cultivating relationships grounded in recognition, equity, and social justice as we broaden rights and expand narrative possibilities that underpin our socio-political understanding.

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Data availability statement

The contents underlying the research discussed are contained in the manuscript.

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