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## PRESENTATION

# DOMESTIC WORK: DOCUMENTING AND (RE)EVALUATING BRAZIL

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Domestic work represents one of the most distinct manifestations of the inequalities that have historically shaped – and continue to shape – Brazilian society. Longstanding gender, class, and racial asymmetries documented over time show how domestic work mirrors broader political and social dynamics, including Brazil’s fragmented and fragile democratization process, the expansive informal labor market, entrenched family inequalities rooted in traditional gender roles, and the profound economic and cultural legacies of slavery – factors that have disproportionately affected the lives of black Brazilian women.

For at least the past five decades, these issues have garnered significant attention from social scientists. In Brazil, gender and feminist studies have been at the forefront of efforts to examine the inequalities surrounding domestic work. Since the mid-1970s, feminist scholars have pursued a broad analytical agenda encompassing topics such as working conditions, the racial and class profiles of domestic workers, the contradictions and tensions between “employers and workers”, the distinctive characteristics of the labor market for these women, the role of labor movements and unions, and the complex interplay between inequality and emotional bonds within the relationships forged through this labor (Saffioti, 1978; Chaney & Castro, 1989). In this context, domestic work has emerged as a central focus in the history of Brazilian gender and feminist studies, resulting in one of the most extensive and influential bodies of research within the field. Moreover, it is important to underscore the role of domestic work as a primary avenue through which lower-income and less-educated women have historically accessed paid employment in Brazil. This has

had profound implications for their political, economic, and cultural representation in the country (Bruschini & Lombardi, 2000).

In recent years, the topic has gained heightened attention from various other disciplines, including labor sociology, decolonial studies, the sociology and anthropology of emotions, ethnic and racial studies, and care studies, expanding disciplinary boundaries and causing a significant impact in areas such as law and social communication. These new analytical perspectives have enriched the scholarship, introducing innovative approaches that have revealed notable transformations in the nature of domestic labor in Brazil.

Concomitantly, over the past two decades, there has been a significant expansion of public policies aimed at supporting domestic workers, including the equalization of labor rights through Lei Complementar [Complementary Law] n. 150 (2015), the ratification of International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention n. 189 (Organização Internacional do Trabalho [OIT], 2011), and more recently, initiatives developed by the Secretaria Nacional da Política de Cuidados e Família [National Secretariat of Care and Family]. We must also highlight the critical role played by the domestic workers' union movement in securing these advancements, consolidating the importance of their activism and union efforts in Brazil's recent history. Nevertheless, regulatory gaps have resulted in a paradoxical situation in which a significant portion of "diaristas" (day laborers)<sup>1</sup> remains excluded from these hard-won labor protections and rights.

In Brazil, the responsibilities associated with domestic tasks and caregiving are undergoing significant transformations. Nevertheless, the home continues to be the main locus of multiple negotiations and arrangements shaped by gender, race, and class. A notable development has been the decline in the hiring of "mensalistas" (full-time domestic workers) coupled with a sharp increase in the employment of "diaristas" (day laborers). This shift has afforded workers greater autonomy in managing their employment contracts and opting for less servile arrangements – as evidenced by the transition from residing in employers' homes to living independently (Monticelli, 2022). Conversely, the gradual increase in the hiring of elder care workers reflects a new trend of integrating paid occupations within households. In Brazil, care takes place "behind closed doors", with the burden predominantly shouldered by families. With only two out of ten families having access to professional assistance for domestic and care tasks, the intersectionality of race, class, and gender manifests in distinct ways: black women constitute the majority of the paid care workforce, while in the realm of unpaid care, the responsibility falls disproportionately on all women simply by virtue of their gender (Pinheiro et al., 2021).

Moreover, while some traditional practices persist, new methods of providing care are emerging. In wealthier households, where the hiring of professionals is feasible, the domestic environment becomes more heterogeneous, complex, and often tense. Conflicts over identity boundaries and rights frequently arise from the provision of these services, creating a domestic setting that can resemble a "mini-market" (Guimarães, 2020). In this evolving context, familiar patterns endure: care responsibilities predominantly fall on poorer, less-educated, black women, enabling their more affluent female employers to pursue more prosperous careers. This network of negotiations transcends the conventional rules of economic rationality. Within the home and the realm of domestic life, affection plays a pivotal role and traverses negotiations, revealing hierarchies

<sup>1</sup> "Diaristas" are domestic workers who are paid for their working day and may work in several homes during the month, in contrast to "mensalistas", who are domestic workers who only work for one family household during the whole month.

and conflicts among women differentiated by class and race (Brites, 2003). In the contemporary shifting landscape of rights and market dynamics, affection still remains significant, though it increasingly assumes politicized dimensions intertwined with issues of intimacy, responsibility, inequality, and the role of the State.

This dossier examines and debates this broad spectrum of issues and reconfigurations. Drawing on insights from pioneering scholars in the field, we aim to uncover both continuities and emerging challenges that shape our understanding of contemporary (re)configurations.

Our collective reflection on the theme of this dossier, “Domestic work: Home, market and politics”, began to take shape during the roundtable discussion “Paid domestic and care work in Brazil: Where are we now?”, held at the First Congress of the Red de Investigación sobre Trabajo del Hogar en América Latina (Rithal) in 2021.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the goal was to review the research on domestic and care work over the past five decades, identifying both continuities and shifts in normative and market reconfigurations, while also considering family values and the broader political implications of this debate. This dossier is grounded in a perspective that acknowledges and revisits the history of activism by domestic workers, their hard-won rights, and the empirical and theoretical legacy of this process, providing a solid foundation for analyzing ongoing changes and transformations.

The first article in this dossier, titled “Frontiers in paid domestic work: Analytical and identity dilemmas”, by Anna Bárbara Araujo, Nadya Araujo Guimarães, and Luana Simões Pinheiro, explores paid domestic work within Brazilian households. The piece emphasizes the extensive diversity of domestic work configurations, drawing on both academic literature and recent statistical data. The authors demonstrate how domestic and care work are occasionally depicted in the literature as fragmented and distinct fields, while at other times they are integrated into a broader framework, leading to complex analytical challenges. They also demonstrate how recent developments in the labor market have not only catalyzed new theoretical perspectives but have also provided clues to understanding the creation and blurring of boundaries between these occupations, thereby shedding light on newly emerging identity dilemmas.

The article by Jurema Brites, Thays Monticelli, and Cecy Bezerra de Melo, titled “The role of affection in domestic work studies”, examines how affection – one of the central concepts in the field – has been theoretically framed, emphasizing the dichotomy between oppression and agency in the scholarly literature. The authors call for a re-examination of affection through the lens of practice theory, integrating both the processes of inequality and the potential for emancipation through affection. The article also explores how affection shaped responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing its role in anchoring ambiguous attitudes toward inequality, hierarchy, and care. Conversely, the absence of affection prompted reflections on the assurance (or lack thereof) of rights, providing some leeway to recognize “humanity” through a more politicized understanding of affection.

The article “Always the women? Values and housework division in a comparative perspective”, by Felícia Picanço, Maira Covre-Sussai, Isadora Vianna Sento-Sé, and Clara Araújo, presents a comparative analysis of values and practices related to the sexual division of domestic labor. Using multilevel analyses of quantitative data from the Family and Changing Gender Roles survey conducted by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the authors examine

2 <https://doity.com.br/primeirocongressodarithal>

gender roles, values, family models, domestic practices, and public policies across forty countries from various continents, to identify which factors have the greatest influence on maintaining or altering patterns in the sexual division of labor.

The aforementioned collection of articles, which examines hiring practices, family dynamics surrounding the division of domestic tasks and associated values, everyday relationships, and their affective and inequality dimensions, is further enriched by two additional pieces that address broader institutional policies. Alexandre Barbosa Fraga’s article, “Domestic service and legal parity: Argumentative dispute and associated factors”, analyzes the debates for and against the equalization of labor rights for domestic workers and the ratification of ILO Convention n. 189 in the Brazilian National Congress, drawing on data from the political context in Brazil at the time.

Joaze Bernardino-Costa, Meg Weeks, and Renata Monteiro Lima’s article, “Domestic workers’ activism: From the kitchen to the national and international arena”, explores the history of the domestic workers’ union movement through a decolonial framework. The authors not only emphasize the crucial role of activists in securing labor rights in Brazil and their leadership in the ratification of ILO Convention n. 189, but they also identify the emergence of a new decolonial political subject, suggesting that through their union activism, domestic workers are reshaping the very possibility of a new model of nation.

The dossier “Domestic work: Home, market and politics” opens up new analytical avenues for examining the intersections between the home and the market, focusing on inequalities in domestic work, hiring dynamics, affection, and the evolving challenges stemming from the growing heterogeneity among domestic and care workers. Grounded in the everyday realities of households, the articles compiled here extend into institutional arenas of rights disputes – such as the National Congress and workers’ unions – suggesting that the everyday experiences of domestic and care workers mirror the broader social and political fabric of the nation, including enduring colonial legacies and ongoing struggles for democratization and social justice, while also addressing the contemporary challenges facing Brazilian society. Together, the articles in this dossier underscore the continuities and inequalities that stubbornly persist in the practices, discourses, and logics underpinning domestic work in Brazil, offering insights into and reconsiderations of essential facets of Brazilian society. At the same time, the texts explore the potential new avenues emerging from the agency of these workers, encouraging us to investigate new possibilities and horizons at the intersection of home, market, and politics.

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