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## FRONTIERS IN PAID DOMESTIC WORK: ANALYTICAL AND IDENTITY DILEMMAS

 Anna Bárbara Araujo<sup>I</sup>

 Nadya Araujo Guimarães<sup>II</sup>

 Luana Simões Pinheiro<sup>III</sup>

Translated by: Paulo Cesar Almeida Scarpa<sup>IV</sup>

<sup>I</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Natal (RN), Brazil; annabarbaraaraujo@gmail.com

<sup>II</sup> Universidade de São Paulo (USP), São Paulo (SP), Brazil; nadya@usp.br

<sup>III</sup> Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Ipea), Brasília (DF), Brazil; luana.pinheiro@mds.gov.br

<sup>IV</sup> Freelancer, Curitiba (PR), Brazil; pauloscarpa@gmail.com

### Abstract

This article focuses on paid domestic work in Brazil, highlighting its diverse configurations through both the prism of academic literature and national household survey data. The first section reviews the academic debate, noting that domestic and care services were previously treated as distinct fields. Recently, however, scholars have increasingly merged them into the broader category of paid care work, encountering novel analytical dilemmas. The second section shifts focus to recent labor market changes, which have not only prompted a change in theoretical frameworks but also provided insights into the creation and blurring of occupational boundaries, thereby illuminating the identity dilemmas faced by workers within these evolving sectors.

DOMESTIC LABOR • CARE • PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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## FRONTEIRAS NO TRABALHO REMUNERADO EM DOMICÍLIO: DILEMAS ANALÍTICOS E IDENTITÁRIOS

### Resumo

Neste artigo refletimos sobre o trabalho remunerado nos domicílios brasileiros. Procuraremos observar a diversidade das suas configurações, seja pelo prisma da literatura acadêmica, seja à luz de dados mais recentes, que nos permitem dimensioná-lo. Assim, mostraremos como serviços domésticos e de cuidado figuram na literatura ora de maneira fragmentada, como campos distintos, ora de maneira articulada, subsumidos em um campo mais amplo, obrigando a encarar dilemas analíticos desafiadores. Evidenciaremos, também, como os recentes movimentos do mercado de trabalho não apenas estimulam novos enquadramentos teóricos, como deixam pistas para entender a produção e diluição das fronteiras entre tais ocupações, iluminando os dilemas identitários que se colocam.

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## FRONTERAS EN EL TRABAJO REMUNERADO EN CASA: DILEMAS ANALÍTICOS Y DE IDENTIDAD

### Resumen

En este artículo reflexionamos sobre el trabajo remunerado en los hogares brasileños. Buscaremos observar la diversidad de sus configuraciones, ya sea a través del prisma de la literatura académica o a la luz de datos más recientes, que nos permitan dimensionarlo. Por lo tanto, mostraremos cómo los servicios domésticos y de cuidados aparecen en la literatura a veces de manera fragmentada, como campos distintos, a veces de manera articulada, subsumidos en un campo más amplio, obligando a enfrentar dilemas analíticos desafiantes. También evidenciaremos, cómo los recientes movimientos del mercado laboral no sólo estimulan nuevos marcos teóricos, sino que también dejan pistas para comprender la producción y dilución de las fronteras entre tales ocupaciones, iluminando los dilemas de identidad que surgen.

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## FRONTIÈRES DU TRAVAIL RÉMUNÉRÉ À DOMICILE: DILEMMES ANALYTIQUES ET IDENTITAIRES

### Résumé

Cet article réfléchit au travail rémunéré aux domiciles brésiliens. On cherchera à repérer la diversité de ses configurations, soit du point de vue de la littérature scientifique, soit à la lumière des données les plus récentes, qui nous permettent de le jauger. Donc, on démontrera que les services ménagers et les services du *care* figurent dans la littérature tantôt de manière fragmentée, en tant que domaines distingués, tantôt de manière articulée, subsumés sous un domaine plus large, ce qui oblige à affronter des dilemmes analytiques difficiles. On mettra également en évidence que les mouvements récents du marché du travail, au-delà de stimuler de nouveaux encadrements théoriques, fournissent des pistes pour comprendre la production et la dilution des frontières entre les dits services, mettant à jour les dilemmes identitaires qui s'y posent.

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**I**N THIS ARTICLE, WE EXAMINE THE TWO MOST PROMINENT FORMS OF PAID WORK PERFORMED in Brazilian households: domestic service and care work. We explore both the similarities that link them as well as the differences that set them apart. Our analysis will draw on evidence from two key areas, which will be discussed in the main sections of the article.

We begin by reviewing the academic literature, which, over the years, has spanned various analytical perspectives and closely aligned with international debates, producing a substantial body of work that has steadily grown since the 1970s. While we do not aim to cover this scholarly production exhaustively, we will highlight key interpretative shifts, particularly how advances in the study of paid domestic work have uncovered heterogeneous practices, social relations, and representations. We then examine the impact of the emerging international field of care studies, which has introduced new perspectives that emphasize the analysis of emotions and affections, the State's role as a care provider, and the increasing pressures on care services due to an aging population. We will reflect on the analytical challenges posed by studying care in contexts such as Brazil, where paid domestic work has long been significant i.e., where the commodification of care within households is neither a new phenomenon nor simply a consequence of women's increased participation in the professional workforce.

In the second part of the text, we transition from engaging with various strands of scholarly literature to exploring a different domain: the empirical findings concerning the labor market situation in Brazil. We will use these findings selectively to shed light on some of the challenges posed by different interpretations of the profiles and work relationships that characterize the two most prominent social groups in this debate: domestic workers and care workers. These findings provide insights for further reflection on how these workers construct their identities and representations. We will use two sources of data. The first is the Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua [Continuous National Household Sample Survey] (PNAD-C), which will help us identify similarities and differences in the profiles and working conditions of domestic workers and care workers – issues central to identity disputes documented in the literature. The second type of empirical data also holds strategic value, providing insights into how the boundaries between these two occupations, as revealed in the PNAD-C data, become blurred in everyday work contexts and are strategically exploited by companies, leading to their commodification. The data we use depict a new and increasingly significant reality in the sector: the rise of companies specializing in mediating domestic and care work. We will document their activities through studies conducted in three Brazilian cities – Rio de Janeiro (RJ), São Paulo (SP), and Natal (RN) – each offering valuable contextual insights due to their varying conditions for integrating and compensating domestic work.

### **Household workers: Interpretative advances, analytical dilemmas. Reassessing scholarly legacies**

Domestic work has long been a focus of interest in Brazilian social science, leading to the development of a diverse and prolific range of analytical perspectives on both its paid and unpaid forms. The interpretative advances achieved over nearly fifty years of study have enriched our knowledge of this topic, yet they have also presented analytical challenges, some of which we will highlight here. Our selective review, while not exhaustive, will be organized around two main markers. First, we will address the debate surrounding *paid* domestic work. Second, we will

examine scholarly contributions that specifically address the differentiation and heterogeneity within paid household work in Brazil, with the aim of understanding the fluid boundaries that characterize these activities.

We recognize that this fluidity poses challenges for scholars in terms of how labor identities are constructed and negotiated, as well as how collective interests are represented. In this initial section, we will explore the social foundations of this fluidity by drawing on the extensive literature produced by Brazilian social science.

In our Brazilian context, discussions on “domestic employment” are undoubtedly indebted to the pioneering work of Heleieth Saffioti. As a thought-provoking and insightful scholar attuned to her time, Saffioti explored the connections between Marxism and the so-called “women’s studies” in her seminal work *A mulher na sociedade de classes: Mito e realidade* (1969) (Guimarães & Hirata, 2021). In 1978, she published *Emprego doméstico e capitalismo*, engaging with Marxist feminist literature (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Seccombe, 1974, among others) to understand the status of paid domestic work in contemporary societies (Saffioti, 1978). Defining it as a non-capitalist form of labor within a capitalist economy, Saffioti demonstrated that wage-based domestic services were a relatively new phenomenon, previously confined to domestic servants or enslaved women.<sup>1</sup> She also highlighted that the products of domestic work were consumed by the employing families and emphasized that domestic work – whether paid or unpaid – has always been considered as a responsibility assigned to women. Saffioti’s most notable contribution to Brazilian sociology of paid domestic work was her exploration, following her mentor Florestan Fernandes, of how remnants of a pre-capitalist past persist in this type of labor. These remnants manifested in the subordinate and marginalized integration of Black individuals – particularly poor Black women – into the Brazilian labor market, which facilitated the super-exploitation of their labor and became a defining feature of how the capitalist system took root in Brazil. For Saffioti, paid domestic work was not merely a channel through which Black women were integrated into the economic sphere. It was more than a defining element of the private order within families or the division of reproductive labor among women. In her view, domestic labor became a constitutive dimension of how capitalist accumulation took shape in Brazil.

A decade later, in 1989, the book *Muchachas no more*, edited by Elsa Chaney and Mary Garcia Castro, heralded a new wave of reflections on domestic work in Brazil, significantly impacting the broader debate on this type of labor across Latin America and the Caribbean. The collection was groundbreaking in integrating academic and activist perspectives, amplifying the voices of domestic workers organized in unions and associations who contributed with their own writings. The book introduced crucial reflections that would gain traction in the following years, such as the gendered dimension of class, the dilemmas faced by feminist employers, and the refusal of organized domestic workers to identify with the employing family. Instead, these workers asserted their professional identity, a stance that Chaney and Castro (1989) were among the first to document.

Equally influential was Lélia Gonzalez’s 1984 essay, “Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira”, which was first presented in 1980 at the IV Encontro Anual da Associação Brasileira de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais [IV Annual Meeting of the Brazilian Association for Postgraduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences]. While Gonzalez did not confine her

<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Heleieth anticipated an analytical avenue that would later be explored in the social history of labor, as demonstrated in works by Bakos (1983), Lauderdale (1992), Matos (1994, 1995), Carneiro (2006), Souza (2009, 2017), and Telles (2011).

discussion to paid domestic work, she argued – with the characteristic passion of her writing – that racial inequalities are central to understanding paid domestic labor in Brazil. She extended the debate beyond the labor market, positing that the image of the Black female domestic worker was a foundational element of the national social imaginary, shaping how Brazil viewed itself and its women, and contributing to the naturalization of social inequalities in the country. Once again, we find paid domestic work situated at the heart of interpretations about Brazilian society and the type of society we have constructed. Thus, whether through the hands of Heleieth Saffioti's Marxist materialism or the cultural and psychoanalytic lens that inspired Lélia Gonzalez, the figure of the “domestic worker” emerges as crucial for reflecting upon the social order in Brazil.

In the 1990s and 2000s, research on paid domestic work in Brazil expanded significantly, not only in terms of the amount of research but – particularly relevant to our focus – through the introduction of new themes. Several novel key analytical approaches stood out during this period (which we highlight without aiming to be exhaustive), reflecting a conceptual shift that increasingly valued subjective work experiences, the complex dynamics of negotiating social relations in everyday work experiences, and the development of collective identities, along with the rise of new social movements and actors.

The plurality of female identities and the inequalities between employers and domestic workers have emerged as yet another significant and innovative field of study. These themes were thoroughly explored in Suely Kofes' pioneering ethnography, *Mulher, mulheres: Diferença e identidade nas armadilhas da igualdade e desigualdade; interação e relação entre patroas e empregadas*, presented as her doctoral thesis at Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp) in 1991 and published a decade later (Kofes, 2001). Kofes' work underscores the complexity of the cultural norms underpinning the relationships between employers and “housekeepers”, emphasizing how socialization into authority and obedience is negotiated and managed within these interactions, while also noting that class differences often constrain their agency. The issue of emotions and their profound and complex role in either reinforcing or masking power hierarchies is another key theme extensively explored by Jurema Brites (2007). Brites offers an insightful analysis of inequalities by building on Donna Goldstein's (2003) concept of “affective ambiguity” to examine how emotions significantly shape interactions between employers, their children, and domestic workers. However, the exchange of gifts, favors, affection, and informal, uncontracted services exists alongside – and does not negate – the entrenched hierarchies and class distinctions.

The works of Kofes and Brites reveal how, on both a symbolic level and in everyday social practices, women are divided into employers and workers/employees, reflecting significant class and racial divisions. These divisions have also been explored from a different analytical angle, with a closer look at labor market dynamics, in the article by Cristina Bruschini and Maria Rosa Lombardi (2000) titled “A bipolaridade do trabalho feminino no brasil contemporâneo”. The authors argue – drawing on data from the 1990s demographic censuses, the PNAD up to 1997, and the *Relação Anual de Informações Sociais* [Annual Social Information Report] (RAIS) up to 1996 – that the dynamics of women's entry into paid work are characterized by two opposing yet complementary poles. On one hand, there is the enduring sector of domestic work, which continues to absorb a significant portion of female labor. On the other hand, from the 1980s onward, women have increasingly engaged in technical and scientific careers. This configuration ultimately resulted in two distinct poles: on one side, a precarious but significant sector within the female workforce, where 18% of employed women in 1997 were engaged in domestic-related

jobs; on the other side, an affluent sector made up of university-educated women in “technical, scientific, artistic, and similar” professions, particularly in fields such as architecture, engineering, medicine, and law. The connection between these poles is that women in higher-status positions depend heavily on the paid domestic work performed by those in the lower pole to support and sustain their careers. Bruschini and Lombardi also made an important contribution by revealing the heterogeneity within domestic work, providing disaggregated data segmented by occupation, living arrangements with employers, and the presence or absence of formal work contracts, among other factors. Some of these categorizations build on the foundational work of Hildete Pereira de Melo (1998) in her study “O serviço doméstico remunerado no Brasil: De criadas a trabalhadoras”.

Until this point, care workers were not classified as a distinct occupation in Brazilian sociodemographic records.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it was only from the 2000s onward that the separation between care and domestic work became possible, enabling more robust and precise analyses of this phenomenon, now officialized by the new *Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações* [Brazilian Classification of Occupations] (CBO) introduced in 2002. Reflecting these changes, updated statistics began to include care work as a specific category within paid household work. The ability to measure care work separately was crucial for understanding the distinctions emerging between domestic and care work, as we will demonstrate in the following section.

These reflections soon inspired a new generation of scholars. Some, like Freitas (2010), connected the experience of humiliation with racial subjugation. Others argued that the subjugation historically endured by domestic workers, who had long been silenced, propelled them to develop a critical knowledge base through political activism, effectively articulating class, race, and gender (Bernardino-Costa, 2007; Ávila, 2009). According to Bernardino-Costa, this critical awareness empowered domestic workers to challenge the narratives underpinning the hegemonic notion of the Brazilian nation by destabilizing two of its foundational myths: “racial democracy” and the “benevolent master/mistress”. By rejecting the notion that a mild and benevolent form of slavery could serve as the basis for a Brazilian exceptionalism – now “modernized” into an expansive market for the domestic employment of subjugated and silenced Black women – organized domestic workers emerged on the political stage as a social movement, establishing themselves as a new collective actor (Bernardino-Costa, 2007, 2015). Once again, we encounter an interpretive framework that places paid domestic work at the very core of the structure of Brazilian society. However, not so much for the role of paid domestic work in the material reproduction of society (its function within the accumulation process), but rather for its symbolic significance – serving as the foundational rationale for Brazilian exceptionalism – and for the political consequences of its deconstruction, expressed through resistance, as Ávila (2009) has argued via the decolonization of knowledge as a means to decolonize power, in line with Bernardino-Costa’s argument.

In the 2000s, new interpretive developments emerged with the rapid international consolidation of the field of care studies. Much like the earlier “domestic work debate” (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Delphy, 1984) drew from feminist academic reflections (England, 2005; Folbre, 2012), the socioeconomics of care ultimately became a significant turning point within

2 Hildete Pereira de Melo (1998), using data from the 1995 PNAD, used code 808 to describe “other occupations in household services”, which were impossible to disaggregate, even though it was known that this category included a range of disparate occupations, several of which related to care work: “nursing attendant”, “water carrier”, “caregiver for the sick”, “caretaker for the elderly”, “nurse”, “bodyguard”, “gardener”, “driver”, “boat pilot”, and “security guard”.

the broader field of domestic labor studies. This interpretive novelty is not incidental; it reflects the growing recognition among scholars in the Global North of the increasing commodification of paid domestic work. For example, Boris and Klein (2012) observed that care occupations were among the fastest-growing in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s. This growth paralleled the diversification of household labor, particularly in response to the rising demand for direct care due to an aging population, leading to a form of commodification that embedded these new monetized relationships into daily life.

This trend accelerated particularly in contexts where State involvement in welfare promotion had historically been minimal, such as in the United States, or where it had retreated due to the rise of neoliberal policies, as observed in countries such as England and France. Consequently, this new theoretical approach associated the growing commodification of activities that support family life with the decline of the welfare state and the growing reliance on market-provided services (see Arruzza et al., 2019; Fraser, 2020), thus revealing the neoliberal imprint that has shaped 21<sup>st</sup> century systems of healthcare, education, and household labor (Thelen, 2015).

Thus, it would not be an overstatement to say that this new configuration of social organization completes the previous major theoretical movement that led many scholars, particularly in the Anglophone context (Thelen, 2015), to examine gender inequalities through the lens of *unpaid* domestic labor performed by women in their roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers, rooted in kinship reciprocity and driven by an intense division of labor within the family household. This movement, which reached its peak in the so-called “domestic labor debate”, resulted in seminal reflections on work-family balance and the concept of the double shift (Hochschild, 1991).

However, this theoretical framework increasingly struggled to account for new dimensions of domestic labor that prompted this interpretative shift. On one hand, it became more apparent that care tasks were being redistributed, transitioning from family management to market-based solutions, with varying degrees of State involvement depending on the welfare regime in place. As this process unfolded, income inequalities widened in European and North American countries, making it easier for higher-income groups to hire workers for various forms of direct care (such as childcare, eldercare, and support for individuals with disabilities) or indirect care. This new reality has also been shaped by evolving migratory patterns, which compel racialized women to move to wealthier countries to take on caregiving jobs, underscoring the intersection of structural class and racial inequalities. This dynamic serves as a clear example of a new dimension of neoliberal globalization (Arruzza et al., 2019), leading to an international division of reproductive labor (Parreñas, 2005) and a “care drain”<sup>3</sup> (Hochschild, 2003). This intricate new reality is evident both in the expanded scope of the debate, as extensively documented in the literature (Glenn, 2000; England, 2005; Boris, 2014), and in the polysemic nature of the concept of care, which has become a central focus of this interpretive shift.

The complexity of this shift introduced new analytical challenges at the center of the debate for understanding the situation in Brazil. On one hand, Brazil has long experienced a significant commodification of care, traditionally managed through paid domestic labor. It is no surprise that this issue, as previously discussed, quickly attracted the attention of Brazilian scholars early

3 Just as the metaphor of “brain drain” became commonplace in studies describing the impact of highly skilled workers migrating from countries in the Global South to the Global North, Hochschild coined the notion of “care drain” to describe the care deficits that emerge in countries of origin due to the migration of women.

on. Indeed, there was a striking difference in the proportion of women engaged in domestic work in Brazil and elsewhere compared to other regions. In 2019, paid domestic work in Brazil constituted 14.2% of the total female workforce, according to the PNAD, making it the second-largest occupational group for women after retail (Pinheiro et al., 2019). In contrast, estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018) indicated that only 1.4% of employed women in Europe and Central Asia were domestic workers in 2016. In France, this percentage was slightly lower, at just 1.3% during 2017-2018 (Hirata, 2020).

On the other hand, the emerging trend of commodifying family needs – particularly within higher-income households – introduced significant differentiation in the types of work performed in the domestic sphere. This shift required new theoretical frameworks, as it represented an empirical novelty that challenged the existing field of domestic labor studies. For instance, Mignon Duffy (2011) demonstrated that in the United States, although paid domestic work constituted only a small portion of the reproductive labor market, various forms of in-home services – such as home care, cleaning services, as well as institutional care – were experiencing substantial growth. In Brazil, Hildete Pereira de Melo (1998) observed that while women’s participation in the labor market increased by 92% during the 1970s and 1980s, paid domestic work grew by only 43%. This discrepancy foreshadowed changes beginning to take shape. Guimarães (2016, 2020) identified the emergence of a new occupation in the Brazilian labor market during the 1990s, which would only be officially recognized later, with the 2002 revision of the CBO. The occupation was so novel that it led to the creation of its own term – *cuidadora* (a simplification of the original title, “home caregiver for the elderly”) –, which only gained widespread use in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> This professional role not only emerged as a new category but also gained significant social importance, with its growth proving exponential over the past 15 years and demonstrating resilience to economic crises and labor market contractions, until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is no coincidence that studies on care work and domestic labor, whose initial development seemed to be leading to separate fields of research, have increasingly sought to explore the connections and distinctions between these two types of professional activities, both in Brazil (Guimarães, 2016; Guedes & Monçores, 2019; Araujo, 2022; Guimarães & Pinheiro, 2023) and in other countries (see Glenn, 2000; Duffy, 2005; Carrasco et al., 2011), including in Latin America (Borgeaud-Garciandía, 2017; Arango et al., 2018; Rojas Scheffer, 2019). Moreover, there was a pressing need to address the complex challenge of reconceptualizing domestic labor in a context where, on one hand, the forms of its provision in private spaces were becoming increasingly differentiated, and on the other hand, the connections between care work and the feminization of social assistance were gaining prominence in the public sphere, particularly through various poverty management programs and “governing the poor” initiatives (Georges & Santos, 2012; Destremeau & Georges, 2017).

In our case, this is particularly important for two reasons. First, the dynamics between these two groups: while domestic workers have long been numerous, the number of care workers has also grown markedly, with their numbers continuing to rise despite the cyclical nature of the Brazilian labor market (Guimarães, 2020). This suggests that professional care workers have

4 The author analyzed the archives of Brazil’s longest-running newspaper, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, from 1885 to 2019, and found that the term only began appearing in the 1990s. Since then, its presence in the media has surged dramatically, reflecting the increasing importance of this new role in Brazilian social life.



become a new necessity for families who can afford to hire such services in contemporary Brazil. Moreover, understanding the new and complex dimensions in the provision of household labor becomes crucial for another reason: the fluid boundaries between the roles of “domestic workers” and “care workers” as they are effectively performed in everyday work scenarios. This underscores the power asymmetry within households and the limited ability to enforce boundaries in the contracted work. Care workers, in particular, lack professional recognition, meaning their rights are contingent upon the progress achieved by domestic workers, which have resulted in legislation covering all forms of household labor. However, the interpretive challenge intensifies when we consider that, despite the trend towards blurred boundaries in job functions, distinct identities appear to be solidifying and increasingly differentiating these two groups of organized workers.

Secondly, the high prevalence of in-home services as a typical characteristic of care systems in countries such as Brazil underscores both the deficiency of public care policies and the prevailing income inequality. The significant size of the market for domestic and care work reflects the rapid concentration of wealth, meaning that only two out of ten Brazilian households can afford to hire these services (Guimarães, 2020). Additionally, the wealthier the household, the greater the variety of domestic and care services it employs (Guerra, 2017; Wajnman et al., 2023).

Brazil presents a particularly fascinating case, not only due to its extensive use of domestic workers but also because it provides a key context for understanding the intersections between domestic and care work, given the fluid boundaries between these roles in everyday labor relations within households. As a result, identifying, measuring, and understanding the origins, manifestations, and impacts on the working and living conditions of both domestic workers and care professionals presents significant challenges for current research agendas and methodologies; a challenge which has emerged in tandem with analytical advancements in understanding the evolving dynamics of family organization and the labor market.

This new conceptual turn in the scholarly field has also introduced fresh theoretical challenges. Specifically, some scholars have critiqued caregiving literature for its heavy focus on the emotional dimension, arguing that this approach obscures issues of inequality and exploitation – topics central to the literature on domestic work, particularly within materialist and Marxist feminism. Mary Romero and Nancy Pérez (2016, p. 179) have argued, for example, that “analysis shrouded in ideological beliefs of a ‘labor of love’ and ‘mother’s wit,’ moves us far away from addressing social inequalities and any recognition of care work as a collective responsibility”. Even seminal authors in the field of care studies, such as Mignon Duffy (2005), have sought to delineate differences between the two scholarly traditions. One tradition focuses on the emotional dimension, interdependence, and relational nature of care work (Hochschild, 2003; Folbre, 2012). The other, rooted in studies of reproductive work and social reproduction, emphasizes the maintenance of life and future generations, with particular interest in non-interactive activities such as food preparation and cleaning. Duffy argues that paying close attention to these activities is crucial for understanding the nuanced inequalities and forms of subjugation present in what Boris and Parreñas (2010) described as the “backstage of reproductive work”, which predominantly employs non-white women. Therefore, bringing this realm to the forefront within a broader conception of care is essential for revealing the racial inequalities that shape social reproduction, especially in countries like Brazil.

## **Domestic workers and care workers: Heterogeneities, fluid boundaries, and identity dilemmas. Reflecting on emerging scenarios and empirical evidence**

### **Domestic workers and care workers in Brazil: Distinct profiles operating within fluid boundaries**

If, as we have discussed thus far, the topic of convergences and divergences between paid care work and paid domestic work has garnered significant attention in the literature – sparking debates and revealing new analytical avenues – a closer examination of the individuals who perform these roles sheds light on new questions that arise directly from their subjective work experiences.

First of all, we must bear in mind a significant distinction resulting from how these two types of work have become institutionalized in Brazil's labor market, a factor that heavily influences how these workers are perceived. Domestic workers, by definition, work within the homes of their employers. In contrast, care workers can operate in various settings – whether in private homes or institutions – enabling them to establish employment relationships not only with individuals but also with private or public organizations. Additionally, it is not uncommon for care workers to divide their time between institutional work, where they have a formal employment relationship, and additional hours of informal domestic work, such as covering shifts for colleagues in private residences. These income-boosting strategies are fairly common and highlight a crucial distinction in the work experience: while domestic workers are exclusively tied to household labor, care workers have the flexibility to navigate various social and professional environments. In this context, the workplace itself plays a significant role in shaping the professional identities of these women, influencing the political debates and dilemmas that currently define the relationship between domestic workers and care workers, whether the latter operate in private homes or institutional settings.

Keeping this crucial distinction in mind, we will analyze the latest Brazilian data to identify and quantify individuals who, when interviewed in household surveys, describe their occupation as being performed within a household setting, whether as “domestic workers” or “care workers”. For this analysis, we will exclude care workers who identify their occupation as being in institutions (such as healthcare or long-term care facilities) and focus instead on those working in household settings, who in 2022 accounted for 84.8% of all personal care workers, totaling approximately 606,000 professionals.

In 2022, data from the PNAD-C revealed that Brazil had 5.2 million women employed in roles categorized by government statistics as “household workers”. This broad category encompasses general domestic service workers, childcare workers, personal care workers, cooks, drivers, housekeepers, among others. However, despite this diversity, most of these workers fall into just three main categories: 74.7% identified as “general domestic service workers”, 11.8% as “childcare workers”, and 10.8% as “household personal care workers”.<sup>5</sup> Over time, there has been a noticeable decline in the proportion of general domestic service workers, while the numbers of care workers and nannies have increased (Guimarães & Hirata, 2020; Fontoura & Marcolino,

5 It is important to note that the Classificação de Ocupações para Pesquisas Domiciliares [Classification of Occupations for Household Surveys], utilized by Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), employs the term “personal care workers” rather than “elderly caregivers”. However, the latter term is often used as a proxy for the former, as it is understood that elderly individuals constitute the majority of those receiving this type of care. This excludes childcare, which is classified separately under the term “nannies”.

2021). Between 2012 and 2022, the number of general domestic service workers decreased by 20% (from 4.9 million to 3.9 million), while the number of nannies increased by 33% (from 463,000 to 616,000). Additionally, the number of care workers surged by 138%, rising from 237,000 in 2012 to 566,000 in 2022 – a significant change over a short period, highlighting the growing prominence of care work within the domestic services sector as a whole.

The progressive and systematic transformation in the structure of the paid domestic work market goes hand in hand with differences in the profiles of those who identify as domestic workers versus those who work in care services – a distinction highlighted in recent studies (Guedes & Monçores, 2019; Fontoura & Marcolino, 2021; Matias & Araujo, 2023). An examination of the 2022 PNAD-C data reveals differences, albeit minor, in the racial composition of these occupations. In Brazil, paid domestic work is predominantly performed by Black women, who are more likely to be employed in general domestic services (75.7% compared to 72.5% for white women). In contrast, white women are disproportionately represented among personal care workers (13.7%, compared to 9.4% for Black women), a category that, as will be discussed further, typically enjoys better working conditions and social protections. Educational disparities are also significant: nearly 53% of “personal care workers” have at least completed high school, whereas less than one-third of general domestic workers have reached this level of education.

When it comes to working conditions, the disparities are even more pronounced. Care workers average 40.5 hours per week, significantly more than the 29.5 hours worked by those in general domestic services. This discrepancy is partly due to the increasing number of *diaristas* – workers who are employed on a daily or part-time basis – among the broader category of domestic workers (Pinheiro et al., 2019; Pinheiro et al., 2021). Between 2012 and 2022, the proportion of workers who reported working in more than one household or in a single household less than three times a week – the legal definition of a *diarista* in Brazil – increased from 38% to 43%. Daily workers typically have shorter work hours than domestic workers with monthly contracts – not due to a preference for fewer hours, but because they cannot fill their schedules despite being available (Pinheiro et al., 2019). However, daily work is significantly more prevalent among general domestic workers compared to personal care workers. In 2022, 52% of general domestic workers were daily workers, while only 18.4% of personal care workers reported working on a daily basis.

An important indicator of the predominant type of work in each category helps clarify how boundaries between these occupations are established. Care work for the elderly – as well as other types of personal care – requires building a relationship of trust, familiarity, and empathy between the caregiver and the recipient. Consequently, providing regular care on a daily basis is less common and tends to be more stable, with most care workers employed on a monthly regime when working in a home setting. In contrast, general domestic work often involves more indirect care activities, such as cooking, washing, ironing clothes, cleaning the house, or gardening, which do not necessarily demand frequent direct interaction with the recipient. This allows for greater flexibility, making it easier to work for different employers throughout the week or month. As a result, the daily work model has become more prevalent, with over half of these women working on a daily basis in 2022.<sup>6</sup>

6 The Brazilian literature on domestic work facilitated by platform companies has shown that the same worker may provide general services in multiple households within a single day (Andrada et al., 2023). This has led to the emergence of the hourly domestic worker – a hitherto inexistent occupation in Brazil, though it has long existed in other countries.

Paid domestic work remains significantly unprotected in Brazil. In 2022, only about a quarter of these workers had formal employment contracts (25.3% for care workers and 24.4% for general domestic workers). However, when we consider social security contributions as a variable – beyond just the existence of formal labor contracts – we get a clearer sense of the widespread lack of protection. Many of these workers operate independently as freelancers or individual microentrepreneurs, while others are in employment arrangements that do not guarantee labor rights or where such rights are actively violated by employers. When social security contributions are used as a measure of labor and social protection, the proportion of protected workers shows a slight increase, though it remains quite low across all groups. In 2022, just under 35% of household workers contributed to social security, with 37.5% of care workers and 35.1% of general domestic workers making contributions. This highlights that, while considering social security contributions does reveal a marginally higher proportion of protected workers, the overall rates of protection remain very low across all categories.

Finally, average wages reveal both the precarious and exploitative conditions prevalent in this sector, as well as the disparities among different types of household workers. Although all roles within domestic work are associated with low pay, significant differences exist between the earnings of personal care workers and those in general domestic services, highlighting a persistent hierarchy between these two occupational groups. In 2022, personal care workers earned an average of BRL 1,214.00 per month, while general domestic workers earned approximately BRL 1,000.00 per month. It is important to note that, in both cases, these average wages fell below the minimum wage of BRL 1,412.00 for that year. Monthly wages are determined by the total hours worked each month, and as mentioned earlier, care workers typically work longer hours than general domestic workers. Consequently, when considering hourly wages, general domestic workers earned an average of BRL 8.90 per hour, compared to BRL 7.50 per hour for care workers. This suggests that if general domestic workers were able to secure more hours, their total monthly earnings would likely surpass those of care workers.

When we turn our attention to the realm of professional identities, several important dilemmas emerge for those actually engaged in these activities. Research has shown (Debert & Oliveira, 2015; Guimarães, 2020; Araujo, 2022) that care workers face an ongoing struggle to establish a distinct professional identity, separate from that of domestic workers. This struggle has led to conflicts with organized domestic workers (Araujo et al., 2021) as well as with the nursing sector (Groisman, 2015; Guimarães & Hirata, 2020). Among women working in households who identify as “care workers”, there is a noticeable pattern of “boundary-work”:<sup>7</sup> these workers refuse to perform domestic tasks that do not directly involve the individual under their care, emphasizing the importance of their professional qualifications acquired through caregiver training courses. This distinction is deliberately employed to differentiate their activities from those of general domestic workers, allowing them to distance themselves from the realm and stigmas associated with domestic labor, even when their work is conducted within the residences of elderly people.

However, this form of “boundary-work” runs against the often-blurred lines that define household labor. Guimarães and Hirata (2020), in their analysis of data from the 2009 Employment and Unemployment Survey in the São Paulo metropolitan area, found that many women, who could be classified as care workers based on their job descriptions, reported that their duties

7 Borrowing the term “boundary-work” as coined by Lamont and Mólnar (2002).

frequently overlapped with general domestic work. Notably, the whiter and more educated the workers were, the more likely they were to describe their activities as aligned with professional care work. Unsurprisingly, recent studies that examine the growing importance of the care sector in the Brazilian economy and propose classifications for its related occupations (e.g., Guimarães & Pinheiro, 2023; Almeida & Wajnman, 2023) highlight that in Brazil, the distinction between what international literature refers to as “direct care” (typically associated with care workers) and “indirect care” (more common among general domestic workers) remains particularly blurred.

Moreover, care workers lack specific regulations to protect their professional activities, leaving them even more vulnerable to employers manipulating these boundaries. This is especially true in a context like Brazil, where paid activities within the home are rarely scrutinized by labor courts due to the legal emphasis on preserving domestic privacy.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, another significant factor – one that has only recently gained due attention in the debate – is the further blurring of these boundaries by companies offering services for both elderly care and domestic work. These companies have seen substantial growth in recent years, particularly during the pandemic, and most notably in the form of platform-based businesses (Andrada et al., 2023).

### **Labor intermediation: Strengthening strategic boundaries in a new context**

In Latin America, Brazil stands out as a prominent center for labor intermediation services. Over recent decades, the number of companies involved in labor mediation has increased significantly, operating as intermediaries between job seekers and employers by listing job openings and facilitating worker placement. It is important to note that labor mediation goes beyond traditional outsourcing, as these intermediary companies typically do not establish a direct employment relationship with the workers. Consequently, mediated work represents a distinct category within salaried labor, as argued by Guimarães (2009).

In major metropolises, specialized agencies providing domestic workers have been around since at least the 1990s. However, the recent growth and expansion of these businesses have increasingly captured media attention.<sup>9</sup>

In the domestic and elderly care sectors, the intermediary market has become highly competitive, particularly in major cities, with multinational companies offering a range of services for families. In more recent years, the emergence of digital platforms has made it easier for individuals to hire these services via websites or mobile apps (Andrada et al., 2023). These companies operate as multifaceted agents, shaping the job market and sometimes even providing professional training courses or managing the relationship between workers and employers. In addition to creating job opportunities, domestic and care work intermediaries play a crucial role in structuring a market for professional *identities*, by which we mean the competition over how different occupations are perceived and valued, affecting both how individuals view themselves and how they are perceived in their professional roles.

8 We highlight a recent development implemented by the Brazilian government that could potentially impact this situation, although it is still too early to gauge its effects. This development is the Domicílio Eletrônico Trabalhista [Household Labor Platform] (DET). Effective since August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, this mandatory electronic system will be required for domestic employers and individual microentrepreneurs (MEIs). Managed by the Secretaria de Inspeção do Trabalho [Labor Inspection Secretariat], of the Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego [Ministry of Labor and Employment], the DET will enable electronic notifications to employers regarding administrative acts, tax matters, summonses, and general notices.

9 For example: <https://www.mapadasfranquias.com.br/noticia/maria-brasileira-foca-expansao-no-rio-de-janeiro> and <https://exame.abril.com.br/negocios/dino/empresa-de-limpeza-lanca-franquias-em-todo-o-brasil/>

In a recent study conducted in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Natal, Araujo (2024) documented how intermediation companies actively promote symbolic boundaries between care workers and domestic workers. The study observed this both in training courses, where instructors consistently emphasized the distinctions between the two types of work, and on company websites and social media, where definitions often emphasize the unique roles and responsibilities of each occupation. These companies provide detailed information on what is expected of an elderly care worker, the qualifications and characteristics of a domestic worker, and key considerations when hiring a worker for your home. For instance, a social media post from a major elderly care company in São Paulo states: “The care worker is a professional who assists the elderly with their daily activities, helping them manage tasks more effectively while promoting comfort and well-being”.

Companies often construct professional identities by using emotionally charged language that equates care work with familial love (Araujo, 2019). In firms specializing in domestic worker services, whether for full-time employees or day laborers, there is a strong emphasis on emotional narratives centered around client trust and security, as well as the professionalism of the workers. Some companies even stress that they conduct criminal background checks on their workers and that their training ensures high-quality services. Beneath the assertion that these professionals are *trustworthy* exists an underlying portrayal of domestic workers as a “dangerous class” – a risk that these companies claim to “neutralize”, thereby subtly revealing underlying class and racial biases.

Moreover, the CEOs of intermediation companies also play a role in managing the professional identities of workers. Interviews indicate that these companies actively promote and encourage the development of professional identities and the training of workers.

*When we hire a care worker, they go through a two-month training process within Home Care, you see? We don't just drop someone into a client's home without preparation. “Oh, I met you today, and I'll send you there!” Not at all! They have to go through Home Care for two months. We work to shape the vase. So, if the vase isn't ready yet, we'll break it down and reshape it to our standards. Once we see that they're ready to go to the client's home, matching the family's needs, we send them out. (Interview with an intermediary company director, 2020).*

In short, as new realities emerge in the Brazilian labor market – marked by the evolving dynamics of different domestic work occupations, the structures of these occupations, and the profiles of their workers – new factors are also influencing employment access and the agents involved in mediating these opportunities, while simultaneously shaping how domestic work occupations are represented and how workers in these roles perceive and present themselves and their work.

## Final considerations

In this article, we aimed to identify some of the key analytical challenges in understanding what is currently the largest segment of paid domestic work: domestic and care services. In doing so, we emphasized the particular importance of the Brazilian context for comprehending these two services, which often become intertwined in our country.

Thus, we emphasized the broad diversity in the analytical approaches taken by studies on domestic work and those on care work. We examined the convergences, conceptual shifts, and attempts at synthesis between these fields and discussed how these interpretations can be

applied to understand the status of domestic and care workers in the Brazilian labor market. As we sought to illustrate in this article, we believe that understanding this reality requires employing a variety of interpretative tools and expanding empirical strategies.

We recognize that simply mapping out the profiles of key social actors – domestic workers and care workers – is not sufficient, no matter how detailed this analysis may be. As discussed, there are structural and sociodemographic elements that distinguish and define these groups. However, these elements are also influenced by employer discretion, which often blurs the boundaries between these professional activities in the day-to-day management of work obligations. While professional regulations may establish some of these boundaries, another significant finding is that they also emerge from a continuous process of differentiation carried out by the workers themselves. This ongoing effort strives to define, justify, and create barriers that distinguish these professional roles, thereby shaping and reinforcing their professional identities.

Our analysis also brought attention to novel dimensions that have been largely overlooked in the existing literature, particularly the creation of symbolic boundaries between different professional groups within household work. These boundaries are shaped not only by traditional factors but also by emerging actors who have gained prominence due to their strategic role in training workers to access job opportunities in a competitive and often opaque market, convincing potential employers of the workers' abilities. These new actors are the intermediation service companies, which have become increasingly influential in regional Brazilian markets, where they incorporate the management of professional identities as a key element of their business strategy.

In summary, the range of analytical perspectives we have proposed offers a fruitful approach to understanding how these boundaries are sometimes blurred and sometimes emphasized, depending on the circumstances and strategies of different actors. This complexity, in turn, presents significant challenges for capturing, describing, and interpreting these dynamics.

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### Note on authorship

Anna Bárbara Araujo – contributed to the literature review, the analysis of secondary data, and the case study on intermediation agents.

Nadya Araujo Guimarães – contributed to the literature review and the analysis of secondary data.

Luana Simões Pinheiro – contributed to the literature review and the analysis of secondary data.

### Data availability statement

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

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