

# Conceptualizing the Foundation of Inequalities in Care Work

American Behavioral Scientist  
2016, Vol. 60(2) 172–188  
© 2015 SAGE Publications  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0002764215607572  
abs.sagepub.com



Mary Romero<sup>1</sup> and Nancy Pérez<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Over the past decade, social science researchers in the area of feminism, labor, immigration, and family have written extensively on the care work crisis and globalized care work. Depending on how broadly care work is conceived, these writings emphasize unique aspects of gender, race, class, and/or citizenship inequalities. Second wave of feminist perspectives, for instance, identify housework and most work culturally defined as “women’s work”—including all paid health occupations dominated by women, such as nurses, direct care workers, and hospital workers but also possibly even health, education, and social service occupations—as central to gender subordination. Another important research stream, focusing on domestic labor as women’s work, but recognizing its traditional outsourcing to slaves, servants, and later employees, highlights the complexities of the inequality generated, not only in terms of gender but race, class, and citizenship as well. Bringing these two bodies of literature together in conversation initially pointed to the inaccurate assumption that care work was valued when it became wage labor. The paid labor of domestics, nannies, and elderly care workers, however, remains deeply devalued, most often with those with limited options entering the profession. This article both assesses contradictions within dominant approaches to care work and highlights the cultural and political foundations of the very inequalities that domestic care workers experience.

## Keywords

inequality, care work, intersectionality

---

<sup>1</sup>Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Mary Romero, Arizona State University, Wilson Hall, Room 125, PO Box 876403, Tempe, AZ 85287-6403, USA.

Email: mary.romero@asu.edu

Social science researchers in the area of feminism, labor, immigration, and family are writing extensively on the care crisis and globalized care work. Their research finds that housework and child care continue to be framed as women's work; and, while men may assist in various tasks, their major contribution is still framed as breadwinner. More women, including mothers, are working full-time and are no longer leaving the labor force to raise their children or care for elderly parents. Working mothers commonly report feeling guilty for missing school functions and not being available to volunteer at school or extracurricular activities. Women are assumed to be the parent to stay home or leave work if their child becomes sick. Men seldom take maternity or sick leave to help at home or to be a stay-at-home father even when the option is available.

Compounding the gendered pattern of familial responsibility is the fact that many adults face longer work days, stemming from mandatory overtime, demanding careers, both parents working full-time or long commutes. Family members are living further away from each other, eroding the traditional reliance on kin care. We have a growing elderly population who are not only living longer but more likely to be aging with health problems and disabilities. The erosion of paid health care benefits, welfare, and paid assistance to the disabled has placed additional burdens on working family members, particularly those who do not have the financial means to take time off work or employ a care worker.

The growing crisis has not resulted in family-friendly policies, such as paid maternity leave, affordable and accessible child care and elderly care, flexible work hours, and schedules accommodating family needs. Both culture and politics remain stagnant and hardly reflect these realities. Instead, care work continues to be defined as an individual problem rather than one demanding policy changes. Affluent families are able to rely on hiring migrant women workers who leave their own children behind and send remittances home to support family members. These migrant women are frequently poorly paid and face unregulated working conditions, as well as having precarious state statuses to reside and work in the host country. These responses to the care crisis incorporate inequalities rather than proposing solutions for all working families.

Care work scholarship has taken many twists and turns in understanding the implications of the patterns described above and the implications for gender, race, class, and citizenship inequalities. Framing the issue with gender at the center of analysis tends to focus on the plight of professional women, stay-at-home moms, and working mothers rather than low-wage care migrant and immigrant workers commonly referred to as domestics, housekeepers, and nannies. This conceptual division between women is most evident in the early scholarship, which separated the literature into sociology of gender, sociology of the family, sociology of work, and race relations; and, as globalized care work flourished, the later body of research incorporated sociology of immigration. Researching the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and citizenship status inequality is largely based on analyzing the experiences of women working outside their homes. Concepts used to analyze care work include work–family balance, globalized care work, intensive mothering, transnational mothering, division of household

labor, emotional labor, shadow work, reproductive labor, and so on. In this article, we aim to identify the various approaches to gender and race inequality in relation to the devaluation of care work and analyze cultural assumptions embedded in these conceptualizations that inscribe inequality. We argue that theorizing all women's work as care work erases significant cultural and political structures that deny labor rights and limit access to citizenship. We examine the presence of these inequalities in conceptualizing care work and juxtapose these to domestic workers' campaigns aimed at gaining rights and improve working conditions. Campaign messages are geared toward soliciting employers' and the larger public's support. Consequently, campaign messages are susceptible to incorporating cultural and political depictions and processes that actually serve to maintain gender, racial, class, and citizenship subordination. In dialogue with academic research, we highlight these dominant narratives and the ways they reify inequality.

We begin by discussing initial analysis of gender and race inequality, which tended to build on early and potentially myopic conceptions of housework as paid and unpaid labor. We then turn to more recent research on care work that focuses on (a) globalized care work of domestics and nannies and (b) female-dominated occupations that some researchers identify as part of the larger economy of care, such as teachers, nurses, child care workers, and mental health and social service occupations. Our review of both streams of research reveals the reemergence of cultural themes that were previously discarded for essentializing worker characteristics and inscribing gender and race inequality. These different categories of care work also highlight the importance of legal constraints to improving conditions. The gaining popularity of this new research is demonstrated in the last section. Here, we highlight the contradictory framing and discourses in domestic organizing—framing and discourses that straddle the interests of workers, employers, and the popular care work movement. The larger “care economy” consequently tends to reinscribe inequality by ignoring core cultural processes and significant legal structures; and, in doing so, limits workers' rights and their struggle for dignity.

## **Housework and Domestic Service: Analyzing Gender and Race Inequality**

### *Centering Gender*

An early theme emerging from the Women's Movement in the 1960s was the drudgery of housework, which was defined as women's work and as central to gender subordination. In the *Feminist Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963) described women she encountered as having “voices (that) were dull and flat, or nervous and jittery; they were listless and bored, or frenetically ‘busy’ around the house or community” (p. 235). Housework was defined as a woman's activity carried out in her position as daughter, mother, or wife, and treated as unskilled labor. Attention to the unequal distribution of housework entered feminist discourse as the “Politics of Housework,” which sparked debates over the value of housework and the monetary worth of all the unpaid work related to maintaining a home and family. No longer willing to accept framing this

work as a “labor of love,” feminists demanded that housework be recognized as “real” work. They argued that the primary distinguishing feature between “real” work and housework was the monetary value placed on these tasks defined as women’s work. Several concepts emerged to call attention to the unpaid labor that women in the home do, such as “shadow work” (Illich, 1981) to highlight its invisibility in the family and society. For women who added this unpaid labor after a full day employed outside the home, Arlie Hochschild (1991) referred to this work as the second shift.

To demonstrate the value of this work, some economists and feminists identified similar activity in the economic sphere that was found in various occupations, such as a cook, teacher, chauffeur, and the like. Taking the monetary value placed on the various tasks involved in caring for a family, economics computed the monetary value of these tasks to calculate the worth of housework in the market place. This exercise was successful in identifying the skill level involved in women’s unpaid labor in the home. Another approach was to highlight this work as “a necessary condition for the family wage earner to exist” (Illich, 1981, p. 2). Here, one could arguably identify the significance of feeding, clothing, caring, and raising children, which reproduced future workers for the labor market. Without this necessary labor, the state and the capitalist economy could not function. Some feminists campaigned for “wages for housework” in recognition of their contribution to the economic system (Costa & James, 1975). While internationally proposals for wages for housework continue to emerge, the larger discussion in the United States, more often than not, turns to that of work–family balance.

Analysis of the devaluation and gender division of household labor was expanded to female-dominated occupations, such as nursing, teaching, cooking, serving, and cleaning. The lower wages symptomatic of female-dominated occupations was evidence of the continued devaluation of labor related to women’s work. Further analysis pointed to the ways that this labor was assumed to be unskilled and essentialized as a natural female trait. As men entered into some of the higher paying occupations dominated by women, such as teachers and nurses, researchers found that males were more likely to be paid higher wages and advance more quickly. In addition, men were less likely to encounter the same expectations to engage in emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) or act subordinate as women were. These findings focused on gender inequality and advocated the position that these were universal experiences for all women and further evidence that “women’s work,” paid or unpaid, united all women. Notably, however, such findings and conclusions were based largely on the experiences of heterosexual White middle-class women. They ignored working class men of color’s experiences in many of the very same positions as well as wage differentials between White and non-White women as well as those who were not citizens. Patriarchy alone simply did not explain it all.

### *Centering Race in an Intersectional Approach*

Sociologists researching domestic service in the 1980s and 1990s recognized the role that colonialism, along with slavery, played in shaping the occupation. U.S. colonialism laid the foundation for policies and racial-gendered etiquette that established both

White supremacy and patriarchy as key to labor exploitation (Rollins, 1985). Our national imagination of mistress–maid relationships is still represented by the faithful servant, the saving Maria and the Mammy figure, which serves to mask long hours, low wages, lack of health care benefits, or social security (Romero, 2003). The long-term consequences of colonialism are also evident in the social, political, and economic inequalities within and between nations, reflected in the configuration of our contemporary global care chain (Parreñas, 2001). Indeed, the majority of women working as domestic workers, nannies, and elderly care workers in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Washington, DC, and across the United States are from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands—all countries that have experienced U.S. colonial and neocolonial interventions.

Early conceptualizations explained the lack of state regulations and the employment of vulnerable populations in paid housework in “bridging occupation” and “ghetto occupation” terms. Historians defined domestic service as a bridging occupation based on their research on European immigrant women. Here, the core focus was on workers’ gender and citizenship status and domestic service was framed as the ideal entry-level occupation to provide European immigrant women from rural areas, and was seen as a protected environment to learn middle-class American values, develop appropriate skills to raise a family, or transfer these skills to the labor market. In contrast, work that saw domestic service as an occupational ghetto captured the restricted employment opportunities and the lack of intergenerational mobility women of color experienced in the occupation (Glenn, 1981, 1986). While the literature on domestic service is no longer divided by European immigrants and women of color in the United States, a tension remains when it comes to emphasis on immigration or race. The distinction is most evident when one considers what is highlighted in immigration scholarship on ethnicity, culture, assimilation, and acculturation versus racial conceptualizations, which tend to focus on domination, subordination, and privilege.

Much of the research on domestics in the United States over the past 30 years incorporates intersectionality to analyze power dynamics and the interpersonal relationships between employee and employer. The research setting is typically the employer’s intimate space of their home, which usually involves two women from different class, racial, and ethnic groups. Increasingly, they may also differ in citizenship status, religion, and age. Examining the interaction between employer and employee has offered valuable insight into everyday experiences that reproduce inequality. Women of color, including immigrants, experience having their skills treated as “natural” or “cultural” qualities that construct them as “ideal” nannies, caretakers, or domestic workers. Employers continue to express racial preferences for certain racial ethnic groups on the basis of their “natural” abilities. Analyses of the labor process in such milieu points to the types of requests and exchanges that serve to subordinate the worker, establish employer dominance, and maintain racial, gender, and class privilege. Moreover, labor law, welfare legislation, and immigration policy are significant as well, creating the structural content within which women of color, primarily immigrant, dominate the current care economy (Chang, 2000; Glenn, 2010; Mattingly, 1999; Smith, 2011).

State policy has played a monumental role in the class, race, gender, and citizenship inequalities that have been and continue to be found in domestic service. Slave labor in the South was guarded by individual states' slave codes, which gave masters absolute power. After emancipation, White southerners responded by establishing Black codes to restrict the movement of Blacks, which assured their access to plenty of cheap labor. Based on "master-servant" common law, anti-enticement laws were introduced to prohibit workers from seeking better employment by revoking an employer's right to hire a worker contracted to another employer. This practice served to keep Northern recruiters away and limit employment opportunities. Vagrancy laws were used to keep both Black men and women employed. Unlike White women who were expected to stay home caring for their families, Black women were "assumed to be idle if not working for wages" (Glenn, 2010, p. 32). Jim Crow laws were not eliminated from federal law until the 1964 Civil Rights Legislation and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were passed (Russell, 1998).

The role of law and policy, and their implications for the inequalities experienced by domestic workers are not merely a historical artifact. The U.S. government, it seems, has been and continues to be relentless in refusing to extend federal labor laws to cover most domestic service positions (Smith, 2011). As laws emerged in the 1930s to protect labor, domestic service was excluded—not because it was considered women's work but more specially because it was considered Black women's work. Even though, domestic service was an occupation with documented reports of abuse and was the major occupation employing women from 1870 to 1940, these workers were excluded from coverage in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). It is important to note that during this period the state mandated the regulation of working hours for women on the basis of protecting their reproductive capacity (Smith, 2007, 2011). Racism and its influence in regional politics prevailed, and the federal government excluded domestics, predominately Black women, from labor protections passed under the New Deal (Glenn, 2010). The price for gaining the support of Southern Democrats in passing the National Industrial Recovery Act, the National Labor Relations Act, and the FLSA was to exclude Blacks from the same labor rights as Whites. The exclusion of domestic service and agricultural workers from these legal protections—that is, collective bargaining, minimum wage, guaranteed time-and-a-half for overtime, and stipulations on the type of work children younger than 16 years were allowed to do—insured that protective laws were reserved largely for Whites.

In the 1970s, domestic workers made another attempt to gain FLSA coverage. This time the campaign included a feminist alliance with employers participating and supporting the National Committee on Household Employment. Working together, domestics and employers forged a gender solidarity—a solidarity that saw the extension of labor rights to domestic workers as a benefit for all women. In her analysis of legislative debates, Premilla Nadasen (2012) identified the hidden racial and gender assumptions that Congressmen and male policy makers drew from in arguing against the extension of such protections. They included the claim that the plight of domestic workers was in the "women's sphere" and thus,

low wages and poor treatment [fell] squarely on the shoulders of middle-class female employers—their “wives”—and framed domestic worker as an occupation that took place in the privacy of the home, outside the public realm . . . a personal space of refuge . . . housewife-employers were incapable of complying with the law and keeping records. (Nadasen, 2012, pp. 81-82)

And passage would result in “a disruption of the gender division of labor” (Nadasen, 2012, p. 82). This last claim points to the real concern men had to protect their own male privilege and avoid the labor themselves.

In 1974, congressional FLSA amendments were passed and domestics gained federal minimum-wage protections; however, live-in workers and home health care aides were excluded on the grounds that they provided “companionship” services (Boris & Klein, 2012). The Department of Labor (DOL) maintains that regulating labor in the employers’ household for live-in workers is difficult to impossible. Yet as legal scholar Peggy Smith (2011) points out that “live-in” conditions is not a new phenomenon for DOL because they cover other workers, such as “firefighters, resident managers of storage facilities, assistant deputy probation officers, a damtender, residential care assistants, maintenance monitors of power generating plant, apartment resident site managers, house parents of boys’ facility, a garage watchman, telephone operators, and park caretakers” (pp. 180-181). In addition, domestic workers are not covered by Occupational Safety and Health Act, Family and Medical Leave Act, or the Civil Rights Act.

## **The Reemergence of Cultural Themes in Care Work Conceptions**

### *Care as Love*

Recent scholarship on globalized care work draws from both conceptual frameworks on gender analysis of “women’s work” and the racial analysis of women of color domestics, but reinscribes inequalities through culturally embedded notions. For instance, Hochschild’s (2002) conceptualization of the care crisis recognizes that the First World’s “care deficit” is addressed by extracting from Third World families, which captures the inequalities between families and countries. However, instead of defining reproductive labor as the scarce resource, the notion of a “chain of love” conceptualizes love as the scare resource. Establishing love as the commodity, rather than explicitly recognizing the extensive range of labor provided by immigrant women of color employed as domestics, nannies, and elderly care workers essentializes care work qualities. This approach not only places emotion above skill but as central to the work (i.e., Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Furthermore, as emotion, this work is distinctively unique and cannot be regulated by the state and cannot fit into normative employer–employee or client–customer frameworks. Instead, employees are characterized as seeking an emotional connection, which shifts the focus away from the pressing issues of fair wages and improved working conditions. And, ultimately, such

an argument justifies the exclusion of these workers in labor law in the United States and detracts from ongoing labor struggles.

Debates over labor of love versus love as labor is one that constantly appears when discussing care work (Lutz, 2011). Raka Ray and Seemin Quyum (2009) summarize the critique that many scholars researching domestic workers have with emotional connection, which they refer to as the “rhetoric of love” (p. 25). The expression is most commonly represented in the characterization of the employee as “one of the family.” Defining one’s relationship as familial rather than in labor terms allows the employer to make requests as a friend or family member, leaving the employee feeling obligated to comply and in an exploitative situation (Romero, 1992). Ray and Quyum (2009) identified several factors increasing the likelihood of “rhetoric of love” entering employer–employee relations: the type of working arrangement, degree of child care involved, and the age and gender of employers. Consequently, one strategy used by workers to construct boundaries is avoiding labor considered “personal service” (Anderson, 2000; Lutz 2011; Romero, 1992).

Given the power relationships of domination/subordination and dependency stemming from domestic service’s historical roots, the culture of servitude is constantly lurking in the relationship between maids and madams (Fish, 2006; Ray & Quyum, 2009). Some researchers have found some workers do seek an emotional connection with their employer, particularly if they are living-in and caring for children, which can be attributed to their extreme isolation. Research also finds that seeking emotional connection is sometimes a strategy to gain respect and dignity (Colen, 1986; Glenn, 1986; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992) and a way to address the shame and disgust experienced doing “dirty work” (Lutz, 2011). The “rhetoric of love” can be useful in disrupting the verbal and spatial deference that reproduces class, race, and citizenship distinctions (Fish, 2006; Ray & Quyum, 2009; Romero, 1992). 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.

A closely related concept that culturally embeds notions of essentialism is emotional labor. Here, love is frequently constructed as a central component of care work; and all too often, the ability to excel is tied to workers as mothers with the implication that they have a cultural propensity toward family, babies, and care work. This framework not only fails to consider emotional labor as paid or unpaid labor but redefines and erases the labor by defining it as love. Furthermore, there is a paradigm shift away from labor studies to the study of love and care, something that tends to blur the intersectional issues of inequality in the labor and focuses solely on gender. For instance, in Cameron Lynne Macdonald’s (2011) work, this concern with emotional labor is not so much the “cost” of the work on nannies but rather the impact on motherhood among middle-class women employers. Other researchers have analyzed the same phenomena as reproducing class status and inequality (Ray & Quyum, 2009; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992, 2011).

Judith Rollins (1985) argued that employing women of color fulfilled two functions, “affording the employers the self-enhancing satisfactions that emanate from



having the presence of an inferior and validating the employer's lifestyle, ideology, and social world, from their familial interrelations to the economically and racially stratified system in which they live" (p. 156). However, in Macdonald's (2010) analysis, gender inequality becomes central to the employer rather than the employee, as suggested in the following statement, "arguably, the conflict between mothering ideologies and the need for paid childcare workers is the trip wire on the feminist road to gender equality" (p. 8). Attention is on "mother-employer" instead of the "mother-employee" who is the caregiver. While high-status professional women employ caregivers as nannies, the only detailed analysis of mothering ideologies considered are the employers.

To analyze solely employers' management and monitoring strategies, the nanny becomes the medium by which intensive mothering and children's needs are met. Thus, the worker becomes a shadow mother by learning to recognize how and when to be invisible so that the mother-employer's maternal visibility is enhanced. Within this framework, the caregiver as mother is not analyzed and this approach ignores issues of race, class, citizenship, age, and other kinds of inequality shaping her "mothering." The caregivers' "mothering" is described as traditional without considering the social and economic conditions that shape their decisions in their own home or the lack of "real" parental status they have over their charges at work. The nanny's perspective is largely limited to responses to employers' management strategies.

It is crucial to recognize, in our view, how mothers employed as nannies and domestics also face mothering ideologies, which are particularly challenging in the complexities arising from transnational families and mothering. While their own children are never far from their minds and are the recipients of remittances, capitalist ideas of family and motherhood do not include transnational families but rather results in mother blaming (Lutz, 2011). In her study of mothers in the Philippines migrating to work as domestic workers, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001) found that although the women were considered the new economic heroes for their sacrifices involved in sending home remittances, transitional households were viewed as "the destruction of the moral fabric" (p. 109). These families were treated as "broken" as a result of not conforming to "traditional expectations of cohabitation among spouses and children," "the traditional division of labor," and the "traditional practices of socialization in the family" (Parreñas, 2001, p. 109). However, the domesticity of women is not only culturally maintained but is legally supported in the 1987 Family Code of the Republic of the Philippines. These migrant women are caught between "the ideology of women's domesticity even as the economy promotes the labor market participation of women" (Parreñas, 2008, p. 23). Patriarchy is maintained by placing migrant women in jobs framed as relying on their natural abilities for caring and nurturing. This not only maintains gender inequality at home but assures their place as low-wage workers for wealthier countries.

### *Care as Nurturing*

Numerous feminist scholars have attempted to begin their study on care work by defining the essence or natural state of care as an emotional and interpersonal

relationship (Abel & Nelson, 1990; Cancian & Oliker, 2000; Folbre, 2001; Hochschild, 2002; Noddings, Gordon, & Bender, 1996; Tronto, 1993). The emphasis on emotion and relational tasks divides the labor involved in reproductive labor into a range of activities and conceptualizes care work with an emphasis on the nurturance framework of care (i.e., Cancian, 2000). Although reproductive labor includes labor than nurtures, these are treated as separate tasks. Cooking and cleaning frequently appear as reproductive and the care of children and elderly are classified as involving face-to-face interaction. The fact that cooking, cleaning, and laundry are fundamental to caring for children and the elderly, the labor that does not involve actual interpersonal interaction to be accomplished is excluded. Other elements used to distinguish different types of reproductive labor are skills, such as physical skills, cognitive skills, and emotional skills. Glenn (1992) and Roberts (1997) use the division to analyze the gendered and racialized division of labor when the work becomes paid labor of women of color. However, most research on nannies and elderly caregivers shows that workers hired as caregivers find themselves expected to do housework, cooking, and laundry. Similarly, domestics hired to do housework are frequently expected to provide care, cook, or do laundry (Anderson, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Two recent studies conceptualizing gender and race use a historical approach to explain the resulting inequality, yet each is distinct in attending to the centrality and role of cultural and legal structures.

In *Making Care Count: A Century of Gender, Race, and Paid Care Work*, Mignon Duffy (2011) draws from U.S. Census data from 1900 to 2007 to analyze paid care occupations that include health care, education and child care, and social services. Using this broad generalization of care work, occupations are then categorized as nurturant and nonnurturant care using Dorothy Roberts's (1997) classification of domestic labor as "spiritual versus menial labor." While spiritual and menial labor are constructed to distinguish domestic labor that is highly valued and devalued, Duffy (2011) constructs entire occupations as consisting of labor that is relational or nonrelational. Nurturant care refers to the intimate, face-to-face relationship that maintains and/or develops human capabilities (spiritual), which are perceived more natural for women. Nonnurturant care is defined as not relational, yet it "undergirds" nurturant care, and is described as dirty, invisible work (menial). Notable is that Duffy (2011) examines only nurturant care, despite the most significant concentrations of racial-ethnic workers employed in nonnurturant jobs. She does, however, acknowledge that "basing claims of the value of care on relationality, to the exclusion of or in opposition to the other skills and labor involved in paid care, is problematic" (p. 138). Paid care occupations that are dominated by women of color and immigrant women are ultimately excluded from such a framework. No less problematic is the nonrecognition of how care workers position themselves across multiple intersections, and their own articulated and often collective, radical views of care.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2010) similarly offers a historical analysis of care in *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America*. While she does identify paid care occupations considered "dirty work," she uses the classification to characterize the job sector dominated by women of color. In tracing the historical trajectory to our current care system, Glenn (2010) identifies three forms of free and forced labor regimes of

care within our current care system: direct care giving, maintaining immediate physical surroundings, and kin or community mothering. The market revolution and early industrialization used the notion of “family wage” to conceal women’s unpaid reproductive labor and emphasizing the private home as the refuge. The housewife and breadwinner distinction legally relegated women as dependents and racialized the American standard of living, both of which generated a need for servants to maintain a status standard of cleanliness, order, and beauty. Forced labor regimes in the early republic included slave and indentured servitude to care for their master’s children. After the civil war and reconstruction, freedmen and women were deprived material resources that would allow them to become independent workers, slavery was rewritten into history to naturalize White supremacy, criminal laws such as vagrancy statutes and petty crimes were written to compel labor.

After the emancipation, vagrancy laws were used to force Black women into domestic service. Instead of including female-dominated occupations previously identified as incorporating aspects of care work, Nakano Glenn’s analysis of laws and public policy include the “outing system” that placed Indian boys and girls into White homes to labor, implementation of “domesticity” in women’s prisons, Americanization campaigns stressing homemaking techniques targeting immigrant women, marriage and family law, and access to welfare and limited employment options. These legal and cultural structures forced women into care work through status obligation and racialized gendered servitude. Nakano Glenn’s conceptualization of care work incorporates the work of feminist legal scholars into a sociological analysis of care work, which is inclusive of all women doing paid and unpaid care work.

As denoted by Nakano Glenn’s analyses, both cultural and legal structures influence labor organizing surrounding care work. This is evident to a considerable degree in contemporary organizing campaigns by domestic workers, including housecleaners, nannies, and elderly caregivers, to which we turn to now. Campaign strategies and themes are analyzed to identify the cultural and legal influence shaping the discourses used to gain support to pass Domestic Bill of Rights. Organizing discourse includes workers’ definition of care work and their recognition that domestic service is one of the fastest growing occupations employing mostly immigrant, women of color. We argue that organizers adoption of some cultural aspects in academic discourse reinscribe race, class, and gender inequalities. We also point to campaigns’ limitations resulting from social inequalities already existing in legal structures.

## **Contemporary Discourse of Domestic Workers Organizing**

As in the past, domestic workers in the United States have relied on informal networks, mutual aid associations, cooperatives, and unions to organize. “Rather than organizing along the primary axis of class alone, these workers have integrated into their organizing strategies more specific identities based on race, ethnicity, gender and family. They have drawn upon their identities as careworkers” (Boris & Nadasen, 2008, p. 415). Some of these groups are the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights

of Los Angeles,<sup>1</sup> Andolan,<sup>2</sup> Unity Housecleaners of the Workplace Project,<sup>3</sup> Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees,<sup>4</sup> Damayan Migrant Workers Association,<sup>5</sup> CASA de Maryland,<sup>6</sup> Mujeres Unidas y Activas,<sup>7</sup> and Domestic Workers United<sup>8</sup>. The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is a national organization consisting of 44 affiliate organizations with a local chapter in Atlanta that serves over 10,000 nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the elderly in 26 cities in 18 states. Sources offering organizers' conceptualization of care work are affiliate organizations' mission statements, which identify the type of worker, the targeted issues, and proposed strategies. Having been denied the right to collective bargaining, these workers must engage in coalition building in their struggle for a living wage and improving working conditions.

Domestic workers' advocacy and organizing groups identify these employees as housekeepers, nannies, and elderly care workers; predominately immigrant women of color; and, many are working mothers. These workers' contributions to the larger economy are demonstrated in the following slogan, "Domestic work is the work that makes all other work possible."<sup>9</sup> NDWA's mission statement characterizes the workers as follows:

Domestic workers care for the things we value the most: our families and our homes. They care for our children, provide essential support for seniors and people with disabilities to live with dignity at home, and perform the home care work that makes all other work possible. They are skilled and caring professionals, but for many years, they have labored in the shadows, and their work has not been valued. These workers deserve respect, dignity and basic labor protections.<sup>10</sup>

In an effort to eliminate the stigma attached to domestic service, organizing materials include a call for dignity and justice. This message is softened by defining domestic work as "an act of love" but recognizing the labor as "real work."<sup>11</sup> Love in this case, however, differs from Hochschild's notion of love as a scarce resource. Rather, it is seen as the labor of providing care with dignity and respect. "Domestic work makes it possible for seniors and people with disabilities to live with dignity at home. Domestic workers make it possible for many busy families to provide safe, reliable care for their children and their homes."<sup>12</sup> As real work, the emphasis is on the workers' experience and professional skills.

The research report released by NDWA (2012) details information on areas of inequality domestics' experience. *Home Economics* is based on a survey of 2,086 nannies, caregivers, and housecleaners from 71 countries in nine languages and in 14 metropolitan areas in the United States. They frame inequalities as rooted in historical, social, and economic trends, including both the "devaluation of women's labor in the household" and "the legacy of slavery with its divisions of labor along lines of both race and gender" (NDWA, 2012, p. ix). Workers are further vulnerable to exploitation because they are immigrant women, some of whom are undocumented and women of color. NDWA points to the isolation of the work, both from other workers and outside public view, which creates a vulnerable environment. All of these characteristics are further worsened by the lack of federal and state labor protections. Substandard

working conditions include low wages, hazardous work involving long-term exposure to toxic chemical and workplace injuries, and disrespect and abuse on the job.

Since domestic workers are not covered by federal labor laws, NDWA, along with their affiliates, are struggling to pass a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in each state. Since June 2015, a Bill has been passed in Massachusetts, California, Hawaii, New York, and Oregon. The New York State DOL identifies the following workers as covered by the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights:

work in another person's home: caring for children or an elderly person, keeping house (cleaning and cooking), and doing other domestic jobs in the home (gardening or repairs) . . . If you perform companionship services . . . if you take care of an elderly person, and do not perform additional work such as cleaning services—you are not subject to the overtime and day of rest rules under the new law.<sup>13</sup>

After 1 year working with the same employer, the employee is entitled to 3 days of paid vacation. Persons engaged in similar work on a casual basis are not considered domestic workers under the law.

Hawaii's Domestic Bill of Rights covers "services performed by employees such as cooks, waiters, butlers, valets, maids, housekeepers, governesses, janitors, laundresses, caretakers, handymen, gardeners and chauffeurs of automobiles for family use."<sup>14</sup> In Hawaii, the law does not cover vacation, sick leave, or holidays but does include overtime pay after 40 hours a week. In addition, domestic workers are protected from discrimination based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, color, ancestry, disability, and marital status. The Bills of Rights passed in the various states vary depending on the political process and successful lobbying.

Passing legislation requires appealing to a larger audience beyond low-wage immigrant women of color employed as housekeepers, nannies, and elderly caregivers. NDWA's major campaign aimed at gaining public support is "Caring Across Generations." The campaign is aimed at building a national movement to connect family members across generations to strengthen family and caregiving relationships, namely paid elderly caregivers. Calling attention to the growing elderly population and the absence of a comprehensive plan to address the needs of older parents and grandparents, NDWA, along with numerous partners, advocate for cultural change, local, state, and federal policy advocacy, online campaigning and field activities, and civic engagement. Culture change and creating policy are the two major initiatives. Culture change refers to transforming the way we think about aging by promoting multigenerational relationships and valuing care work. Policy advocacy brings stakeholders together to establish a comprehensive program to support the aging and paid care workers. Ai-jen Poo (2015), the director of NDWA, has elaborated this campaign in her book, *The Age of Dignity*. She argues that opportunities are available to professionalize the occupation and offer well-paying jobs with better care and essentially dignity for all.

Professionalizing the occupation, of course, requires the state to build an infrastructure for care that offers benefits and security by training workers with skills to support

people in a range of environments. Since many of these workers are undocumented, Poo (2015) advocates establishing a path to citizenship for caregivers using work-based criteria. She recommends that workers for a “temporary legal status and work authorization based on the demonstration of employment as a domestic worker or care provider and later receive legal permanent residence based on their continued performance of qualifying employment and completion of training” (pp. 163-164). However, demonstrating ones deservingness to legal personhood via a national, dominant narrative of hard work and merit, justifies and reestablishes a systemic gendered racism that profoundly produces detrimental consequences. As Paula Ioanide (2014) reminds us, “whiteness has made concessions to people of color who were willing to reproduce its foundational terms and wages in exchange for modicums of mobility and delimited inclusion” (p. 155).

## Conclusions

Even though concerns about social inequality surrounding care work have been around for decades, conceptualizing care without attention and care toward gender, race, class, and now citizenship is challenging but nevertheless essential. The United States is facing a growing aging population and a society that does not want to face the responsibility of caring for loved ones, let alone the workers who have performed that work all along. The urgency lies in the continued racial/ethnic stratification among care workers and the inability to abolish race, class, gender, and citizenship boundaries that reproduce labor exploitation. The lack of labor laws protecting domestic workers, many of them undocumented women, exacerbates the social inequalities we find in paid reproductive labor. Important as well, cultural values surrounding the economy care work further complicate the labor for domestic workers by framing the work-related tasks they engage in as somehow distinct from any other kind of employment. These cultural values and beliefs, in fact, rationalize the lack of regulation and reinforce inequalities and hierarchies between employer and employee, as well as between families, communities, and nations.

It is important to recognize that the distinctions researchers make about the types of labor in caring rarely appear in domestic workers’ own organizing materials. Rather, and to gain popular support for legislation changes bolstering labor rights, organizers engage in the rhetoric of love and emotion and attempt to highlight the dignity and respect in both giving and receiving care. We suggest that such dominant narratives are ultimately problematic in so much as the argument that care is so unique undermines the very struggles for fair wages, labor regulation, and protections. It does so by removing culpability from the political and placing care work in the realm of the personal and affective, often bolstering essentialist views. While these narratives of emotion and love enhance the status of the labor involved in motherhood, ultimately they also reinscribe inequality.

## Acknowledgments

We thank Vinnie Roscigno and anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles was formed in 1986 to advocate for human and civil rights of immigrants and refugees in Los Angeles. They began a Household Workers Committee in 2006 and activity sought passage of the California Bill of Rights.
2. Founded in 1998, this group organizes and advocates for low-wage South Asian immigrant workers. Members are employed as babysitters, housekeepers, and restaurant workers.
3. Unity was founded in 1992 and is a cooperative of immigrant housecleaners in Long Island, New York.
4. Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees was founded in 1992 to address the crisis of Haitian immigrants in the United States and Guantanamo Bay.
5. Damayan serves Filipino women domestic workers in the New York and New Jersey since 2002.
6. CASA serve low-income immigrant communities and assists workers find employment.
7. Mujeres Unidas y Activas began their work with Latina immigrant women in 1993 and actively worked to pass the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights.
8. Domestic Workers United has been organizing Caribbean, Latina, and African nannies, housekeepers, and elderly caregivers in New York since 2000.
9. <http://www.domesticworkers.org/who-we-are>
10. <http://www.domesticworkers.org/who-we-are>
11. <http://www.domesticworkers.org/domestic-work>
12. <http://www.domesticworkers.org/domestic-work>
13. <https://labor.ny.gov/legal/laws/pdf/domestic-workers/facts-for-domestic-workers.pdf>
14. <http://www.domesticworkers.org/hawaii-bill-of-rights>

## References

- Abel, E. K., & Nelson, M. K. (1990). *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, B. (2000). *Doing the dirty work? The global politics of domestic labour*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Boris, E., & Klein, J. (2012). *Caring for America: Home wealth workers in the shadow of the welfare state*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Boris, E., & Nadasen, P. (2008). Domestic worker organize. *WorkingUSA*, 11, 413-437.
- Cancian, F. M. (2000). Paid emotional care: Organizational forms that encourage nurturance. In M. H. Meyer (Ed.), *Care work: Gender, labor and the welfare state* (pp. 136-148). London, England: Routledge.
- Cancian, F. M., & Oliker, S. J. (2000). *Caring and gender*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

- Chang, G. (2000). *Disposable domestics: Immigrant women workers in the global economy*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Colen, S. (1986). With respect and feelings: Voices of West Indian child care and domestic workers in New York City. In J. B. Cole (Ed.), *All American women: Lines that divide, ties that bind* (pp. 46-70). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Costa, M. D., & James, S. (1975). *The power of women and the subversion of the community*. Bristol, England: Falling Wall.
- Duffy, M. (2011). *Making care count: A century of gender, race, and paid care work*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fish, J. (2006). *Domestic democracy: At home in South Africa*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Folbre, N. (2001). *The invisible heart: Economics and family values*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *Feminist mystique*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Glenn, E. N. (1981). Occupational ghettoization: Japanese American women and domestic service, 1905-1970. *Ethnicity*, 7, 352-386.
- Glenn, E. N. (1986). *Issei, nisei, war bride: Three generations of Japanese American women in domestic service*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Glenn, E. N. (1992). From servitude to service work: Historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor. *Signs*, 18, 1-43.
- Glenn, E. N. (2010). *Forced to care: Coercion and caregiving in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1991). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2002). Love and gold. In B. Erenreich & A. R. Hochschild (Eds.), *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy* (pp. 15-30). New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2001). *Domestica: Immigrant workers cleaning and caring in the shadows of affluence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Illich, I. (1981). *Shadow work*. London, England: Marion Boyars.
- Ioanide, P. (2014). The alchemy of race and affect: "White innocence" and public secrets in the post-civil rights era. *Kalfou*, 1, 151-168.
- Lutz, H. (2011). *The new maids: Transnational women and the care economy*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Macdonald, C. L. (2010). *Shadow mothers: Nannies, au pairs, and the micropolitics of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mattingly, D. (1999). Making maids: United States immigration policy and immigrant domestic workers. In J. H. Momsen (Ed.), *Gender, migration, and domestic service* (pp. 62-79). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nadasen, P. (2012). Citizenship rights, domestic work, and the Fair Labor Standards Act. *Journal of Policy History*, 24, 74-94.
- National Domestic Workers Alliance. (2012). *Home economics: The invisible and unregulated world of domestic work*. New York, NY: Author.
- Noddings, N., Gordon, S., & Bender, P. (1996). *Caregiving: Readings in knowledge, practice, ethics, and politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Parreñas, R. S. (2001). *Servants of globalization: Women, migration, and domestic work*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.



- Parreñas, R. S. (2008). *The force of domesticity: Filipina migrants and globalization*. New York: New York University Press.
- Poo, A. (2015). *The age of dignity: Preparing for the elder boom in a changing America*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Ray, R., & Quyum, S. (2009). *Cultures of servitude: Modernity, domesticity, and class in India*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Roberts, D. (1997). Spiritual and menial housework. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 9, 51-80.
- Rollins, J. (1985). *Between women: Domestic workers and their employers*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Romero, M. (1992). *Maid in the U.S.A.* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Romero, M. (2003). Nanny diaries and other stories: Imagining women's labor in the social reproduction of American families. *DePaul Law Review*, 52, 809-847.
- Romero, M. (2011). *The maid's daughter, living inside and outside the American dream*. New York: New York University Press.
- Russell, K. K. (1998). *The color of crime: Racial hoaxes, White fear, Black protectionism, police harassment, and other macroaggressions*. New York: New York University Press.
- Smith, P. R. (2007). Aging and caring in the home: Regulating paid domesticity in the twenty-first century. *Iowa Law Review*, 92, 1835-1900.
- Smith, P. R. (2011). Work like any other, work like no other: Establishing decent work for domestic service workers. *Employee Rights and Employment Policy Journal*, 15, 157-198.
- Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York, NY: Routledge.

### Author Biographies

**Mary Romero** is a professor of justice studies at Arizona State University. She is the author of "The Maid's Daughter: Living Inside and Outside the American Dream" (NYU) and "Maid in the U.S.A." (Routledge). She is coeditor of several books, including *When Care Work Goes Global, Locating the Social Relations of Domestic Work* (Ashgate), *Interdisciplinary and Social Justice: Revisioning Academic Accountability* (SUNY Press), and *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities* (Blackwell).

**Nancy Pérez** is a PhD candidate of justice studies at Arizona State University. Her research interests are migration, labor, and theoretical perspectives on the body and pain. She is currently writing her dissertation on Central American and Mexican domestic workers and their children in Los Angeles. This study uses interdisciplinary approaches to understand the complexities of domestic work affected by current legal processes that are reshaping cultures of resistance, and the conditions influencing experiences of self, community, and the production of memory.