

# Regulating the Unregulated?: Domestic Workers' Social Networks\*

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*Drawing upon participant-observation and in-depth interviews, this article examines the responses of Mexican undocumented immigrant women to the organization of paid domestic labor as "job work," where a domestic worker cleans house for many different employers on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Job work exacerbates the privatized nature of both the work itself and the negotiation of the employer-employee relationship, and it also confronts domestic workers with having to secure multiple employers. The women in this study dealt with these challenges by informally collectivizing and sharing information through social networks. What appears to be an extremely atomized labor relation for the domestic workers is in fact mitigated by a work culture transmitted through many social interactions. These network resources are both enabling and constraining.*

A front page article in the *Los Angeles Times* recently carried a subheading claiming that "an influx of immigrants has inflated the pool of domestic servants" (Wilkinson 1992), while another Los Angeles area newspaper described the travails of Latina domestics in Dickensian terms (Schmidt 1991). These media reports reflect the fact that during the 1980s particular areas of the United States, such as California, New York and urban centers with concentrated immigrant populations, witnessed a dramatic resurgence of paid domestic work. Census and Department of Labor data underestimate the growth of the domestic occupation because they do not accurately capture occupations where "under the table" pay arrangements and undocumented immigrants may prevail. But other evidence suggests that in recent years, paid domestic employment has increased (Rollins 1985; Sassen-Koob 1984).<sup>1</sup>

The resurgence of the domestic worker occupation, like the global expansion of informal sector employment of which it is a part, is an unanticipated phenomenon. Decades of scholarship predicted the irreversible decline and demise of economic activity unregulated by the state and the concomitant steady expansion of formal sector work, with jobs becoming increasingly specialized and firmly embedded in large, bureaucratic organizations (Castells and Portes 1989). Yet in many instances, the expansion of the informal sector is directly articulated to restructuring processes in the formal sector (Sassen-Koob 1984). Income and occupational polarization, growth in management and the professions, and the mass entrance of women into the formal sector of the labor force have stimulated demand for the services of paid domestic workers.

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1. Rollins points out that while census figures show that the domestic occupation is declining, these figures are misleading because of widespread underreporting practices. Census data underestimate the numbers of African-American and immigrant women in the occupation (1985:56-57).

In this article I discuss how key transformations in the occupation have resulted in what Mary Romero (1988a) calls "job work," where a domestic worker maintains several employers, and cleans a particular house on a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis in exchange for a flat rate of pay. Job work represents an advance over other more personalistic domestic work arrangements that occur in live-in situations where a domestic worker is locked into both employment and residence with only one employer. It is an improvement over day work arrangements because domestics are generally paid "by the job" instead of by the hour. They work for different employers on different days, and thus experience reduced personalism in employer-employee relations. Job work, however, confronts domestic workers with atomized working conditions and privatized employer-employee relations, and it requires them to seek multiple employers. My research examines how Mexican undocumented immigrant women in a California community attempt to meet these challenges by informally collectivizing their experiences and information in extensive networks outside the work place.

Decentralized horizontal networks established among domestics and their employers are key to the organization of domestic work.<sup>2</sup> Various studies examine how Mexican immigrants use their social networks to link with particular industrial and agricultural firms to feed into predominantly immigrant labor markets (Lemons forthcoming; Mines and Anzaldúa 1982; Thomas 1985). But studies have not considered how paid domestic workers use network resources, perhaps because the domestic worker establishes employment with an individual employer rather than with an institution that hires many people. An analysis of domestic workers' networks adds to our understanding of immigrant labor markets and processes by showing how occupational experiences are shaped by work cultures sustained by the networks. For the undocumented immigrant women examined in this case study, the social networks prove to be both enabling and constraining.

Since domestic work is generally viewed as a stigmatized, second class job, studies have typically investigated the extent of upward mobility, both individual and intergenerational, out of domestic work (Broom and Smith 1963; McBride 1976; Katzman 1981; Glenn 1986). This study suggests that there is mobility within the occupation, and that networks partially govern this mobility. A domestic worker's position within the occupation is not static. It is subject to change and may improve as she gains experience, learns to utilize the informational resources embedded in the social networks, and establishes a set number of *casas* (houses) to clean.

Much of the scholarship on paid domestic work has focused on the relationship between the employer and the employee, as exemplified in the insightful studies produced by Judith Rollins (1985) and Phyllis Palmer (1989). Consequentially, the relationships established between workers in the occupation have not received as much attention from sociologists. There are, however, some notable exceptions, as Romero (1987) examines the apprenticeship relationships between pairs of domestic workers, Salzinger (1991) analyzes the social interactions that occur within two very different types of domestic workers' cooperatives, and Glenn (1986) examines the experiences of different generations of Japanese-American domestics in the context of community relations.

This article focuses on how interactions that occur among paid domestic workers in multiple social settings generate an important work culture. I discuss the characteristics and historical transformations in the domestic occupation, describe the research methods and data, and then analyze how the domestic workers' social networks are both enabling and constraining. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for the immigrant women domestic workers and for their employers.

2. Decentralized horizontal networks, rather than a vertical pyramid structure, commonly organize informal economic activity (Piore and Sabel 1984; Castells and Portes 1989).

## Occupational Characteristics and Transformations

Domestic work was the single largest category of paid employment for all women in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Katzman 1981; Glenn 1986), but by the mid-twentieth century most working women were located in formal sector employment, in retail, clerical and professional jobs. Domestic work declined, and twenty years ago Lewis Coser (1974) predicted that the domestic servant occupation would soon become obsolete in modern society. The job, Coser stated, is atavistic, based largely on ascribed status, requires the performance of non-specialized, diffuse menial tasks, and is based on particularistic rather than universalistic relations between employer and servant.

While Coser was incorrect in predicting the obsolescence of the domestic work occupation, he did correctly anticipate the decline of highly personalized, particularistic relations between domestics and their employers, a decline brought about by the shift from live-in employment to day work (Katzman 1981; Clark-Lewis 1983, 1985; Romero 1987, 1988a). Day workers are able to retain family and social life outside of the work site, so they are less vulnerable than are live-in domestics to being manipulated by employers' personalistic appeals to family ideology—to see themselves “like one of the family” (Young 1987). Moreover, domestic workers who do day work are better able to circumscribe their work hours and they generally earn hourly wages, a form that more closely approximates industrialized wage work (Katzman 1981; Glenn 1986).<sup>3</sup> Day work arrangements represent an improvement over live-in situations, since they loosen, but do not end, the intensely personalistic relationship between domestics and their employers (Romero 1988a).<sup>4</sup>

Romero (1987, 1988a, 1988b) carries the modernization theme one step forward in her analysis of Chicana domestic workers, advancing a view of domestics not as victims, but as workers consciously and actively trying to improve their working conditions. According to Romero, the conditions in which domestic work occurs have gradually shifted from live-in, to day work, and most recently, to “job work.” In “job work,” domestics are paid not by the hour, but rather a certain amount for performing agreed upon tasks. Under these arrangements, domestics are able to position themselves as “experts” to sell their labor services in much the same way a vendor sells a product to various customers (Romero 1988a). When they work for several employers, domestic workers are less likely to become involved in deeply personalistic employer-employee relationships. If they can accumulate a sufficient number of employers, they can leave the least desirable jobs. Another advantage of this arrangement is that it allows domestic workers to set their own hours and work schedules. Flexibility is a factor much appreciated by women who have their own family and domestic responsibilities (Romero 1987).

In some ways, then, the occupational transformations from live-in, to day work, to job work have improved the conditions of domestic work. Job work, however, remains marred by significant problems: the isolated and privatized nature of the work and the negotiation of the employer-employee relationship, and the requirement of securing and maintaining multiple employers in the context of job scarcity and volatility.

3. In the United States the shift to day work was largely due to the efforts of African-American women who rejected the constraints imposed by live-in work (Clark-Lewis 1983 cited in Wrigley 1991:328). This trend accelerated during World War I so that live-out arrangements eventually became more prevalent (Katzman 1981; Palmer 1989).

4. Although live-in domestic work arrangements have declined, immigrant women continue to fill live-in positions, although they too express preference for non-residential jobs. The absence of legal status is one of the primary factors forcing immigrant women into live-in jobs. After implementation of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act's employer sanctions and amnesty-legalization, a *Los Angeles Times* article reported a shortage of “capable, well-trained housekeepers and nannies” for live-in positions (Sunila 1990). Newly legalized immigrant women left live-in positions, and employers and agencies grew fearful of the penalties for hiring undocumented immigrants. To keep legal immigrant women in live-in positions, some employers began to offer job perks.

While job work allows for greater independence and further diminishes particularistic relations with employers, these arrangements introduce the extra burden of locating multiple jobs and juggling complicated schedules (Romero 1988a; Salzinger 1991). Jobs are volatile, and domestic workers remain vulnerable to employers' whims. There is generally no formal or standardized contract established between the employer and the domestic employee, and contracts between employers and domestics are generally limited to verbal agreements (Solorzano-Torres 1987; Trevizo 1990). Domestic workers must accommodate for these conditions by constantly seeking and maintaining a sufficient number of jobs. In this context, the domestic's job search becomes not a finite precursor to employment, but an ongoing part of the job itself.

A second problem is that the transformation to job work does not eliminate, and perhaps even exacerbates, the domestic worker's atomized working conditions and labor arrangements. As Rollins indicates, employers today typically do not hire multiple domestics, with one assigned to laundry, another to cooking, serving or child care responsibilities, so the job occurs in virtual isolation. The terms and conditions of the work are generally negotiated between two lone individuals, the domestic worker and her employer:

The mistress-servant relationship is one of the more private labor arrangements existing; it takes place within private households between fairly isolated individuals. As multi-servant households become more and more rare, the typical domestic works alone; . . . A sense of isolation surrounds the job and the relationship: there are no co-workers or co-managers on the spot to support, reinforce, compete with, or guide behavior. Consultations with others in similar positions must take place haphazardly during off hours; the job situation is typically one of a single employer dealing with a single employee (Rollins 1985:91).

Domestic work does indeed occur in an isolated, largely non-regulated and privatized environment, and most domestic workers negotiate job terms and pay without the benefit of guidelines established by government, unions, employment agencies or private firms. A labor agreement established between two lone individuals who are operating without standard guidelines heightens the asymmetry of the employer-employee relationship. Additionally, domestic workers must locate and secure multiple sources of domestic employment to survive. Paid domestic work is increasingly performed by Latina and Caribbean immigrant women, a group of workers who, due to their class, race, gender and legal status, are among the most disenfranchised and vulnerable in our society. Given the conjuncture of these circumstances, which exacerbate the asymmetry in the employer-employee relationship, how do immigrant women strategize to improve their employment as domestics? In particular, how do they seek employment, learn the job tasks, and negotiate pay and working conditions? Looking at immigrant women domestic workers not as hapless victims but as purposeful social actors offers some clues to these questions.

## Research Description

My research on domestic employment comprises part of a larger study on migration patterns and changing gender relations among Mexican undocumented immigrants (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992). The research was conducted in a Mexican immigrant community located in the San Francisco Bay area. The well-defined immigrant *barrio* where these people reside is bordered by middle class and very affluent residential areas, and the women seek domestic employment in these surrounding communities. In the 1990 Census, three of the nearby municipalities ranked among the top ten wealthiest cities in California, each one of

them surpassing the per capita income of Beverly Hills.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the *barrio* where the Mexican immigrants live is one of the poorest areas in the county. The *barrio* extends around a central avenue lined with commercial establishments selling Mexican products, as well as a community center, a non-profit medical clinic, a Catholic church, and an elementary school. Bars, beauty salons, notary publics, check cashing services, and taco vending trucks also populate the avenue. On any given day, children, women, and men walk along the sidewalks that flank the four lane traffic.

The data come from informal conversations and participant-observation that occurred in various public and private locales, and are supplemented by interviews with seventeen undocumented immigrant women with recent experience as non-live-in domestic workers. All interactions and interviews were conducted in Spanish. Research began in November 1986, just as the Immigration Reform and Control Act was passed, and continued for eighteen months.

The majority of the seventeen women interviewed were between thirty and fifty years old, although one woman began working as a domestic in the United States at age 15 and another was still energetically working at age 71. They reflect diverse class and occupational origins. Ten came from rural, peasant backgrounds, four came from urban working class origins and three from urban middle class backgrounds in Mexico. Fifteen of the seventeen women were currently married or living in consensual unions. All of these women chose to do paid domestic work because as undocumented female workers they encountered few employment options in the local economy. Also, domestic work offered more flexible hours and potentially higher pay than other jobs. Much of the material centers on my observations of these women's conversations and interactions with other immigrant women in the community.

Most studies of paid domestic workers are largely based on information gleaned from interviews and historical materials (Dill 1988; Dudden 1983; Glenn 1986; Katzman 1981; Palmer 1989; Romero 1987, 1988a, 1988b). An exception is Rollins's study (1985), which is based on interviews with domestic employers and employees, and on participant-observation material gathered by Rollins when she went "undercover" as a domestic worker, a method that provided a wealth of insights. The novelty and strength of participant-observation in my study is that it occurred in multiple settings. As a "known observer," I participated with the women and gathered information at parties, church and community events, and in people's homes. Observing domestic workers in their daily social life reveals that many social connections and exchanges undergird what appears to be a privatized economic relationship.

Social interactions I observed among immigrant women domestics provide a sharp contrast to the solitary quality of both the domestic worker's job and the employer-employee relationship. In various social settings, at picnics, baby showers, at a parish legalization clinic, and in peoples' homes, I observed immigrant women engaged in lively conversation about paid domestic work. Women traded cleaning tips, tactics to best negotiate pay, how to geographically arrange jobs to minimize daily travel, how to interact (or more often, avoid interaction) with clients, how to leave undesirable jobs, remedies for work-related physical ailments and cleaning strategies to lessen these ailments. The women were quick to voice disapproval of one another's strategies and to eagerly recommend alternatives. These interactions were not embedded in formally organized cooperatives, as they are for some Latina immigrant women domestics (Salzinger 1991), or in "domestics' social clubs" as existed for

5. See "California cities: Rich and poor" in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1992, which reports per capita income ranging from \$55,721 to \$68,236 for three municipalities. Rank is according to per capita income earned in 1989 and reported in the April 1990 Census. These data were compiled by statistical analyst Maureen Lyons and researcher Tracy Thomas.

some black domestics in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s (Dill 1988). But these interactions were not as haphazard as those that have been described among African-American women (Rollins 1985; Kaplan 1987).

These network interactions occurred spontaneously throughout the barrio in diverse social settings. The majority of women who participated in these exchanges were undocumented immigrants, although legal immigrant women and a few naturalized citizens also participated. Some of the women were neighbors, relatives, or *comadres* (co-godmothers), but in other instances, acquaintances who met at parties or medical clinic waiting rooms also shared work experiences. Since they worked different hours in widely dispersed, suburban areas, these paid domestic workers generally traveled to work alone by taking the bus and then walking, or by car. Only women who worked together in pairs car pooled.

Looking at the domestics' networks counters the view of the domestic occupation as an entirely privatized and individualized labor relation. Immigrant women's social ties among family, friends and acquaintances intersect with housecleaning employment. These social networks are based on kinship, friendship, ethnicity, place of origin and current residential locale, and they function on the basis of reciprocity, as there is an implicit obligation to repay favors of advice, information, and job contacts. In some cases these exchanges are monetized, as when women sell "jobs" (i.e. leads for customers or clients) for a fee. Generally, however, more informal reciprocity characterizes these interactions. Immigrant women who do paid domestic work rely on their network resources to resist atomization and enhance their work, but the networks themselves can also be oppressive. Although employers appear to use their own networks to their advantage, this paper focuses on domestics' networks.

## Domestic Workers and Their Social Networks

### *The Job Search*

How does an individual locate work as a paid domestic worker? The women I interviewed most often located jobs not through agencies or classified ads, but through the informal networks of employers. Employers, all of whom were women, recommended a particular domestic worker among friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers. Teresa E., for example, found her first domestic job at a county medical clinic, with a nurse who needed someone to clean her house every other week.<sup>6</sup> This employer recommended Teresa E.'s services to her own co-workers, so that Teresa later worked cleaning houses on alternate days for several public health nurses who shared the same office, but lived in different neighborhoods. Similarly, Rosario Q. found her first housecleaning job with her son's school secretary, and she later worked for two teachers at the same school. Bonnie Thornton Dill's (1988) interviews with black domestic workers employed in the Northeast earlier in the twentieth century reveals that employer references at that time also served as the critical job finding technique. For those domestic workers, however, referrals from employers were a way to find one "good" employer. For the Latina immigrant women in this study, employer referrals were used to develop and maintain a weekly or bi-weekly route of employers.

Employer networks were the primary job finding techniques, but obtaining the first housecleaning job was often problematic. In this regard, the family, friends and kin ties of the women seeking employment proved useful. Immigrant men were more likely to pass along domestic job referrals than were immigrant women because of competition among women for a limited number of jobs. Some women occasionally found work through other

6. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

women, but unless a domestic worker had a surplus of desirable jobs—an unlikely occurrence—or was returning to her country of origin, she was unlikely to pass along a choice job. Many of the immigrant men in this community worked as gardeners, and a few in horse stables, and this provided them contact with prospective employers of domestic labor. In this regard, immigrant women do appear to benefit from immigrant men's network ties (Kos-soudji and Ranney 1984).

Women with ties to well connected, established kin networks found initial employers without much difficulty. Immigrant women lacking these ties were either unable to break into domestic work, or languished on the margins of the occupation. As a single teen in the United States without close family ties, Anabel C.'s first U.S. job was as a bar waitress; she managed to break into domestic work, which she viewed as preferable employment, with the help of a man she met at the bar and later married:

As Reynaldo went there (the bar) quite often, I got to know him and I told him I didn't want to work there anymore. . .and so I left and then he found me houses (to clean) as he worked as a gardener, and he would transport me to the various jobs.

The first difficult task in domestic employment is breaking into the employer network and gaining access to clients who exclusively contract with one person for services. Once a woman obtains a steady employer, there is the possibility—but no guarantee—that the job will snowball into more referrals and more jobs. Most women wish to maximize their earnings by securing as many jobs as possible. Due partially to the unpredictable turnover of employers, few women reached the point of having the maximum number of jobs they could handle.

Maria Alicia N., a single mother of three children, had a difficult time establishing steady and sufficient domestic employment. She initially came to the United States alone, leaving her children behind in Mexico under the care of her mother, so that she might assume a live-in domestic position with an employer who promised to help her find additional domestic job work as well. When the extra jobs were not forthcoming, she quit her live-in domestic position in order to work alongside another domestic worker who paid her virtually nothing but promised in return to find Maria Alicia her own clients. This domestic worker, a more established Mexican immigrant woman, exploited Maria Alicia's labor, and never did pass along any clients. Ultimately, Maria Alicia paid a fee to another domestic worker in order to obtain her first steady employer.

Many undocumented immigrant women were constantly on the lookout for more domestic jobs. Indeed, part of the occupation seems to be the search for more jobs and for jobs with better working conditions and pay. Although some undocumented immigrant women tried placing ads in newspapers and on community bulletin boards to secure domestic work, employer networks were the primary means of securing multiple employers.

### *Subcontracting Arrangements*

While employment with one party can multiply into several jobs, securing that first job is difficult. For this reason, many new immigrant women first find themselves subcontracting their services to other more experienced and well-established immigrant women who have steady customers for domestic work. This provides an important apprenticeship and a potential springboard to independent contracting. Romero (1987) discusses the important training and recruitment functions of these apprenticeships among Chicana domestics, but she looks only at the advantageous features of the relationship. While subcontracting arrangements can be beneficial to both parties, the relationship is not one characterized by altruism or harmony of interests. I found that immigrant women domestic workers who took on a helper did so in order to lighten their own work load and sometimes to accommodate newly arrived kin, factors that often led to conflicting interests.

For the new apprentice, the arrangement minimizes the difficulty of finding employment and securing transportation, and it facilitates learning expected tasks. The “how-to’s,” such as how to use a variety of vacuum cleaners, knowing the names of various cleansers and polishers and cleaning techniques, are sometimes learned in this context. These types of interactions are vividly portrayed in the movie *El Norte* where the newly arrived Guatemalan undocumented immigrant woman works alongside the more established Latina domestic worker. These apprentice arrangements provide employment for women who lack the important job finding contacts, or transportation. These problems are not equally shared by all undocumented immigrant women, as some women readily find new *casas* (houses) through employers, family, friends and acquaintances, and some women already have access to private transportation.

The women learned employee strategies in both informal settings and in the subcontracting relationship. When Maria Alicia N.’s sister, Eulodia, arrived in the United States “without papers,” Maria Alicia invited Eulodia to accompany her on domestic jobs and began teaching her the rigors and strategies used in paid domestic work. While I visited at their apartment one evening Maria Alicia related to Eulodia how the houses are typically disgustingly filthy when one is first hired—usually no one has cleaned them since the last domestic worker left. She told her sister of the risks involved in taking on a new house under job work terms: “You have to watch out with them (employers) because once their houses are nice and clean, then they say they no longer need your services.”

Maria Alicia offered her sister protective advice, such as not to work too fast, or to be overly concerned with cleaning all crevices and hidden corners. She advised her sister to occasionally clean thoroughly, and on alternating visits to the same work site, to do maintenance routines so that she might minimize the strain of the work. To avoid losing time by talking with chatty employers, Maria Alicia advised Eulodia to simply smile, citing the language barrier as an effective deterrent to the sort of sociability about which the black house cleaners in Rollins’s (1985) book complain. Maria Alicia told Eulodia that when she wishes to leave a particular job because the pay is too low, or because the employer makes too many unrealistic demands, she simply tells the employer she is returning to Mexico.

A subcontracted arrangement is informative and convenient, especially for an immigrant woman who lacks her own transportation or has minimal English language skills. The pay, however, is much lower than what a woman might earn on her own. For example, although Eulodia began working alongside Maria Alicia in her domestic work route, it would be months before Eulodia received remuneration. Maria Alicia felt conflicted about this, but she herself had experienced similar arrangements when she first arrived. She rationalized not paying her sister by citing the debts incurred in supporting her children, her mother in Mexico, and funding her sister’s migration costs.

Similarly, when Teresa E. first began paid domestic work, it was as a “helper” to a Filipina woman who provided the transportation and the clients. Teresa later sought and established her own schedule of employers, and years later, after she began driving a car, she lessened the burden of domestic work by employing a newly arrived Mexican immigrant woman, who lived in her garage, to assist with the jobs. She justified these arrangements by acknowledging the newly arrived woman’s limited options: “If I didn’t take her along with me to my jobs, she would have nothing. What she’s earning may not be much, but at least it is something.”

In an apprentice/subcontracting arrangement the pay can be so low that it renders the experience exploitative and demeaning. Maria G., a thirty-eight year old mother of three, told me that when she was working as a “helper” to an acquaintance and had worked seven hours cleaning on one of the hottest days of the year, she received only \$25, an amount reflecting less than \$4 an hour pay. Contrasting this situation with her previous middle class status, she concluded, “I never would have thought to clean houses in Mexico.” Although

subcontracting arrangements ameliorate isolation and help domestic workers secure employment with multiple employers, the relationship established between the experienced, senior domestic worker and the newcomer apprentice is often very exploitative for the apprentice. The apprentices, however, still acquired training and important information in this context. Sometimes the "how-to's" that women traded were as simple as relating a method of dusting with a damp rag, but a more serious and recurrent theme in these discussions centered on earnings.

### *Negotiation of Pay*

The pay for domestic work varies widely across different regions in the country and even within a given area. For example in El Paso, Texas, characterized by both a high rate of unemployment and the lowest per capita income level of any city with over 100,000 inhabitants in the nation, domestic workers averaged \$15 for a day's work in the 1980s (Ruiz 1987:63).<sup>7</sup> Undocumented immigrant women in this study averaged \$35 to \$50 for a full day of domestic work, although some earned less and others twice that amount. This wide disparity reflects the dynamic economy in metropolitan California as well as the absence of a regulated payment system.

What determines the pay scale for housecleaning work? There is no union, government regulations, corporate guidelines or management policy to set wages. Instead, the pay for domestic work is generally informally negotiated between two women, the domestic worker and the employer. The pay scale that domestic workers attempt to negotiate is influenced by the information that they share with one another, and by their ability to sustain a sufficient number of jobs, which is in turn also shaped by their English language skills, legal status and access to private transportation. Although the pay scale remains unregulated by the state, social interactions among the domestic workers themselves serve informally to regulate pay standards.

Unlike employees in middle class professions, most of the domestic workers talked openly with one another about their level of pay. At informal gatherings, such as a child's birthday party or at a community event, the women revealed what they earned with particular employers, and how they had achieved or been stuck with that particular level of pay. Working for low level pay was typically met with murmurs of disapproval or pity, but no stronger sanctions were applied. Conversely, those women who earned at the high end were admired. At one baby shower, a woman who had recently moved from this community to the Silicon Valley and purchased a home with her husband told us that by working steadily on a job work basis, she averaged \$15 an hour. The women responded with awe and approval, but some of them grew discouraged when they learned that this visitor had obtained legal status and a car, factors giving her distinct advantages in the domestic job market.

The exchange of information about domestic workers' earnings sometimes starts in the pre-migration phase in Mexico. Maria Alicia N., whose two office jobs had provided a middle class status in Mexico until the inflationary crisis of the early 1980s, claimed that rumors of the high earnings that immigrant women could make in domestic work prompted her to migrate to California: "I had heard that here a woman could earn good money, that here a woman could earn \$50 by cleaning one house. I figured that if I could clean two houses, I

7. Survey data collected among return migrant women in Mexico in 1978 and 1979 also indicate that the pay they receive for domestic work in the United States is low: 97 percent of the women who had worked in private households in the United States reported earning less than \$10 a day (Kossoudji and Ranney 1984: 1124-1125). These low wage rates, however, were supplemented with "payment in kind" in the form of room and board, as two-thirds of these women had worked in live-in arrangements.

could earn \$100 with only one day's work. I had to see if it was true." This upper continuum of housecleaning wages attracted women to the work, and such information flowed through transnational networks before migration.

Of course not all immigrant women can earn \$100 a day in domestic work, and fewer still can sustain such relatively high earnings over time. Since most women obtain jobs through employer referrals, in their new job, they generally ask for at least the same wage rate they are presently earning elsewhere or for a slightly higher rate. The highest rates earned by women in my sample were \$50 for cleaning a three bedroom, two-and-a-half bath house, and \$35-40 for cleaning a two bedroom house. Some women were able to clean more than one house a day.

As live-out, day workers, these immigrant women were paid either on an hourly or job work basis, and most women preferred the latter. As one woman said, "When they pay me for the work (*por el trabajo*), I can earn more than when they pay me by the hour (*por hora*)." Most women tried to maximize their earnings by working intensively on a job basis, and sometimes they boasted to one another of their earnings and their busy work schedules. Being paid on an hourly basis, however, also has its advantages as it allows one to work at a slower pace, lessening the chance of accidents and injuries. Physical pain and injuries were exacerbated by the intensified, rapid pace of work. This was a direct outcome and a drawback of the job work system of pay. Women reported racing up and down stairs, lugging tank vacuum cleaners, straining their knees and their backs, and pulling muscles while quickly moving furniture in order to rush off to the next job. Domestic work is indeed, as Rollins (1985) puts it, "hard on the body." For this reason, a small number of the women, usually older women who lacked the requisite physical stamina, preferred to be paid hourly wages.

Regardless of pay arrangements, the pay earned each week is highly variable, and the weekly job schedule is constantly in flux. The job is typically performed for the same employer on a weekly or bi-weekly schedule, so domestic workers must patch together many different jobs in order to maintain a certain income level. Adding to the variability, domestic workers typically earn a different amount of pay with different employers. A domestic worker may also have different pay arrangements with different employers, earning a set fee for cleaning some houses, and an hourly wage for cleaning others.

Sometimes the employer sets the price, but when the domestic worker has enough jobs, and if she is a fast worker, she is able to be more selective and assertive in setting the pay. One afternoon at Maria M.'s home, as she was preparing for an interview with a potential employer, who had been referred from another employer, I naively asked "What kinds of questions do they ask you in the interviews?" She quickly retorted: "They don't ask me anything, it's me who interviews them! I decide how much needs to be done, and I set the conditions: no washing laundry and ironing, and I tell them I charge \$50 for 4 hours a week." Her response reflects what Romero (1988a; 1992) has referred to as domestic workers' attempts to define themselves as "expert cleaners."

Only those women who have a number of steady clients can afford to aggressively bargain to upgrade their jobs. If their requests are not met, they can leave that particular job without risking their earnings. Maria M. was confident in asking for a certain wage level because she already had six steady housecleaning clients, and in addition she worked in a produce vending business operated by her family.

A survey conducted in Los Angeles indicates that undocumented immigrant women earn less in domestic employment than do women with legal status (Simon and De Ley 1984). Yet earnings are also mediated by an employee's ability to communicate at some rudimentary level with her employers, her ability to efficiently arrive at numerous work sites without wasting time on excessively long bus rides and walks, and importantly, by her ability to utilize information available through the social networks. The woman in my sample who consistently earned the highest income from domestic work, Maria Alicia N., constantly drew

on the domestics' networks for cleaning tips and advice. Her favorite topic of conversation was domestic work, and with friends, family and acquaintances she discussed how to approach an employer for a raise, and how to deal with problematic employers; she also drew on the employers' networks for new job referrals. In spite of her undocumented legal status, her resourcefulness paid off. At any given time, she could unfold a large calendar page stored in her purse, where she recorded whose house she cleaned on which day of the month; with the exception of Sundays, each calendar date block bore two or three penciled-in names. Maria Alicia cleaned approximately fifteen houses a week, and on a very good week, her earnings totalled \$500.

Since the number of jobs and hours worked per week fluctuates, earnings do not always yield anticipated amounts necessary to cover bills. This is a serious problem for women who are not well-connected in the domestics' networks, and for those women who are primarily or centrally responsible for meeting household expenses. Teresa E. best illustrates this precarious dilemma. When I first met her, she was desperate to find new employers, and when she learned that I was attending a local university, she asked if I knew of students who wanted to hire domestic help. At that time she had only three jobs lined up for the week. Over the course of the following months, she found new domestic work jobs, but they were sporadic, organized on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. On one occasion when I asked Teresa about her weekly earnings, she could not specify, but she was certain that it always remained below \$200. Later, when I interviewed her during an exceptionally good work period, we tallied up the projected hours and earnings for the following five day work week to be \$170. She figured that on alternating weeks she would earn only \$115 with three days of work. Two weeks later, she lost her best paying job, lowering her "good week" earnings to \$124. Her low week earnings thereafter sank to \$73. Doing in-home child care for a neighbor's children, taking in boarders, and pooling income with her children enabled her to pay the bills during that period. When I visited Teresa E. two years later, she had promoted herself into the forefront of domestic work; her earnings had increased and she now employed a young "helper." I believe that she advanced within the occupation because she learned to drive and because of her greater exposure to and use of the network resources, a process facilitated by her attendance at evening English classes, where she exchanged job information with other classmates.

Domestic work is inherently volatile. Women who are not well-connected to networks of employers who provide referrals, and to other domestics who offer strategic advice, run the risk of severe underemployment. To minimize this, some women combine paid domestic work with other jobs, such as in-home day care for other immigrant women's children, vending, or other wage employment. Similarly, other women supplemented their primary income, which they earned working 40 hours at jobs in restaurants, laundries or motels, by cleaning one or two houses for pay on their days off.

## Discussion

With the restructuring of domestic employment into job work, domestic workers encounter both atomized working conditions and privatized employer-employee relations, as well as the need to continuously secure and maintain multiple sources of employment. To cope with these challenges, Mexican undocumented immigrant women whom I studied create and rely on informal social ties among themselves. While domestic workers still experience isolation on the job, the network interactions allow women to exert more leverage in negotiating the jobs with their employers. Women teach one another how to negotiate pay, how to placate employers, and how to get the job done in the most expedient manner. These exchanges generally occur "off the job" in multiple settings, at baby showers, after mass on

Sundays, and in other informal social gatherings. The sharing of information modifies the privatized, asymmetrical employer-employee relationship; domestic workers' ability to tap into their employer's networks for job referrals helps them find multiple jobs. While the occupation remains largely unregulated by formal bureaucratic government agencies, an intensive and informal social regulation is created by the domestic workers themselves. For domestic workers with full access to the informational resources, the networks are enabling and advantageous.

The domestic workers' networks, however, also embody a down side, and they are particularly constraining for women who are trying to break into domestic work. This is most clearly illustrated in the "on the job" informal subcontracting relationship, where a more experienced domestic worker takes on a newly arrived immigrant women as a "helper." Although this provides the newcomer with a job and with job training—training which in the formal sector is normally shouldered by the employer—the subcontracting arrangement leaves the "helper" vulnerable to exceedingly low pay and trapped in an exploitative relationship. In spite of these disadvantages, for those women who lack job leads from friends and family, subcontracting can serve as a springboard to obtaining their own jobs. This process is best illustrated by those women who went from being inexperienced, apprenticed "helpers" to entrepreneurs who subcontracted their work to other helpers.

Domestic work can be conceptualized as a career, with the networks governing entry into the occupation and internal occupational mobility. As one advances in the career, the network systems become more advantageous. Instead of just finding one good employer (Dill 1988), building a career now entails securing a steady route of multiple employers. Success in the occupation hinges not only on the quality of job performance, but more importantly, on the domestic workers' ability to utilize the network resources, and in some cases, to use more vulnerable domestic workers as helpers.

This dual-edged aspect of the networks tempers a romanticized view of "women's culture" and networks as necessarily nurturant, cooperative and expressive of ethnic solidarity. Structural features of job work help account for the exploitative features of the networks. With the institutionalization of multiple employers, and the decline of particularistic, personalistic employer-employee relations, employers are less obligated to loyally retain the same employee for many years. This creates an environment where domestic workers must compete against each other for a scarce number of choice jobs. The employer-employee relationship is still fundamentally private and asymmetrical, but it becomes most unequal when the relationship is mediated by domestic workers through the subcontracting arrangement. Job work characteristics prompt domestic workers to alternately share mutually beneficial information, and to compete with one another in an individualistic manner.

Black domestic workers have struggled to negotiate employer-employee relations that allow them to maintain their dignity (Dill 1988), and Chicana domestic workers have upgraded the occupation by defining themselves as expert cleaners and creating instrumental, professional-like relations with their employers (Romero 1988a, 1992). This study of Mexican undocumented immigrant domestic workers highlights how information gained through social exchanges allows domestic workers to better negotiate the terms of "job work." The content of these network interactions suggests the formation of an important work culture. Through decentralized network interactions and exchanges, women are developing a particular set of values, practices and collective advice that, in the absence of any enforced occupational guidelines, is shaping the character of the employer-employee relationship. This work culture is different than, for example, those among female garment workers (Lamphere 1985), cannery workers (Zavella 1987), or department store employees (Benson 1986), as it is constituted outside of the work place. Yet the work culture may be more important precisely because it is regulating an informal sector occupation where employer and employee

confront one another in isolation, and because it is advanced by undocumented immigrant workers who have little recourse to appeals through the legal system.

Employers of domestic workers are a diverse group, and they include the professional middle class and upper-income, dual-career families of the sort described by Hertz (1986), as well as seniors living on fixed incomes, dual-earner working parents and single mothers (Salzinger 1991). But what is key to the intersection of this new supply and demand for domestic work is the restructuring of the occupation into job work terms. Hiring a domestic worker to clean the house once a week or twice a month is less expensive and therefore more accessible to the middle class and to many working women than is hiring and paying a full-time live-in. Job work arrangements that are sustained by the networks allow a wide audience of female employers to use their class position to "buy out" of some of their gender oppression in the home, while male employers benefit because their status-quo privileges with respect to housework and caregiving remain unchallenged (Hertz 1986; Rothman 1989).

A question that this study leaves unanswered but throws into relief is the extent to which similar network processes occur among those who employ domestic workers. Referrals among employers appear to be the main job finding technique for Latina domestics, but what other kinds of information are employers sharing among themselves, and how does this affect the pay and the conditions of domestic work? Anecdotal evidence from this study and others (Romero 1988a; Rollins 1985) suggests that employers do exchange strategic information and sometimes pressure one another to raise or lower pay for domestic work. This may be an occupation governed by parallel and interacting networks of women of different classes, ethnicities, and citizenship status who meet at the multiple work sites in isolated pairs. A fuller understanding of the terms and conditions of domestic job work awaits future research that will systematically examine how employers use their own social networks to structure domestic work.

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