

**INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS: RACIAL-ETHNIC  
STRATIFICATION IN DOMESTIC WORK AND  
IMPLICATIONS FOR IDENTITY-BASED ORGANIZING**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article reports on a survey of 410 Colorado domestic workers, which demonstrates that race/ethnicity and national origin are more powerful predictors of workplace oppression than gender or class. An “intersectionality” framework explores how a hierarchy of oppressions divides female domestic workers from their female employers, and from each other, suggesting challenges to domestic worker organizing along gender or class lines, in that both professional women and white domestic workers benefit from racialized hierarchies within domestic work. These findings suggest associational “identity politics” organizing as a productive strategy to highlight the unique experiences of racially and ethnically subordinate domestic workers and to build on existing community networks of nonwhite immigrant workers, thus establishing an identity-based foundation of mutual strength and political power from which domestic women of color can reach out to build majoritarian alliances for change.

**MAIDS AND MA’AMS: GENDER DISCORD**

As the “feminization of migration” increasingly characterizes transnational labor flows (Lyons, 2004a, 2004b; Maher, 2004; Moras, 2008a), domestic workers

make up an ever-larger share of that migration stream. In fact, the global domestic work trade is one of the world's fastest-growing economic sectors (ILO, 2010; Mather, 2005). In America, 25% of foreign-born women are domestic workers (Kaufka, 2003) and studies have found the majority of domestic workers to be immigrant women of color (Domestic Workers United and DataCenter, 2006).

The rise of the largely female, transnational domestic work sector (Anderson, 2000; Hongdagneu -Sotelo, 2007; ILO, 2010; Mather, 2005; Poo & Tang, 2005; Romero, 2002; Yeoh, Huang, & Gonzales, 1999) has led some scholars to predict an emergent "Global Feminism" that uses transnational feminist networks to organize domestic workers along gender or class lines to advance universal women's and workers' rights (Lyons, 2004b; Moghadam, 1999; Swider, 2006). Such an analysis often unites a feminist/gendered approach with a Marxist/class approach, arguing that the "gendered construction of reproductive labor is at the center of women's oppression" (Glenn, 1992: 12) and interpreting women worldwide as core members of an oppressed group that can be united transnationally along gender/class lines.

But this effort to cast the plight of domestic workers as representing the universal oppressions facing women as a class (a viewpoint Romero [2002] calls the "common victim" view of shared female oppression) veils the reality of profound class and power divisions between female domestic workers and their typically female supervisors (Andall, 2000; Rollins, 1987). The reality is that most employers of domestic workers in the Global North are white professionals, with the woman in the family doing most of the hiring and supervision of workers who are often immigrants (Domestic Workers United and DataCenter, 2006). The highly unequal relationship between these two groups of women belies any notion of "gender solidarity." The global economic system has enlarged job opportunities for professional, mostly white women in the "productive" economy, while converting nonwhite migrant women into domestic workers providing "reproductive" labor to those professionals—an international system of caretaking that involves the transfer of reproductive domestic work from upwardly mobile professional women to uprooted, nonwhite migrant workers who have few other options (Barker & Feiner, 2009; Browne & Misra, 2003; Lan, 2006; Messias, 2001; Moras, 2008a; Stiell & England, 1997).

This phenomenon is called the global care chain—a series of home-care links connecting people across the globe, as desperate migrant women, displaced by globalization processes, are forced to leave their own children behind in the care of others as they migrate to richer nations in search of survival through domestic work (Hochschild, 2000; Yeats, 2005). These global care chains subjugate migrant women, steering them into low-wage domestic work far from their own families, even as they liberate northern, professional women from traditional "women's work" in the home and allow them entry into the better-paid productive economy. Satterthwaite (2004: 10) calls this process the "transnational transfer of gender constraints," through which "class-privileged women purchase the

low-wage services of migrant [women] domestic workers.” Similarly, Hongdagneu-Sotelo (2007: 21) notes that even in the wake of modern feminist equality movements, professional white women remain obligated to somehow take care of the domestic housework. “By subcontracting to private domestic workers, these women purchase release from their gender subordination in the home, effectively transferring their domestic responsibilities to other women who are distinct and subordinate by race and class, and now also made subordinate through language, nationality and citizenship status” (see also Andall, 2000; Moras, 2008b).

In this way, globalization has not created a new transnational space for building bridges between women who are “common victims” of oppression but rather “generates a new category of difference between women” (Lutz, 2002: 90). As privileged families shift the burden of housework onto immigrant workers, work. “Newly arrived inevitably power dynamics of race and class are invoked, dividing the “foreign others” doing the “dirty work” from the affluent homeowners employing them. A key function of the domestic worker in this arrangement is to reproduce the “female employer’s status (middle-class, non-laborer, clean) in contrast to herself (worker, degraded, dirty)” (Anderson, 2000: 2; see also Moras, 2008a, 2008b; Palmer, 1991).

The “us-them” divisions inherent in such a system can be profound. Even when migrant domestic workers come from educated, middle-class backgrounds similar to those of their employers (as many actually do [Gurung, 2009; Hongdagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Lutz, 2002]), their position as domestic workers in their new country immediately segregates and defines them as the devalued “service” providers among the families for which they Brazilian immigrants enter the U.S. labor market and are quickly shorn of their former status,” Margolis (1994: 129) notes. “This disjunction between [middle-class] social roots and current employment provides a crash course in downward mobility. Nowhere is this truer than in domestic service.”

For such reasons, a predominantly gender analysis or hope for gender solidarity is inadequate to addressing domestic workers’ challenges. In fact, the deeply personal kind of domination and exploitation embedded in domestic work is typically *between women* (Rollins, 1987), which suggests a *class* analysis might best explain the relationship between affluent professional women and their typically poor, female domestic employees. But, as we will now argue, class analysis also falls short of the task.

### **CLASS SEGMENTATION: THE WAGES OF WHITENESS**

The domestic work industry not only divides women from each other on class lines (employer vs. employee) but also divides domestic workers from their employers *and even from each other* on racial-ethnic lines. The reality of significant racialization in the domestic worker industry harks back to the classic argument of W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) (which has been applied by Roediger and

others [1991]): that there is a “wage to whiteness.” Even though white female employers face gender oppressions that face all women, and even though white domestics face class oppressions unique to their profession, the oppressions of both these categories of women are mitigated by the significant psychological, cultural, and economic wages attached to their white identity. White domestic workers enjoy a relatively privileged position of respect, as they are typically seen as the most refined caregivers, and are able to obtain the most desirable, highest paying domestic jobs. Romero (2002: 43) concludes that “white women directly benefit from racial subordination” in the domestic work industry, as such subordination affirms the status of white, female employers, even as it treats nonwhite domestics as inferior to white workers.

Certainly there is no denying the *gendered* nature of domestic work, in that more than 90% of domestic workers are women (England & Stiell, 1997). It is also clear that female domestic workers as a group occupy a very different *class* position than their (often female) employers. For all the focus on those gender and class themes, however, there has been an inadequate focus on differences *among* domestic workers. “Domestic workers are not a monolithic category and there is no one universal domestic worker experience” (England & Stiell, 1997: 198). Some scholars have argued that domestic work is “universally despised,” and that “those who are involved in it are universally dehumanized” (Gurung, 2009: 376). The reality, however, is that the domestic workforce is a thoroughly stratified profession, in which the race, national origin, and language of a worker are employed to channel different domestic workers into various kinds of work: white, European workers experience the very best conditions, while the most exploitive workplace conditions are endured by nonwhite, immigrant workers (Anderson, 2000; Gabriel & Macdonald, 1994; Glenn, 1992; Hongdagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Palmer, 1991; Romero, 2002).

Racialized psycho-cultural dynamics are involved in this process, as the subordination of nonwhite, immigrant domestic workers pays psycho-cultural dividends to whites, whether they be employers or domestic workers themselves. Glenn’s (1992) analysis of the “racial division of reproductive labor,” which she applied to the worker-employer relationship, also describes the psycho-cultural relationship between racial-ethnic and white domestic workers.

A dualistic conception of women as “good” and “bad,” long a part of Western cultural tradition, provided ready-made categories for casting white and racial-ethnic women as oppositional figures. The racial division of reproductive labor served to channel and recast these dualistic conceptions into racialized gender constructs. By providing them an acceptable self-image, racial constructs gave white [domestic workers] a stake in a system that ultimately oppressed them. (Glenn, 1992: 34)

It has long been difficult for many whites to accept Du Bois’ insight that there is a “psychological wage to whiteness” (Frank, 1998: 85), or to admit that

“whiteness retains its value as a consolation prize: it does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy” (Harris, 1993: 1758). But it is just this “invisible, unspoken privilege of being white” (Frank, 1998: 81) that nonwhite domestic workers in many studies refer to when noting that white domestics face a very different reality than their own. Roediger’s (1991) classic study of “the wages of whiteness” documented how a good deal of the racial bifurcation in labor markets was maintained by white workers themselves, who feared losing their tenuous position in the labor hierarchy to those below them, and who, whether aware of it or not, benefited from a pattern of white privilege even in the most degraded occupations (see also Saxton, 1971). No matter how harsh the work situation, there is always someone of a different race, ethnicity, or nationality below the white, native-born worker, and the white worker’s relative privilege (economically, socially, and psycho-culturally) depends on “the other’s” continued subordination.

How can we measure the extent of this “wage to whiteness” among domestic workers? Several studies have commented on racial divisions between workers in the industry (notably Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007, and Romero, 2002), but even these scholars focus almost entirely on the experiences of nonwhite domestic workers per se (with minimal comparison to white workers), and there is little in the way of quantitative data measuring the differences between different groups of workers. Recent surveys of the domestic workforce in both New York (Domestic Workers United and DataCenter, 2006) and California (Mujeres Unidas y Activas, 2007) provide statistical data about domestic worker experiences, but these studies focus almost wholly on nonwhite domestic workers. To help address this gap in the scholarship, and to explore how workplace conditions might differ for different categories of domestic workers, we designed a Colorado survey to reach both high-status, white domestic workers and less-respected domestic workers of color. Can we measure the extent of the “wage to whiteness” among the domestic workforce, and if so, what are the implications in terms of domestic worker organizing?

### **THE COLORADO DOMESTIC WORKER SURVEY**

In 2010, we partnered with Denver’s El Centro Humanitario (a nonprofit immigrant rights center) and the Women’s Foundation of Colorado to document conditions facing Colorado domestic workers. A 40-question bilingual survey was administered to domestic workers, who were recruited through various strategies, including the following: media advertisements, making fliers available in community venues, networking through nonprofits, posting ads on internet sites like Craigslist, following leads through web sites of high-end domestic worker placement agencies (such as Au Pair International), attending local events likely to attract domestic workers, and relying on El Centro’s network of domestic workers

who use the center regularly. In the end, 410 domestic workers from 25 countries responded to the survey. We also interviewed 12 workers in depth and conducted a focus group with 10 additional workers. The respondents consisted of 70% women of color (45% Latina; 15% Black; 10% other), 21% white women, and 9% men. Forty percent of the respondents were immigrants and 19% reported limited English skills. We broke down our survey data by race, immigration status, and language. The results are given in Table 1, which demonstrates that nonwhite, immigrant, and/or Spanish-speaking domestics face substantially worse workplace conditions than their white, native-born, and/or English-speaking counterparts.

Reflecting on the conditions expressed in Table 1, one white domestic worker interviewee put it bluntly: “The immigrant women take the jobs no one wants. I know the type of abuses I went through, and can’t imagine how much worse it is for them.” This comment expresses a core insight of intersectionality theory. Non-white, migrant, and/or Spanish-speaking workers face what Stiehl and England (1997) call “interlocking, relational, socially constructed systems of oppression and privilege” that relegate these workers to an exceptionally vulnerable structural position, while white, English-speaking domestics experience higher wages and better working conditions (see also Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Glenn, 1991, Morales, 2009; Radcliffe, 1990; Satterwaite, 2004). Though men make up only a small percentage of domestic workers (9% of our survey respondents), they sit at the top of this domestic worker hierarchy. Male respondents paralleled the race/ethnicity and immigrant/native-born breakdown of female respondents, but Table 1 shows that they experienced dramatically better workplace conditions than females across all categories.

Romero’s (2002: 32) domestic worker study comments on such intersectional oppressions, which undergird the tendency of males to be treated better than females in the workplace, and which result in the advantageous “wage to whiteness.”

Employing white women or college students as household workers does not establish the same power differential as does hiring ethnic minority women and Third World immigrant women. In fact, domestic service is not the same job for a woman of color as it is for a white woman or a man. White women are not subjected to racial slurs, condescending comments about their families or patronizing remarks about their culture. White middle-class women are unlikely to ask white women or men they employ to use separate dishes and silverware, to graciously accept useless discarded items, to wear old house-dresses, or to act “maidish.” The additional assaults upon their personhood forces women of color to do more emotional labor than white women or men in order to keep their jobs.

The data in Table 1 substantiate Romero’s claims of workplace stratification: there are “distinct markets for white workers and for racial-ethnic workers” (Glenn, 1992: 2–3). Men occupy the highest rungs of this racialized and gendered hierarchy. Sitting below male domestics, white native-born women experience the least exploitation among female domestic workers, followed by native-born,

Table 1. Workplace Conditions Facing Colorado Domestic Workers

Percentage of Domestic Workers Experiencing the Following Conditions	White, Nonwhite, Nonwhite, Primarily					
	Male	White, native-born	immigrant	native-born immigrant	Spanish-speaking	
Paid less than minimum wage	19%	26%	33%	36%	60%	59%
Wages regularly withheld by employer	27%	31%	20%	35%	48%	55%
Work over 50 hours a week	11%	14%	20%	11%	22%	21%
Pay is regularly late	25%	16%	20%	29%	33%	35%
Regularly not paid for all hours worked	14%	29%	25%	36%	52%	61%
Receive no regular time off	31%	35%	33%	36%	60%	69%
Required to work long hours w/o breaks	24%	20%	25%	35%	39%	30%
Regularly experience verbal or physical abuse on the job	8%	21%	33%	37%	59%	64%
Live in the house where they work	20%	17%	33%	16%	37%	43%
If worker is a live-in: does employer deduct living expenses from pay?	33%	50%	25%	55%	67%	75%
If worker is a live-in: does worker sleep with the children or in a common area (as opposed to sleeping in a private area)?	13%	24%	20%	37%	65%	62%
Has worker been forced to sleep in unhealthy places (e.g., no windows/ventilation)?	8%	6%	10%	10%	11%	14%

Source: Authors' Survey of 410 Colorado Domestic Workers (Robinson, Dryden, and Gomez, 2010).



nonwhite women. Nonwhite, immigrant domestic workers occupy the lowest tier of the hierarchy, with primarily Spanish-speaking immigrants experiencing the most exploitation of all. In this racial-ethnic hierarchy, Table 1 shows that white, immigrant domestic workers occupy a niche that can be most closely compared to that of white, native workers, separating them from both nonwhite natives and nonwhite immigrants.

The source of such intersectional differences can be traced to the structural socioeconomic weakness of immigrant, nonwhite workers, which fosters vulnerability to exploitation and is linked to cultural assumptions that legitimate and reproduce the racist assumptions embedded in the intersectional inequalities that impact nonwhite workers. In terms of their precarious socioeconomic status, dozens of nonwhite migrant workers in our survey told stories of how they did not know where to turn in America when they faced workplace abuse, were uncertain of their rights, and had few options. “I felt that I did not have a life—not even friends—because I would go straight to sleep after coming home from long work,” one migrant said. “I did not get paid overtime, so it was \$435 every week. But I had no other options; if I quit, where would I go?”

This is a typical Hobson’s choice faced by immigrant domestic workers. Kaufka (2003: 174) finds that “undocumented workers do not have the power to refuse work that is demanding for fear of deportation or losing their primary, and often only, source of income.” Such conditions expose undocumented and immigrant domestic workers to exacerbated exploitation, as they settle for whatever work they can find, endure verbal and physical abuse, and even submit to sexual harassment and assault. As a result, our survey found the following patterns:

- 60% of nonwhite immigrant workers reported that they endured abuse because they needed the money (versus 19% of native-born workers).
- 33% of nonwhite immigrant workers reported that they endured abuse because they did not understand their legal rights (versus 5% of native-born workers).
- 20% of nonwhite immigrant workers had been asked to turn over their passport to their employer as a condition of work—elevating their vulnerability to workplace abuse.
- 16% of nonwhite immigrant workers reported that they endured abuse because they felt isolated and without friends (versus 4% of native-born workers).

Exacerbating their economic desperation, social isolation, and legal vulnerability, nonwhite immigrant domestic workers face profound psycho-cultural biases. Though the responsibility for domestic work has changed over the years—from slaves to black women servants to recent immigrants today—something of the old “master-slave” relationship has remained, as nonwhite domestic workers continue to be seen as perfectly suited to cleaning the dirt of others, and incapable of other kinds of work (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1995; Glenn, 1992;



Macklin, 1992; Morales, 2009; Moras, 2008a, 2008b; Palmer, 1991). This psycho-cultural denigration of immigrant domestic workers affects even those workers who come from a well-educated background and who have high-status professional work experience in their home countries.

In our interviews of domestic workers, a constant theme was immigrant workers' melancholy as they reflect on the social status they left behind in their home country. "I was a trained teacher in Peru, helping to manage the school," recollected one worker. "But my employer doesn't ever want to talk about any of that. She says that expectations are different in America, and that working for her is probably the best job I will ever get." Our interviews gathered several such comments from *déclassé* immigrant domestic workers, sharing their dejection over the higher social status that they left behind in their home country.

Unfortunately, our survey did not gather data allowing us to assess the percentage of Colorado domestic workers who had once had higher-status jobs, but there is some research on this question. Margolis (1994), Mattingly (1999), Sayres (2007), and Gurung (2009) surveyed domestic worker immigrants (from Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, and Nepal, respectively), and each found that most of them had completed education beyond secondary school and most had held higher-status, professional jobs in their home country (e.g., as teachers, as nurses, or in NGOs). These findings match our interview responses, and suggest that the phenomenon of *déclassé* immigrants filling the ranks of domestic work in the United States is real—largely because these immigrants have few other job opportunities, especially when they are undocumented (Gurung, 2009; Mattingly, 1999).

When well-educated and formerly professional immigrants become *déclassé* domestic help, they are quickly shorn of their former status, leading to exacerbated feelings of despair. Gurung (2009) finds that formerly professional Nepalese domestic workers are quickly seen by their American employers as unskilled "women of color," suited to little but domestic labor. "Because of their nationality, race and class positions in the labor market, they were lumped together into a single category: poor Third World women" (Gurung, 2009: 388). Many of these women "quit their jobs, not only because the work conditions became unbearable, but because their human dignity had been violated and the psychological exploitation had become unbearable" (Gurung, 2009: 390).

Colorado domestic workers we interviewed substantiated Gurung's (2009) analysis of the particular despair of formerly professional women at their newly subaltern work position. "The curious thing is that when I left Mexico, I wasn't afraid. I had good work skills and I came with assurance that everything would turn out well. But when my boss harassed me, then I became afraid, and didn't know where to turn." Another survey respondent noted that "I have a degree in Audio-Visual Communication and did marketing work in Peru." But following her downward transition into American domestic work, complete with sexual harassment and missed paychecks, she reflected that "I was fragile after that. I kept thinking [my boss] is capable of doing anything and he could have called

immigration officials and lied about me. I didn't feel safe in my own home, so I dropped my request to be paid what I was owed."

Similarly, Tsuda (2012) finds that Brazilian domestic worker immigrants in Japan typically come from high-status professions and experience profound shock at their immediate decline in social status. The Associated Press (2009) has reported on similar despair among well-educated, highly skilled Chinese women who have been forced into domestic work due to the economic slowdown. In this way, domestic workers across the world, who are largely women of color migrating to more affluent "First World" countries, experience a similar reality—their race/ethnicity, nationality, and immigration status intersect to define them as low-skilled and undervalued, no matter their previous background. "It doesn't matter how intelligent you may appear to be. They just look at you as a black helper. Color doesn't have any respect for class," said one immigrant worker in Canada (Stiell & England, 1997: 353).

In accordance with such views, many white middle- and upper-class women transcend the "inferiority implications" of having to clean the dirt of others by employing women who are culturally defined as different from themselves to do the cleaning (Palmer, 1991). Similarly, white domestic workers, whether immigrant or native-born, benefit from cultural assumptions that nonwhite workers are better suited to the worst of domestic work. Browne & Misra (2003: 502) call this dynamic an "invisible hand," through which cultural understandings of a worker's race, national origin, and language intersect to create a differentiated hierarchy of workplace "performance expectations." In this hierarchy, white professionals and white domestic workers are both considered above certain kinds of "dirty" work, while domestics of color are considered perfectly suited to the harder, lower-paying jobs (see also Anderson, 2000).

Our Colorado survey shows the consequences of such cultural assumptions. For example, there are significant differences between categories of domestics, in terms of the percentage of workers given no regular time off work (35% of white, native-born domestics versus 60% of nonwhite immigrants), the percentage regularly being denied their wages (29% of native-born whites versus 52% of nonwhite immigrants), and the percentage experiencing frequent workplace abuse (21% versus 59%). Maher (2004: 174) summarizes a similar pattern:

White European or American workers tend to occupy well-paid, professional, nanny positions. In contrast, "racial-ethnic" women more often hold lower status and lower pay jobs . . . [as they] are commonly defined as "unskilled" regardless of their qualifications. . . . Accompanying this pattern is a popular discourse that defines Latina immigrants as particularly well-suited for domestic work. . . . I found employers commonly expected these women to be "natural mothers" who would be content with a subservient household role.

Domestic worker placement agencies are part of this stratified system of racialized domestic work, often considering national origin when placing workers.

There is a tendency to assign the highest-paid jobs to white workers and the hardest and “dirtiest” cleaning jobs to nonwhite immigrants (Bakan & Stasiulis, 2005; England & Stiell, 1997; Quick, 2008). Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) found cases of single agencies dividing themselves into three “branches” and giving themselves three names, with each “version” of the placement agency serving different “tiers” of households with different “tiers” of workers. “The agencies serving the top echelon generally place American, Australian, Irish or British ‘middle-class,’ white nannies. These women work for wealthy families exclusively as nannies, not housekeepers, and they consistently rely on agencies to find the choicest jobs” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007: 94). These same agencies carefully screen employers of white, European nannies and hardly ever send white nannies to live-in jobs, but they do not offer similar protections to their nonwhite caregivers.

Our review of the web sites of some of these “top-tier” placement agencies, such as the nationwide EurAuPair agency, the Deborah Calkin agency in New Mexico (where a one-day worker placement consultation costs an employer \$5,000), or Colorado Nanny, Inc., shows serial photos of young, white domestic workers, and commentary on the thoroughness of the screening process for domestic workers (which results in 75% of worker applicants being rejected by the elite Deborah Calkin agency). Such “elite” expectations embedded in the web sites of “white” domestic worker agencies are associated with better workplace conditions for white domestic workers, who are often seen as “class peers” by their white employers (Stiell & England, 1997). “Even as subordinates, they enter their interviews sharing similarities of race, language, and perhaps citizenship with their prospective employers” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007: 103). Employers are even sometimes groomed by the placement agencies to treat white workers differently than workers of color—both in terms of pay scale and the kinds of work expected:

One agency staff said it can be hard to educate families making the transition from a Latina nanny to a white nanny. “Most of the educating I get is with parents who maybe had a Latina nanny and are going into an American. . . . Mainly I’m educating on what kind of money they’re after. . . . They have to know going in that this is no longer a nanny/housekeeper, this is a child care provider and you’re gonna have to tone down the housekeeping part of the job and bring someone else in to do it.” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007: 103)

The data in Table 1 show how these assumptions result in a dual system for domestic workers, in which the best work and highest wages go to white domestics, while nonwhite workers are seen as “maids of all work,” no matter how hard or demeaning the work, nor how low the wage. “Native-born white women employees in domestic service were not subjected to the negative aspects of the racial hierarchy” (Romero, 2002: 94). This reality helps explain why the white workers in our interviews typically dwelt on the rewarding elements of what they

often saw as temporary work, whereas domestics of color were far more negative and pessimistic about their future. In fact, white/European women typically use domestic work as an occupational bridge to something better (e.g., using their work to fund college), whereas women of color typically experience their work as an occupational ghetto (Gurung, 2009; Rollins, 1987).

Immigrant workers we surveyed were well aware of their unfortunate social position as compared to white domestics—whether immigrant or native-born. Of all the nonwhite immigrant workers, 59% felt that their immigrant status contributed to their being exploited, 40% felt their race played a role, and 33% felt that their limited English skills contributed to employer abuse. “It is always the case that immigrants in this work are expected to work longer hours for less pay than Americans,” said one respondent. “A lot of Americans think that immigrants shouldn’t receive the same pay. Most employers pay someone more when they are a citizen,” noted another. Another observed that “most employers pay more when someone is documented or a citizen, and those who aren’t are exploited” (all quoted in Robinson et al., 2010).

These sentiments point to the ways in which national origin, citizenship/immigration status, ethnicity, and language are used as racial markers, signaling who is a “civilized” insider, deserving of dignified work, and who is the inferior stranger, suited to the degradations she or he suffers (Moras, 2008a: 237; see also Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007: 14–19). It is not so surprising, then, that our Colorado study found the *majority* of comments offered by white domestic workers to be positive, noting how the workers enjoyed the creativity, flexibility, and nurturing quality of their work. “I’m funding my Certified Public Accountant studies with this work,” noted one white domestic. “I’m careful to only take the most professional looking jobs. I look for families maybe with a pricey bed and breakfast.” Another white domestic asserted that “I enjoy the work that I do. It helps me pay my way through college; however, I am not ever going to allow anyone to disrespect me. I come to do a job and demand respect while I am there.” One white worker reported that “I am very particular about who I work for and the situation I allow myself to work in.” Another white worker noted that “I speak fluent English and so I notice that I’m always treated better than my co-workers who are less fluent in English.”

The reality is that white domestic workers are highly sought after by employers (especially of western European ethnicity, with a high degree of “Englishness”) (Bakan & Stasiulis, 2005). These workers tend to have a broader range of workplace options, receive higher pay and better work assignments, and can more easily move on from bad workplace situations (Barker & Feiner, 2009; Browne & Misra, 2003; Glenn, 1992; Stiell & England, 1997). These conditions are the antipode of those endured by immigrant workers in our survey, the majority of whom commented on negative aspects of their work, and on their inability to leave a bad employer for a better job. “I did excruciating work for ten hours a day, for just \$50 a day,” said one immigrant. “Even then, they made me sign papers saying

I didn't work that many hours." Another lamented, "When my boss harassed me, I became afraid. I tried to leave, but they wouldn't let me. They kept my money, as a way to keep me in that house. My life became dark. I felt trapped."

These statements of white, native-born workers versus those of nonwhite, immigrant workers teach that ethnicity and nationality/immigration status overlay class position as a source of workplace exploitation. There is a wide distance between a nonwhite, immigrant domestic worker and an "English" nanny. Although class position is often seen as a fundamental source of universal domestic worker exploitation, ethnicity and immigrant status should rightly be seen as "privileged sources of disadvantage" (Andall, 2000: 158; see also Lutz, 2002).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR DOMESTIC WORKER ORGANIZING

Racial-ethnic divisions in the domestic worker industry point to a critical role for racial identity-based organizing. When white domestic workers, whether immigrant or not, tend to see their job as a well-regarded occupational bridge to a better future, it is unlikely that such workers will be vigorous allies in organizing to change the profession. "Rather than approaching domestic labor as an abstract and universal category, we [should] instead draw attention to the variations among women positioned differently in terms of their class, race and citizenship" (Bakan and Stasiulis, 2005: 304). Schwartz (2005: 12) calls such identity-based organizing a "minoritarian politics of insurgency," which can be an early step in building unity, confidence, and political strength among racially subordinated workers, so that they may more effectively engage in broader, majoritarian coalitions with progressive allies in pursuit of policy change.

Identity-based, race-conscious organizing efforts can be distinguished from worksite-based union organizing. There are, in fact, significant obstacles to traditional worksite organizing among domestic workers. The "occupational oddity" (Smith, 2000: 50) of domestic work (taking place in dispersed homes, usually with a one-on-one employment relationship between the homeowner and the worker) means that both workers and employers are scattered across numerous worksites. This geographic fragmentation hinders unionization efforts and makes it challenging for workers "to forge a sense of solidarity or to develop a collective consciousness about ways to improve their labor conditions" (Smith, 2000: 46; see also Mareschal, 2006).

There are also cultural obstacles to unionization efforts in that domestic workers tend to be women of color, providing a service traditionally seen as private "women's work." Such women, and such work efforts, historically have not been seen as deserving of unionization by the traditionally male-dominated union movement. Complicating these obstacles, the domestic workplace (the private home) has traditionally been considered off-limits to contentious organizing efforts. A representative Minnesota Supreme Court case (*State v. Cooper*, 1939) held that a domestic worker could not picket the private home of his employer over

a labor dispute, since “the home is an institution, not an industry. . . the home is a sacred place for people to go and be quiet and at rest and not bothered with the turmoil of industry” (quoted in Smith, 2000: 65).

Though recent domestic worker unionization efforts have seen some success (such as the work of the Service Employees International Union [SEIU] to organize homecare workers across several states), these successes do not apply to the situation facing most domestic workers in America. The successes of SEIU in unionizing homecare workers in several states in the last decade (i.e., California, Oregon, New York, and Washington) all involved the unionization of homecare workers who either worked for state-organized public authorities (which coordinated their work placements in the private homes of the infirm and elderly) or worked for private agencies doing the same (in the case of New York). Organizing workers employed through professional management agencies (whether public or private) offers tremendous advantages in overcoming the barriers of workplace fragmentation associated with domestic work, and successes like those of such unionization drives cannot be expected among the isolated domestic labor workforce employed one-on-one by private employers (Mareschal, 2006; Smith, 2000).

Smith (2000) concludes that domestic worker-organizing drives in the absence of centralized hiring agencies are unlikely to succeed as traditional worksite unionization campaigns, but can find better success along “occupational unionism” lines, uniting workers based on their shared occupational experiences and challenges as domestic workers in general, and not targeting a specific employer or worksite. Ally (2005) offers a similar conclusion in calling for a race- and immigration-conscious “association model” of organizing, as opposed to a class-oriented “union model.” This “association model” is “a non-union based model of representation in which migrant, ethnic, women’s human rights, legal advocacy, and non-governmental organizations mobilize, and on a wider range of issues than just employment” (Ally, 2005: 5).

In the association model, leadership development and community building along racial, ethnic, or immigrant lines are central (see also Boris & Nadasen, 2008). Working through community institutions like hiring halls, immigrant worker centers, and peer-managed worker cooperatives, a race/ethnicity-conscious association model unites workers based not upon their common workplace (since domestics are scattered among isolated employers) but upon their shared occupational identity, and upon the bonds of race, ethnicity, and immigrant status that unite so many of these workers (Andall, 2000; Smith, 2000). “Race and ethnicity have been central to organizing efforts, in part, because that is how many women enter the occupation. But in addition, networks of support are easier to support among women with similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds” (Boris & Nadasen, 2008: 426; see also Queneau, 2006).

Such an identity-based organizing strategy is reflected today in the efforts of groups like New York’s Domestic Workers United, which targets Caribbean, Latina, and African workers, and Denver’s El Centro Humanitario, which targets



Latinas. This article's authors have attended many domestic worker advocacy meetings in Colorado's El Centro Humanitario, and it is a rare meeting that boasts many white workers. Almost all the workers have been immigrant Latinas, primarily Spanish-speaking. This pattern is replicated in domestic worker organizing efforts from New York (Domestic Workers United) to California (Mujeres Activas y Unidas).

The successful effort to pass a New York Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, for example, was driven largely by Domestic Workers United—an organization that was made up almost entirely of immigrant workers of color, and whose landmark study of the domestic worker industry (Domestic Workers United and DataCenter, 2006) focused almost solely on conditions facing immigrant workers, rather than on the thousands of white/European au pairs, chefs, and other better-situated white domestic workers of New York. Similarly, the success of other transnational domestic worker movements (such as Mujeres Activas y Unidas and the Asian Domestic Workers Union) is largely driven by the engagement of women from the Global South, rather than from feminist organizations, unions, or professional “nanny associations” based in the Global North (Tripp, 2006). In this way, domestic worker organizations have found that their base is naturally in nonwhite communities, and that minority domestics have typically been the most politically active in addressing workplace challenges (Mercado & Poo, 2009).

Responding to such realities, the work of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) has been firmly grounded in immigrant enclave organizing. A review of the NDWA's 29 member groups shows that almost every one of them focuses on immigrant/nonwhite domestic workers, ranging from the Asociación de Jornaleros de San Diego, to Casa Latina (Seattle), to Damayan Migrant Workers Association (New York) and Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees (New York). All of these organizing efforts define themselves as focused on women of color—i.e., as a “support group for Latina immigrant domestic workers,” or as following models of “nontraditional labour and community organizing among immigrant women and women of color” (Chang, 2000: 57).

Part of the reason for the success of this model is that language and cultural barriers mean that immigrant domestic workers tend to live in close-knit, homogenous urban enclaves and have their deepest relationships with those who cohabit with them in their neighborhoods (Abrahamson, 1996; Boris & Nadasen, 2008). Aronowitz (1999: 201) has shown that many immigrant domestic workers maintain strong cultural identification with their home countries and cultures, “live in communities separated from the mainstream, occupy limited economic niches, and continue to speak their native languages.” Through organizing around racial-ethnic identity lines, such as targeting cultural festivals and immigrant neighborhood events, the association model of NDWA responds to this reality and takes advantage of the pragmatic virtues of “enclave organizing,” connecting to workers in culturally relevant ways. Ally (2005: 6) shows that these same insights apply to domestic worker organizing in the Middle East, India, and East Asia,



which is dominated not by cross-race, class-based union organizing but “by NGOs that have organized primarily based on migrant identities and advocate on workplace-related issues in tandem with more broad-based issues related to immigrant rights” (see also Schwenken, 2003 ).

In America, New York’s Domestic Workers United (DWU) provides a case study of successful domestic worker organizing efforts on racial-ethnic lines. DWU was founded in 2000 by South Asian immigrant workers who relied on tightly knit immigrant enclave networks to mobilize other immigrant domestic workers from the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America. Organizers reached out to domestic workers in churches, community centers, neighborhood parks, and other places where immigrant workers networked (Boris & Nadasen, 2008; Schwenken, 2003). After several years of community building in these immigrant enclaves, DWU began to assert itself as the leading voice for domestic workers across New York, and built its relationship with the progressive, white Jewish community. In the end, DWU’s success in passing majoritarian domestic worker legislation in New York was built on a foundation of early, race-conscious enclave organizing among immigrant workers. But final success would not have been possible without also building cross-race alliances, involving such groups as the progressive Jewish community and friendly white legislators (Mercado & Poo, 2009).

DWU’s experience suggests that the ability of disenfranchised communities of color to engage in majoritarian coalitional politics with potential progressive allies—and to make demands of political opponents—may depend first “upon a reassertion of racial/national pride and identity” (Schwartz, 2005: 3; see also Andall, 2000). By building domestic worker organizing campaigns on a direct recognition of racial subordination, nonwhite immigrant workers begin to establish their own social identity, based largely in their race or ethnicity, before pursuing a coalitional, majoritarian movement that involves the sustained commitment of white allies. Such associational, race-conscious strategies will focus less on *reaching outward* to build alliances between native-born and immigrant workers along occupational/class lines, and more around *reaching inward* to build unity among workers who often relate to each other more strongly on the basis of ethnicity than they do on the basis of occupation (Fine, 2006). Furthermore, DWU’s success shows that using race or immigrant status as a foundation for organizing domestic workers does not necessarily establish permanent cleavages with potential white allies, but rather can build a solid foundation on which racially subordinate domestic workers can stand and mobilize as they reach out to build broader cross-race coalitions.

## CONCLUSION

A body of research documenting the exploitive conditions facing domestic workers, the 2010 passage of America’s first “Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights” in New York, and the International Labour Organization’s work to establish an

international convention on the rights of domestic workers (International Labour Organization, 2010) all point to one conclusion: domestic workers face substantial workplace exploitation. Therefore, when our research team completed a survey of 410 Colorado domestic workers, we were surprised at one type of response that we frequently received. “Domestic service is usually gratifying,” one worker reported. “It’s rewarding to know you are helping a person create and maintain a home,” said another. Other comments were similar: “It can be a joy to work with children this closely,” “this is a wonderful opportunity to help pay for my college,” and “I now have a dream job of working as a personal chef to a family and I love the art of creating meals” (Robinson et al., 2010). How can such statements cohere with the overwhelming findings of other research that domestic work is poorly paid, degrading, and exploitive?

Intersectionality theory provides an answer by focusing on how different categories of workers are socially constructed so as to face “multiple advantages” or “multiple jeopardies” (Browne & Misra, 2003: 493) related to the intersection of gender, class, race, national origin, and language. The positive statements above were almost always offered by the white, native-born domestic workers we interviewed and rarely by nonwhite, immigrant workers. This pattern suggests an “interlocking system of privilege and disadvantage” (Collins, 1990), in which nonwhite, immigrant workers face far greater troubles than white, native-born workers. In other words, even among a globally subordinated group like women, and in a generally exploitive field like domestic work, there is a “wage to whiteness” (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 1991). Common gender aside, divisions between white female supervisors and their typically nonwhite female domestic workers reveal one aspect of the wage to whiteness; common class aside, the dichotomous experiences of white versus nonwhite domestic workers reveal another.

Our survey of Colorado domestic workers, ranging from well-paid European au pairs to undocumented Latina house cleaners, reveals a clear hierarchy dividing female domestic workers from their professional female employers, *and even from each other*, based on distinctions such as race/ethnicity, national origin, and language. This racial-ethnic hierarchy benefits both white employers and white domestic workers, which suggests that domestic worker movements built along either gender lines (highlighting the common women’s oppression built into domestic work, as advocated by Moghadam [1999] and Swider [2006]), or built primarily along class lines (highlighting the common workplace oppressions faced by all domestic workers, as advocated by Varghese [2006]), will face substantial limitations, unless they also highlight the central importance of race, ethnicity, and immigration status as an organizing focus.

Studying domestic work from this perspective “raises a challenge to any feminist notion of ‘sisterhood,’ Romero (2002: 15) declares. He argues further that “feminist analysis should consider not only the privilege and benefits that husbands obtain at the expense of their wives but also those that one group of women obtain at the expense of another” (Romero, 2002: 168). We similarly conclude that

addressing the exploitations within domestic work will entail overturning social, economic, and psycho-cultural hierarchies of race and national origin and we should not expect that those benefiting from those hierarchies, including professional women or even white domestic workers, will be dependable allies in movements for change. Domestic worker organizing may find the most success not by mobilizing primarily on class or gender lines but rather by mobilizing around workers' race, ethnicity, or immigration status. Associational "identity politics" organizing can highlight the unique experiences of racially and ethnically subordinate domestic workers and build on community networks of nonwhite immigrant workers, thus establishing an identity-based foundation of "strength, community and intellectual development" (Crenshaw, 1994: 94) from which domestic women of color can reach out to build majoritarian alliances for change.

The testimony of a Jamaican domestic worker interviewed by Stiel and England (1997: 356) goes to the heart of the intersectional reality facing domestic workers: "It's a combination of the fact that you're third world, and it's racial too. Because they figure *you're black and you're stupid, or you're coloured and stupid, or you're third world and stupid*" (emphasis in the original). This worker's testimony regarding the stark "racial division of reproductive labor" (Glenn, 1992: 3) suggests that although class and gender position lead to fundamental challenges for all domestic workers, "ethnicity and migrant status [are] privileged over gender as causes of disadvantage" (Andall, 2000: 157).

Addressing this reality will require an explicitly race/ethnicity-conscious organizing strategy. As distasteful as explicitly "racialized" organizing strategies are to some, such a conclusion does nothing more than recognize the historical centrality of race in American politics, and the associated reality that even poor white ethnic groups (such as Irish Catholics or Italian immigrants) "made social gains not by deracinating themselves into the mainstream but by sticking together through ethnic advancement strategies" (Schwartz, 2005: 9; see also Aronowitz, 1999; Moynihan & Glazer, 1970).

Still, building a majoritarian political movement on a foundation of race-conscious minoritarian politics has its challenges. A fundamental challenge is the deep matter of white privilege that a race-conscious organizing strategy must confront. The global reality is that the vulnerabilities of nonwhite and immigrant women help maintain the current advantages enjoyed by white residents of the developed world (including white professional women and even white domestic workers). Considering the way in which domestic service undergirds the upward mobility of white workers, while simultaneously stripping migrant domestic workers of their former class accoutrements, which might connect them to their employers, we can expect complications in building majoritarian alliances linking white women (who are often politically progressive and are commonly considered allies in transnational justice movements) to racial-ethnic domestic worker movements.

As an example of those complications, when the YMCA of America was organizing in the 1930s for national standards to protect domestic workers (many

of whom were black), the strongest resistance came from affluent, white female employers of these domestics, who argued through the National Committee on Household Employment (NCHE) that such standards were an unwelcome intrusion on their ability to organize their home economy as they saw fit (Boris & Nadasen, 2008; Glenn, 1992). It was only after the NCHE was taken over by more militant African American domestic workers in the 1960s and 1970s that the organization stood more aggressively for domestic workers' rights—resulting in the extension of minimum wage standards to certain categories of domestic workers in 1974 (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007).

We can expect that even white domestic workers themselves may be undependable allies in transformational change movements. “As long as the gender division of labor remains intact,” Glenn (1992: 36) argues, “it will be in the short-term interest of white women to support or at least overlook the racial division of labor because it insures that the very worst labor is performed by someone else.” This is not to say that white domestic workers will consciously refuse efforts to improve conditions for immigrant domestic workers in order to preserve their relatively privileged class position. But when one group of people derives socioeconomic and psycho-cultural benefits from existing social arrangements, it may be challenging to sustain their ongoing commitment to changing those arrangements.

We are conjecturing that the same propensity of middle- and upper-class white women to overlook the beneficial racial division of labor in their own homes when they hire domestics may also motivate working-class white domestic workers, who similarly benefit from that racial division of labor. As Glenn (1991: 1355) notes: “White women may actually have a material interest in the continuing subordination of women of color. If this special form of exploitation were eliminated, white women would give up certain benefits. We may have to accept the idea that any policy to improve the lot of racial-ethnic women may necessitate a corresponding loss of privilege or status for white women and may engender resistance on their part.” In fact, there is research documenting how divisions between native-born and immigrant domestic workers have led to failed coalitional efforts, as establishment-minded NGOs of native-born domestic workers (such as advocacy groups for domestic nannies) tend to steer clear of association with the more radical agendas and less politically popular positions of transnational domestic workers' movements (Andall, 2000; Boris & Nadasen, 2008; Lyons, 2004a, 2004b).

For such reasons, any challenge to the tradition of “white skin privilege” (Smith, 2006) can be expected to encounter the conundrum of how to affirm the racial identities and needs of historically marginalized communities “while simultaneously constructing a sense of shared citizenship between those communities and a sufficient number of ‘white’ Americans to sustain a majoritarian democratic politics” (Schwartz, 2005: 7). This conundrum is especially challenging since, in the end, what is needed to address the domestic worker challenge

is a “politics of structural redistribution of both class and race power” (Schwartz, 2005: 10), which will inevitably entail substantial sacrifice in terms of the “wages of whiteness” by the white employers of domestic workers and even by white domestic workers themselves, who may no longer be able to depend on a racialized domestic work hierarchy to sustain their relatively privileged position.

Some of this sacrifice goes beyond material affairs and entails a challenge to the psycho-cultural “wages of whiteness” (Roediger, 1991). As Rollins (1987: 5) demonstrated in exploring the “social-psychological aspect of domination” between female domestics and their female employers, psychological mindsets are critical in maintaining hierarchical systems. Domestic workers’ challenges cannot be dealt with simply by establishing a higher wage for all workers, or even by securing additional legal protections for domestic work—broader cultural changes are also required. Domestic work involves deep psycho-cultural domination of nonwhite, immigrant workers. Addressing this domination will entail fundamental transformations in typically “white” notions of who is suited to clean the dirt of others, and a willingness by whites to take on more of that dirt themselves (Palmer, 1991). These cultural notions of racial and class superiority are the foundational sources of oppression that white people of conscience must sacrifice in confronting the long racialized history of domestic work.

Such sacrifices are possible. People of various racial, ethnic, and class positions have in fact come together to imagine a community without domination, and to unite domestic workers with political allies across class and race lines. But all of these coalitional successes have been built on an initial foundation of the assertive politics of racial identity. Such race-conscious associational organizing reminds us that there is no “single discourse”—no postracial, transracial alliance that can bring all groups together in pursuit of a humanist vision that liberates all of them from their common oppression. In domestic work, there is no common oppression. There are only intersectional oppressions—pointing to the unique injustices of unique groups and suggesting a politics of identity to recognize and respond to those realities.

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