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**Articulating Differences and Inequalities
Paid Domestic Workers' and Housewives'
Struggles for Rights in Uruguay and Paraguay**

Raquel Rojas Scheffer



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Articulating Differences and Inequalities

Paid Domestic Workers' and Housewives' Struggles for Rights in Uruguay and Paraguay

Raquel Rojas Scheffer

Abstract

Housewives and paid domestic workers perform – to a certain extent – the same kinds of tasks. They also tend to share interest in the valorisation of domestic work: If this activity were recognised as such – as work – housewives could claim retirement rights, while domestic workers should be granted the same labour rights as any other worker. But even when sharing the historical burden of house and care work, there are other social hierarchies that interrupt the common experience of these women and hinder the creation of alliances between them. This paper analyses the relationship between paid domestic workers' and housewives' organisations in Uruguay and Paraguay, two Latin American countries that share many similarities in terms of territorial extension, population and economy size, but show contrasts regarding the organisation of domestic workers, particularly their relation to housewives' organisations. Drawing on interviews and participant observations carried out in Montevideo and Asunción – the capital cities of Uruguay and Paraguay – I discuss how the negotiations of differences are intertwined with disputes over inequalities, describing how 'racialised' contexts use ethnic differences to naturalise the undervaluing of domestic workers and justify the subordinated position they assume in society.

Keywords:

domestic work | racialisation | inequalities | organising | Uruguay | Paraguay

About the Author:

Raquel Rojas Scheffer finished her PhD studies in Sociology at the Freie Universität Berlin, as part of the International Research Training Group Entre Espacios/Zwischen Räumen. Prior to that, she obtained an MA in Social Sciences at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, thanks to a DAAD Scholarship. Raquel is originally from Paraguay, where she earned a Specialist Degree in Social Development from the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) and a BA in Social Sciences from the Universidad Nacional de Asunción. Her research focuses on political systems, social policies, inequalities, social movements and labour relations.

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1. Introduction

Pictures of demonstrations in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. In all of them, women holding brooms, dusters and mops, one with a young child in her arms, another holding onto a kid that walks by her side, some others carrying signs and posters with demands. If it were not for the claims in those posters or the difference in time – easily noticeable by the better quality of the digital photos and the presence of smartphones in some of them – one could think all these pictures were taken at the same demonstration. But they were not. Three of them were taken in the early 2000s, at a demonstration of housewives claiming retirement rights. The other three show a demonstration that took place in 2018, in which domestic workers demanded the same right to the minimum wage as any other worker in the country. The similarities between the groups are striking. But even more striking seem to be – at least for some actors – the differences.

Housewives' and domestic workers' organisations have been present in Latin America for decades. These groups not only perform – at least to a certain extent – the same kinds of tasks. They also tend to share an interest in the valorisation of domestic work: If this activity were recognised as work, housewives could claim retirement rights, while domestic workers would be granted the same labour rights as any other worker. But even while sharing the historical burden of care work, there are other social hierarchies that interrupt the common experience of these women and hinder the creation of alliances between them.

The first – and most obvious – is the class dimension. On the one hand, women from middle and upper-classes, many of them members of housewives' organisations, are the ones that have enough income either not to be in need of selling their labour power and able to stay at home, or are able to outsource domestic work by hiring another woman to do it. On the other hand, the women employed as domestic workers are those who could not find a better paying job or a position with better working conditions, due to their lack of training and experience and/or their young age. What is more, paid domestic work is not only an occupation typically performed by women from lower social classes, but also by racialised women. As Lan (2006: 14) puts it, "women of particular ethnic groups are viewed as more naturally suited to it." In this vein, an analysis of the composition of domestic work reveals a certain ethnic specificity of women employed in this sector, for instance in Latin America, where indigenous people or Afro-descendants tend to be overrepresented.

Differences and similarities thus cut across the relations between domestic workers and housewives. This paper analyses the way these are negotiated and the meaning that is attached to them, and particularly, how the articulation of differences could lead either to further reproducing inequalities between these groups, or to contesting and

overcoming them. In this sense, my interest here lies in discussing how conviviality (Mecila 2017) is negotiated between these women that adopt contrasting positions in the social structure.

Unlike other authors (Gorbán and Tizziani 2014; Kofes 2001; Lan 2006; Vidal 2007, 2012; Wasser 2018) the focus of my study and, particularly, the empirical data on which the analysis relies, are not on everyday interactions that take place within the domestic sphere at an interpersonal level, but rather on relations between organisations that seek an impact on political and legal arenas. Even if the asymmetries that characterise the encounter between domestic workers and their employers are basically the same, the level of the analysis changes. Hence, I am interested in discussing how representatives of domestic workers' and housewives' organisations describe their relation to each other, and the effect that this positioning has on their chances of building alliances and achieving their goals.

In order to illustrate this discussion, I analyse the cases of Uruguay and Paraguay, the two smallest countries in the Southern Cone Region of Latin American in terms of territorial extension, population and economy. Domestic work is an important activity for women in both, inasmuch as 13.13% of the female working population in Uruguay and 17.1% in Paraguay are employed in this sector (ILO 2015). Furthermore, in both countries most domestic workers are national citizens, unlike other cases like Argentina, Chile or Costa Rica, where immigration rates tend to be high (Soto et al. 2016). However, despite these similarities, the way domestic workers organise and struggle for their rights in Uruguay and Paraguay differs at many levels, particularly regarding their relation to housewives' organisations. It is precisely because of this combination of similarities and contrasts that I consider these cases suitable for an analysis of the way differences and inequalities around domestic work are negotiated.

It is noteworthy that the relation between housewives' and domestic workers' organisations in Uruguay and Paraguay – as well as in other Latin American countries – is complex. As already stated, they have some points of convergence, inasmuch as both groups have interest in valorising domestic work. However, many housewives – and particularly, those heading their organisations – in turn hire domestic workers, adding tension to their relation. This means that housewives' organisations could be regarded either as allies of domestic workers – when claiming for the recognition of domestic work as *work* – or as their adversary, when domestic workers are negotiating higher wages and better working conditions.

This paper presents five sections and some concluding remarks. The next section describes the interpenetration of domestic work and gender conceptions, paying particular attention to other social asymmetries that characterise the relations around

paid domestic work. Subsequently, I discuss the link between the lower value attributed to this occupation and the characteristics of the people that perform it. Sections 4 and 5 present the data from my case studies, drawing on participant observations and interviews carried out in Montevideo and Asunción. Finally, I seek to contrast the evidence from these two countries and analyse them in light of the theoretical considerations presented before, discussing how the negotiations of differences are intertwined with disputes over inequalities, and arguing that ‘racialised’ contexts use ethnic differences to naturalise the undervaluing of domestic workers and justify the subordinated position they assume in society.

2. For Love or Money, But Always for Women

By definition, *domestic* work refers to the labour performed within the household, including tasks such as cleaning, washing, cooking or taking care of other people, particularly children, the elderly or those who cannot look after themselves. These chores have been historically socialised as the responsibility of women, giving rise to an unequal distribution of tasks in the household. But this gendered division of labour not only determines differences in the allocation of responsibilities and the scope of execution of activities – that is, men’s work in the public sphere of the labour market and women’s in the private sphere of the household – but also creates distinctions based on gender in terms of access to rights, rewards and power. In the words of Acker:

Gender [...] is defined as inequalities, divisions, and differences socially constructed around assumed distinctions between female and male. Gender is a basic organising principle in social life, a principle for allocation of duties, rights, rewards, and power, including the means of violence. Gender is a factor in organising daily life for individuals, families, communities, and societies as large structures (Acker 2004: 20).

Ideas and assumptions built around the concepts of male and female are the basis of the distribution of tasks within and beyond the household and have a bearing on the value assigned to different activities. The work of Silvia Federici is illustrative in this sense. This author discusses the emergence of capitalism focusing on the imposition of the sexual division of labour. According to Federici, this division introduces not only a differentiation in terms of tasks that men and women should perform, but also in terms of their experiences, their lives and their relation to capital and other workers (Federici 2004: 115). This arrangement was of great importance for the development of capitalism, since presenting the labour performed in the household as something that does not produce value operates as a form of primitive accumulation. In her words:

the power-difference between women and men and the concealment of women's unpaid-labour under the cover of natural inferiority, have enabled capitalism to immensely expand the "unpaid part of the working day," and use the (male) wage to accumulate women's labour [...] Thus, primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves (Federici 2004: 115).

This means that, even if the organisation of the household and of production are intertwined (Jelin 1977), this relation is normally overlooked. Let's take, for instance, the Fordist model, where the man acts as the economic provider – the "breadwinner" – while the woman is responsible for domestic and care work. The kinds of work performed by men and women are presented as if part of parallel and disconnected worlds, hiding the nexus between capitalist production and care (Carrasco 2003: 27; Jelin 2010) and attributing value to one – that deserves a wage – while denying it to the other (see next section).

At the beginning of this section I pointed out that domestic work is the work performed within the household. This does not mean, however, that it must necessarily be carried out by a member of the family. Many people choose to outsource these chores, hiring another person who assumes the responsibility of cleaning the household and/or caring and looking after its members, creating relations that include the explicit movement of money (Folbre and Nelson 2000). This is referred to as paid domestic work. However, even when someone outside the family is hired to carry out this work, the gender specificity remains.

Different studies have indicated that even when both partners are inserted in the labour market and a third person is hired to take over the domestic duties, the woman of the household is still in charge of organising, managing and supervising these tasks, which are, in turn, normally performed by another woman (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lan 2006; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002). Therefore, instead of considering paid and unpaid domestic work as dichotomous categories, they can be seen as "structural continuities that characterise the feminisation of domestic labour across the public and private spheres" (Lan 2003: 189).

Of course, this is not to say that there is no difference between the labour performed and the position assumed by a housewife and a domestic worker. Although these women share some social expectations related to the construction and assignation of 'femininity' in society, this common point is interrupted by other social hierarchies that structure their encounter (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 9-10). As I seek to show in the

next pages, “women have different experiences of housework, mediated by differences such as class, age and ‘race’” (Palmer 1989, cited by Anderson 2000: 17).

The first – and most obvious – is the class difference. In this regard, different authors have pointed out that the liberation of women from the burden of domestic duties, in order to be able to perform paid and more highly valued occupations, should be described rather as the liberation of *some* women, that is, those from the upper classes (Anderson 2000; Blofield 2012; Duarte 1993; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Rollins 1985). In fact, this liberation does not occur through a negotiation of the distribution of responsibilities within the household – e.g. between men and women – but through the outsourcing of these tasks to other people, more specifically, to other women. Moreover, according to Anderson (2000: 19), employing a domestic worker appears as the solution to avert gender and generational conflict over domestic work in the household. In the same vein, although a little more radical, Duarte (1993: 178-79) states that “the possibility of having domestic service reaffirms *machismo* and patriarchy within the family”.¹

This accounts for the creation of the demand for domestic work, but not for the supply. To this end, it is necessary to consider long-standing migration processes from rural to urban areas, and on a different scale – but maintaining the same logic – from countries of the “Global South” to those of the “Global North”. In both cases, these processes involve large contingents of people who, attracted by perceived opportunities – real or not – of better remuneration and living conditions, move to areas of greater economic development. In the case of Latin America, this has translated into profound processes of urbanisation and rural-urban migration (Jelin 1977). But gaining access to the labour market once in the city is not easy, particularly when the aim is to obtain industrial jobs, which require certain qualifications. Domestic work emerges, then, as an option for entering the labour market, especially for women, since they do not need to show credentials to prove they are suited for it and there is a relatively stable demand.

The fact that this occupation is regarded as “women’s work” has to do with the belief that women are intrinsically suited to it, as well as with the experience that many women already have after having performed – or helped their mothers perform – domestic duties in their homes. In addition, there is also an unequal access to education linked to gender, which is exacerbated within lower social classes and affects the access of women to jobs that require certain levels of education. This highlights that the experience of “being a woman” is mediated by social class, as well as by other factors such as area of residence and even family size, inasmuch as the opportunities of accessing quality education are significantly reduced in rural and impoverished areas,

¹ My own translation from the original Spanish: “*La posibilidad de disponer de servicio doméstico reafirma el machismo y el patriarcado en el seno de la familia*”.

where it is also common that large families prioritise boys' over girls' education. For these reasons, paid domestic work has been historically performed by rural migrants and other women that have not been able to access higher-paying jobs, either because of their young age, their lack of training, or their pressing housing and food needs that tend to be covered through this occupation (Jelin 1977).

In any case, domestic workers not only “set free” their (female) employers from housework, they also play an important role in affirming the household's social status. In this vein, authors analysing this labour relation in the Latin American context (Costa 2018: 187; Gill 1994: 51) have stated that hiring a domestic worker is how upper and middle-class families demonstrate an advantageous position in the social structure. This means that class relations cut across paid domestic work not only because lower-class women are the ones performing this job, but also because hiring a domestic worker is an indication of belonging to the upper-classes insofar as it shows that a particular household assumes a higher position in the social structure compared to others that cannot externalise housework. Thus, the hierarchical relations that characterise domestic work are not only to be found between employers and workers, but also between households with and without domestic workers.

This status affirmation is even more important for the woman of the household (Anderson 2000: 21), since it is she who, by hiring a domestic worker, can access better paid jobs and/or enjoy more leisure time. At the same time, it is also she who tries the hardest to distance herself from the domestic worker (Kofes 2001: 43), with whom she continues to share the responsibility of household duties. In addition to class differences, employers often resort to other – sometimes even more visible – differences, such as “racial” or ethnic traits.

I have already mentioned that paid domestic work is not only an occupation typically performed by women from lower social classes, but also by racialised women. This is related to historical colonial relations (Bernardino-Costa 2007, 2014; Cumes 2014; Durin 2014a, 2014b; García Castro 1993), as well as to the aforementioned migration processes: The fact that migrant women tend to be employed mainly as domestic workers is often linked to differences between employer and worker that are visible to the naked eye, such as skin colour or other physical features. But these differences are sometimes more subtle, particularly when domestic workers are citizens of the country in which they work. This means that racialisation processes can also take place within national borders.

According to Lan (2006: 11), even if the construction of social boundaries – drawing the lines between “us” and “them” – is many times based on the political-legal regulation of citizenship and national borders, it also involves symbolic struggles and local

negotiations in the interactions that take place between employers and workers. As I seek to demonstrate with the study of specific cases, these symbolic struggles and negotiations occur not only in relation to citizenship or more “obvious” ethnic or “racial” traits but can also rest on differences of language or place of origin (urban/rural). In the end, regardless of the criterion for affirming the difference between groups, the process of racialisation has the same result: it naturalises, inferiorises and excludes those identified as belonging to a “racial group” marked as “different” by the hegemonic normative subject (Miles and Torres 2018; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005), producing inequality by creating barriers that hinder the access to desirable goods and positions. As we will see, the category “race” can be very important in the production of differences between employer and worker, differences which could also be articulated in order to legitimise social inequalities.

3. Is It Really Work? Struggling for Recognition and Rights

Nowadays, domestic work is generally recognised as such – work – by academia, governments and multilateral institutions. However, this was not the case for a long time. Drawing from the classical political economy premise that considers the labour performed within the household as a “reproductive” activity, different from the “productive” work that adds value to the products created in its action, domestic labour was considered “non-productive”. This means, it was depicted as something different from *genuine work*, insofar it did not create “productive surplus”.² These ideas have been systematically refuted from the 1970s on by feminist studies that sought to deconstruct this conception of work (for example, Dalla Costa and James 1975, Federici 1975, 2004, 2013), demonstrating that the activities carried out in the household are an integral (although invisible) part of wage or “productive” labour, and thus, trying to transcend the dichotomy between what is regarded as economic or non-economic, work or non-work (Pérez Orozco 2006: 233).

While these and other feminist theorists have demonstrated that domestic work contributes to the production of value – insofar as the wage labour carried out in the public sphere would be impossible without the complementary labour performed in the household – this value is not always recognised in a society that portrays it as “non-productive”. Furthermore, by considering domestic labour something that women can do because of their “feminine nature”, it is assumed that all women can perform it.

² Adam Smith, in his well-known book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), defines productive labor as “the sort of labor which adds to the value of the subject upon which it is bestowed”. Marx, for his part, addresses this issue in his *Grundrisse* (1857-8), where he defines productive labor as wage labor that produces surplus-value for the capitalist (see Dussel 1985).

Domestic work is thus devalued and depicted as “simple labour”,³ as an activity that does not require any specific qualification, and that can be performed without training or prior social investment. The important role played by gender socialisation within the family, where women do housework and girls learn “to be mothers” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010), goes unnoticed. In that regard, it is important to bear in mind that the value assigned to a particular activity or its products, far from being derived from its own nature or essence, is mediated by social relations. Accordingly, an analysis of the connection between the value attributed to different occupations and gender reveals that “what society deems valuable is in fact part of a field of social conflict, determined not by intrinsic value, ‘natural’ merit, or abstract market forces but by power relations” (Blum 1991: 17).

Although this devaluation applies to both paid and unpaid domestic work, it is more severe in the case of the former, where the most vulnerable ends of the axes gender, class and race/ethnicity tend to converge. The intersection of these axes, and the interplay among them, affects the position domestic workers assume in society. While the effect on the economic dimension is the most obvious – domestic work is one of the worst paid activities, regionally and globally (ILO 2015) – this is also linked to cultural and political inequalities. In this sense, all dimensions are interrelated and affect each other in a reciprocal way, in a paradigmatic case of what some scholars have called *entangled inequalities* (Braig et al. 2013; Costa 2011; Jelin, et al. 2018). In Gutiérrez-Rodríguez’s words:

the correlation between the societal recognition of domestic work and its labour force, commonly racialised and feminised, reveals how labour is not only constituted by its quality, but by its quantifiable character in terms of who does the work. Domestic work is not only badly paid because it is signified as non-productive, but because those doing this work are feminised and racialised subjects considered as “inferior” to the hegemonic normative subject. Again, the devaluation of domestic work is culturally predicated and reflects a hegemonic perception (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 15).

Accordingly, domestic work has long been pushed into the background when discussing labour codes. What is more, if labour laws have addressed domestic work at all, it has only been to mandate lower salaries and benefits for the sector, as well as longer working hours (Barbagelata 1978; Valiente 2010, 2016). This situation started to change over the last decade when many Latin American countries – as well as some from other regions – changed their laws in order to guarantee more rights to this sector. This

3 In Marxist terms, “simple labor” is “the labour-power which on an average, apart from any special development, exists in the organism of every ordinary individual” (see discussion in Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 89-90).

was possible after many years of organising and the creation of a broad transnational network of activism that supported domestic workers' organisations and their claims (see Goldsmith 2013; Mather 2013; Pape 2016; PNUD 2017). Nevertheless, a real equality of rights has not yet been achieved: In many cases, differences in terms of wages, working hours, access to retirement and social security, among other benefits, persist (see PNUD 2017). In addition, even in countries that legally guarantee domestic workers the same rights as any other wage worker, enforcing the law remains a major challenge.

Housewives also organise – nationally and internationally⁴ – in order to claim rights. However, since the work they perform is for their families and *unpaid*, their demands do not focus on labour rights, but on retirement and social security entitlements. The emphasis on the necessity of recognising domestic work as *work*, nonetheless, remains. In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between domestic workers' and housewives' organisations in Uruguay and Paraguay, two cases that illustrate – in a contrasting way – how these groups articulate their differences and commonalities, producing either more horizontal or asymmetrical convivial models not only at the level of everyday interactions, but also at a political level.

4. Same Work, Same Value: Housewives and Domestic Workers in Uruguay

The year 2005 marked a turning point in Uruguay. The country was still recovering from a serious economic crisis that had its worse moment in 2002, when the Frente Amplio, a left-oriented coalition and historical ally of the workers' movement, took power after winning the presidential elections in 2004. The new government introduced many reforms in different areas. One of the most important changes regarding labour relations was the decision to reactivate wage councils, which are tripartite negotiation procedures that bring together workers' and employers' representatives of each branch of activity (e.g. industry, services, agriculture, and their subsections). With the government as the mediator, the representatives negotiate not only wages but all types of benefits, making bargaining agreements that set working conditions for each activity.

The positive effects of these changes were seen most clearly in the case of domestic workers. What is more, in his inaugural speech on March 2005, the newly elected president Tabaré Vázquez mentioned that one of the medium-term objectives of his

4 There exist at least three international organisations that bring together groups of housewives in Latin American countries, and in particular those of the countries I analyze in this paper (Uruguay and Paraguay). These are Unión Intercontinental de Amas de Casa y Consumidores (UNICA), Confederación Iberoamericana de Amas de casa, and Federación de Amas de Casa, Consumidores y Usuarios del MERCOSUR. See <http://ligadeamasdecasa.com.uy/relacionamiento-a-nivel-nacional-e-internacional/>

government was to launch wage councils for the domestic and rural sectors, both historically excluded from this right.⁵ In this context, before the end of 2005, domestic workers had reactivated SUTD,⁶ the historical trade union of the sector, and by 2006 Uruguay had already approved a law for domestic workers, guaranteeing them the same rights as any other wage worker in the country. However, fulfilling the government's promise of the bargaining procedure proved to be more complicated.

As is evident, a tripartite negotiation needs the participation of three actors: the government, workers' representatives and employers' representatives; but to find that third actor was not an easy task. In fact, the problem was quite complex. Not only was there no organisation representing all households that employ a domestic worker in Uruguay, but trying to create such a group would have been almost impossible, considering that most people that hire domestic workers do not see themselves as employers, but rather as consumers (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001: 12).

After failed negotiations with a couple of employers' organisations, in 2007 the government proposed the Liga de Amas de Casa y Consumidores del Uruguay (LAC-Uy), a housewives' and consumers' organisation, as a possible employers' representative. The LAC-Uy, a civil association created in 1995 with the aim of dignifying the role of the housewife, achieving retirement rights for them, and defending the rights of consumers, was not created for the task proposed by the government, but nevertheless decided to assume this responsibility. Finally, in August 2008, the tripartite bargaining council met for the first time, and by the end of the year, they had already signed their first agreement. This included an increase in wages and other benefits, such as the establishment of Domestic Workers' Day, a paid holiday for all domestic workers in Uruguay. From there on, they continued to negotiate in the different rounds of the wage councils, obtaining new salary increases and further benefits.⁷

When I discussed this experience with different actors in Uruguay,⁸ many of them highlighted the fact that the LAC-Uy is a "very peculiar employers' organisation". For a start, employers' representatives in wage councils are normally business chambers, that is, organisations that were created with the purpose of promoting the interests of their sector. As already pointed out, the LAC-Uy emerged with a different objective, and although it assumed the counterpart's role in the negotiations with the SUTD, their members do not really represent the interest of all employers of domestic workers. In fact, households with domestic service in Uruguay, as in most Latin American

5 See <http://archivo.presidencia.gub.uy/web/noticias/2005/03/2005030111.htm>

6 Spanish acronym for Sole Domestic Workers' Union (Sindicato Único de Trabajadoras Domésticas)

7 For more detailed information about the content of the agreements, see BPS (2018).

8 Representatives of the national trade unions' confederation, advisors of domestic workers, researchers and professionals that implemented projects with the SUTD.

countries, are a large and highly heterogeneous group. Some hire services for a few hours a week, while others have a live-in worker that leaves only on Sundays (if at all). There are also cases of households with two or more domestic workers who perform specialised tasks (e.g. cooking, washing, cleaning or babysitting) while in other cases the same person does all these chores and even more. Many times, the employers are also workers who need domestic help so that their children stay supervised when they go to work; but in other cases, the family has a larger income that allows the woman to stay home and supervise the domestic worker(s). The board members of the housewives' organisation, according to the information I gathered through my interviews, seem to make up this last group. Nevertheless, nobody disputed the participation of the housewives' organisation in the wage council and, furthermore, research in this respect has concluded that the LAC-Uy is seen as a legitimate and representative actor (Ciapessoni and Ni3n 2015: 132).

Yet the "peculiarities" of the LAC-Uy go beyond its composition. In this regard, even when assuming the role of the counterpart, this organisation has been highly responsive to domestic workers' demands and open to negotiations. What is more, I argue that a key element for the success of the wage council was the capacity of the LAC-Uy to see their own claims reflected in the claims of domestic workers. In the words of a representative of the housewives:

[T]he labour performed within the household, whether paid or unpaid, has a special value; it is something that should be recognised, valued. [...] We always say that the labour performed by domestic workers deserves to be positioned in the best possible way, and that it deserves to be considered a job like any other (LAC-Uy representative).⁹

In the struggle for the recognition of paid domestic work as work, i.e. as deserving of labour rights, the LAC-Uy saw a first step that could help them achieve their own main objective as well, namely, the recognition of the work of housewives as work, worthy of rights such as social security or retirement. They see both positions as part of the same struggle, a struggle of women whose work is invisible and who do not receive the respect and appreciation they deserve.

This is why we felt the need to participate [in the wage council], because we were doing that invisible and unpaid work. From our perspective, we had to take part in this group, demonstrating that this work deserves remuneration (LAC-Uy representative).

In this line of thought, representatives of LAC-Uy and SUTD, as well as members of other organisations that have accompanied the negotiations in the wage council, agree

⁹ My own translation. All interviews took place in Spanish.

that the relationship between these organisations, which should have been conflictive “by nature”, was always held within a framework of respect and collaboration, even when assuming different positions during negotiation procedures.

This case highlights the ambivalences that characterise the relationship between domestic workers’ and housewives’ organisations. On the one hand, they can be regarded as allies, inasmuch as they both seek the valorisation of domestic work, while on the other hand, particularly when negotiating bargaining agreements, they assume opposite positions and defend confrontational interests. At the same time, far from being antagonistic, these positions sometimes overlap. In this sense, the LAC-Uy not only gave indirect support to domestic workers by participating in the wage councils, thus making the negotiation possible, but also provided direct support by agreeing with the main claim of domestic workers – the need to be recognised as workers with rights – helping them achieve better wages and working conditions.

5. “From Different Universes”: Housewives and Domestic Workers in Paraguay

The organisational process of domestic workers in Paraguay was quite different. Without strong support from the government and immersed in a social context marked by the weakness and high fragmentation of the labour movement, they started to organise with the help of a feminist NGO that was working on ILO (International Labour Organisation) and UN-WOMEN funded projects. Even if, with time, national trade unions and the government started to support domestic workers’ struggle for more rights, the resulting process was much slower, more fragmented and less positive compared to the Uruguayan experience. In this regard, the first organisation of this decade emerged in 2008, and by 2012, two more were created. In 2015, a new law for domestic workers was passed in Paraguay – nine years after Uruguay – and the results were not as good, since domestic workers were still suffering from legal discrimination: The minimum wage for the sector was set at only 60 percent of the minimum wage for other activities.¹⁰

Unlike the Uruguayan case, an actor that publicly opposed the new law was the *Liga de Amas de Casa del Paraguay* (LAC-Py), the Paraguayan Housewives’ Organisation. Their main objection was to the increase in the minimum wage for domestic workers (which went from 40 percent of the legal minimum wage to 60 percent). When asked about the reason for opposing this, a representative of the LAC-Py told me that since

¹⁰ This legal discrimination was finally overcome in June 2019, after years of struggle by organised domestic workers.

most domestic workers lack previous working experience, it would be unfair to pay a minimum wage to those “that know absolutely nothing”.

Although the aim of the LAC-Py is the same as that of the homonymous group in Uruguay – getting retirement rights for housewives – they do not see the demands of domestic workers as an integral part of their own struggle. As one of the actors that took part at the negotiation table for the new regulation of domestic work puts it:

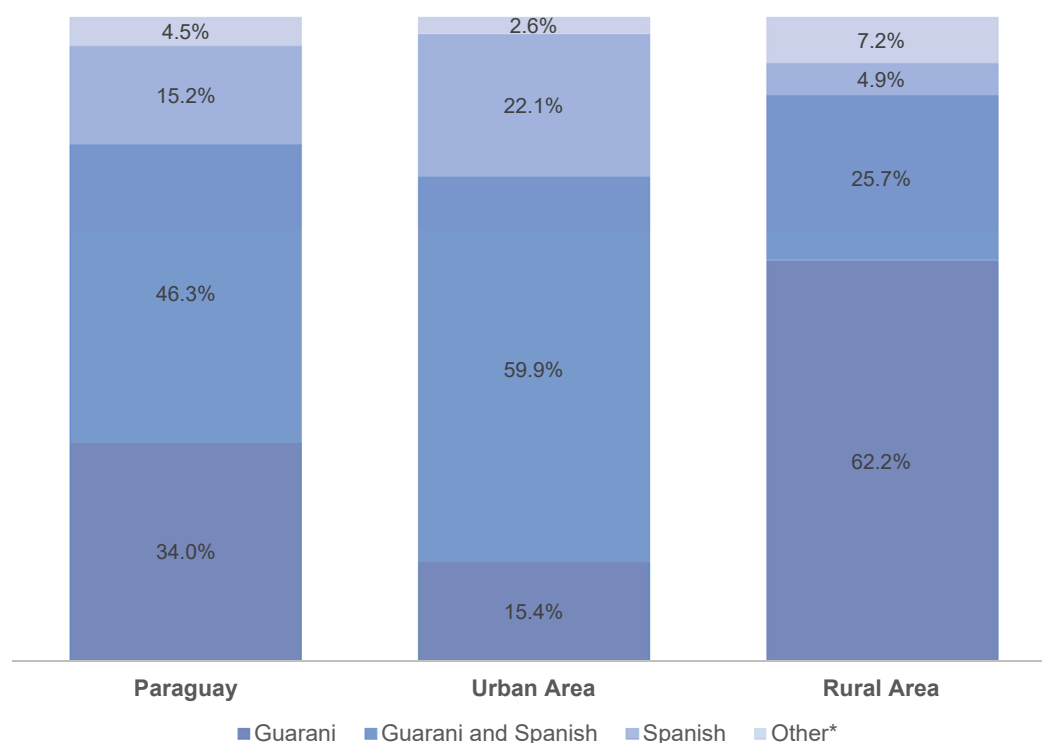
The housewives’ organisation has an interest that is very close to what the workers want to achieve, which is the recognition of unpaid domestic work, its valorisation, and even receiving a pension. But it is still very difficult for them to see the similarities. [...] First we would have to change class and ethnic conceptions. Because here in Paraguay class divides go hand in hand with ethnic ones. And even when visually it is not ... let’s say that it is a very particular country because visually the differences are not as strong as for example in Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala or Mexico. [...] But here, I don’t know, some people don’t want to hear Guarani in their homes (representative of a multilateral organisation).

This quotation approaches the issue from different angles. On the one hand, it establishes a relation between class position and ethnic affiliation, which is common when analysing domestic work. On the other hand, it draws attention to the way in which ethnic differences are expressed in Paraguay, not so much related to phenotypic traits, but rather to cultural ones, the spoken language being one of its main indicators.

On this point, it is pertinent to make some clarifications about the importance and many contradictions that characterise the use of the Guarani language in Paraguay. Although the indigenous population in the country is less than 2% of the total population,¹¹ the percentage of Paraguayans who speak Guarani – either as their only language or in combination with Spanish – is more than 80% (see Figure 1). This means that speaking Guarani (an indigenous language) does not correspond directly with being identified – by oneself or by others – as having indigenous descent. As this figure also shows, Guarani is the predominant language in rural areas, while Spanish is spoken in a greater proportion in urban areas.

11 According to the III National Population and Housing Census for Indigenous Peoples of Paraguay, carried out in 2012 by the DGEEC (Spanish acronym for General Direction of Survey, Statistics and Census), the indigenous population in the country represents 1.8% of the total population.

Figure 1: Predominant Language Spoken at Home, According to Area of Residence (Urban/Rural)

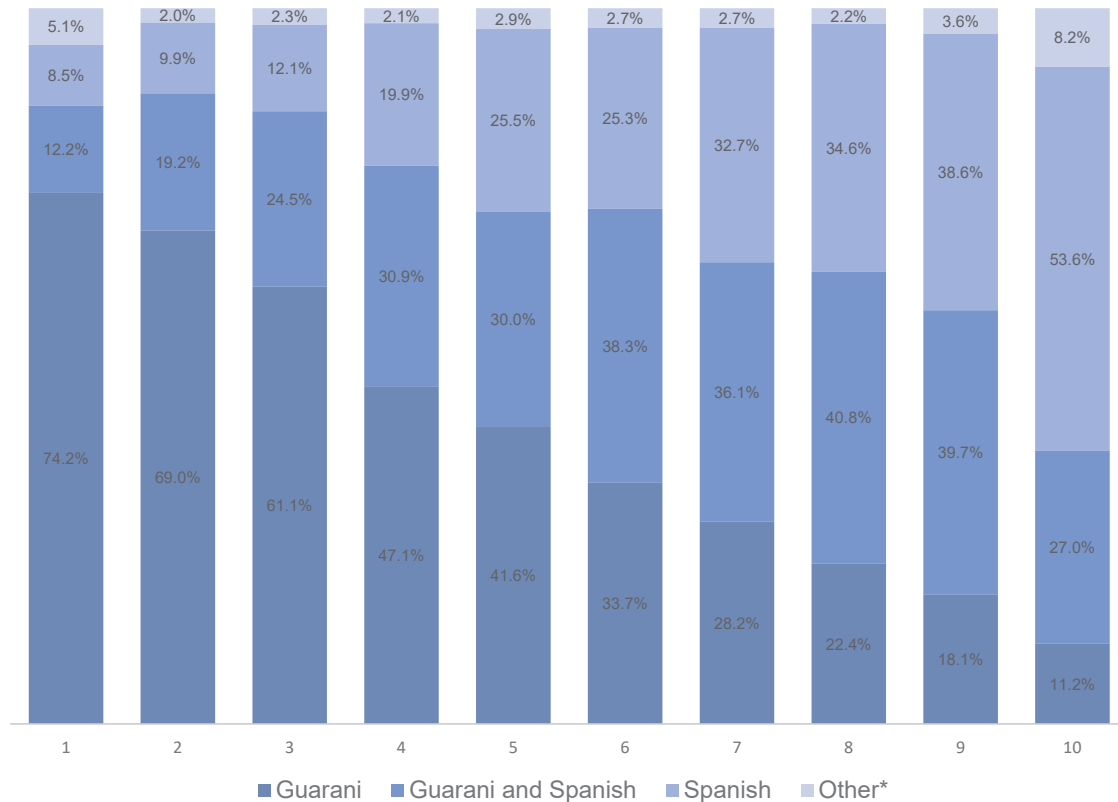


* Includes indigenous language, other language, and no reply.

Source: STP/DGEEC, Censo de Población y Viviendas, 2012.

Furthermore, the use of these languages is not only related to geographical differences: Class divides are intertwined with linguistic ones (see Figure 2). This does not mean that Guarani is the cause of poverty, but there is an important correlation between spoken language and opportunities for upward social mobility. In this sense, being a Guarani speaker means being excluded from the highest levels of education, quality education at all levels, as well as from better paid jobs (Ortiz Sandoval 2012).

Figure 2: Predominant Language Spoken at Home, According to Income Decile (from Poorest to Richest)



* Includes indigenous language, other language, and no reply.

Source: Compilation based on data from EPH 2017

Regarding the population of domestic workers in Paraguay, three quarters of them declare speaking Guarani, either as their sole language (30%) or in combination with Spanish (46%). However, these data do not show the idiomatic change that many of them must undergo when migrating from rural areas – where the main language is Guarani – to work in urban homes, where Spanish is spoken almost exclusively. This often generates a situation in which the worker is even more unprotected because she has not mastered the linguistic codes of this new environment and, consequently, is unable to negotiate better working conditions or resolve conflicts that may arise. In the words of one domestic worker:

The thing is that as domestic workers we are nothing, nobody for them [the employers]. I left my home when I was 15 years old. I am from the countryside, and my problem then was that I couldn't speak Spanish well. I mean, I didn't

even understand it. It wasn't just that I couldn't speak it well because, honestly, until today sometimes I still struggle to do so. At that time, I didn't understand many things and they [the employers] had to repeat everything to me many times ... Moreover, I wasn't allowed to speak because they didn't want their kids to hear me speaking Guarani, since they thought that that was going to hinder their development (Representative of a domestic workers' organisation).

The issue of the different languages is also addressed by the representative of the housewives, especially to mark a contrast with the Uruguayan experience.

In Uruguay, they had a different process. And do you know what was different? The literacy process. I think everyone, everyone in Uruguay is literate. In addition, they don't have the duplicity of the language, the rural question, the two languages. So, they don't have the problem that we would have here with a monolingual Guarani speaker signing a contract, for example. They wouldn't have that problem (Representative LAC-Py).

Being literate is interpreted as synonymous with being a Spanish speaker, while it is assumed that Guarani speakers are illiterate, come from the countryside, and "know absolutely nothing" (words of the interviewee). It is noteworthy that these assumptions stem from a specific historical configuration that, since Spanish colonialism, created a hierarchical system in which the Spanish ethnic group assumes a higher position in the social structure regarding political, cultural, socioeconomic and symbolic dimensions. In this vein, the contrast between urban and rural origins, between Spanish and Guarani speakers, appears many times in the discourse of the representative of the LAC-Py, indicating how important it is for explaining why housewives and domestic workers are different. Thus, contrary to what I pointed out in the previous case, employers and workers are seen as belonging not only to different groups, but to different "universes":

The law did not take into account the socio-anthropological-linguistic situation of the universes in question: employers and workers (Representative LAC-Py).

Drawing on differences of geographical origin and spoken language, the representative of the LAC-Py builds a barrier that permanently separates one group from the other, attributing specific cultural characteristics to each one that are translated, in turn, into a different work ethic:

Nowadays, most people don't work as live-in anymore. And the next day, they just don't show up. And if you ask them why they didn't come to work, they tell you: "Oh, because it rained and the road was wet; it rained and the bus did not come – or – my neighbor died – that's the common one – my neighbor died and I had to help his wife", and so on. It's just absolute irresponsibility! This lack of responsibility towards work, which is a cultural thing, it's totally cultural. And it's

those things, the cultural-anthropological part, I say, that were not considered in the new law. The anthropological or cultural issues related to the situation of the rural class were not taken into account (Representative LAC-Py).

Although culture as a basis for ethno-racial differentiation is more diffuse and difficult to demarcate than phenotypic traits, it is equally effective in establishing boundaries and demarcations between groups. What is more, the distinction between culture and nature is many times blurred, as in the case of the previous quote that assumes that, by the mere fact of coming from rural areas, domestic workers behave in a certain way: irresponsibly towards their obligations. In fact, both elements – cultural and biological – are symbolic constructions used in certain socio-political circumstances as a criterion for definition and delimitation of human groups (Stolcke 2000: 41). In this case, the difference between groups is perceived with such intensity that it does not allow housewives to recognise the similarities of their demands with those of domestic workers.

6. Overcoming Differences ... or Legitimising Inequalities?

Housewives' organisations in Uruguay and Paraguay assume opposite positions towards domestic workers' claims. While the Uruguayan organisation recognises both groups – housewives and domestic workers – as taking part in the same struggle as women whose work is invisible and undervalued, Paraguayan housewives not only do not see this commonality, but view workers and employers as belonging to “different universes”. In this section I argue that even when differences between groups can be found in both cases, the way these are articulated differ, resulting either in the creation of more inclusive categories that could help overcome inequalities, or in the production of symbolic boundaries that foster a deeper reproduction of asymmetrical relations.

Differences are normally used to classify, organise and create boundaries between categories, defining groups and creating hierarchies. However, categories are culturally and symbolically produced (Reygadas 2018), which means that the same traits can be read differently depending on the context. For instance, even though for an external observer there may not be remarkable differences between Paraguayan housewives and domestic workers – in terms of citizenship or “race” in its most phenotypic sense – other elements such as place of origin and cultural identity have a symbolic impact that separates them and affects their relationship to each other. Inequalities in turn are generated and justified by way of difference (Reygadas 2018: 150). Regardless of the trait or criterion used for separating the groups, once the difference is constructed, symbolic processes interact with mechanisms which discriminate, inferiorise and

segregate those marked as 'different', creating inequality by producing barriers to desirable goods and positions (Motta, Jelin and Costa 2018: 10).

As we saw, drawing on differences regarding place of origin (rural/urban area), spoken language (Guarani/Spanish) or educational level, employers in Paraguay attribute a different culture and work ethic to domestic workers, constructing a stereotyped image of them and configuring their social inferiority. By doing so, they justify the undervaluation of the work performed by these women, while reinforcing their class identity. It is through this discursive articulation of differences (Costa 2019a) and the construction of social stereotypes of inferiority of domestic workers that employers legitimise their dominant position with respect to social hierarchies (see also Gorbán and Tizziani 2014).

That said, it must be highlighted that while the identification of difference enables inequality, it does not automatically create it (Reygadas 2018: 150). The relation between difference and inequality is contingent and empirical (Brubaker 2015: 11). As the Uruguayan case shows, housewives are able – at least discursively and/or as a political strategy – to identify themselves with domestic workers and their claims, overcoming class differences and (at least temporarily) dissolving the boundaries between them. But while class asymmetries are present in both cases, in Paraguay ethnic or cultural differences also play a major role.¹² In fact, as pointed out in the previous section, social class and cultural identity – expressed mainly through language – are two categories that are deeply intertwined in the Paraguayan context. This example shows how racial or ethnic characteristics operate as a barrier for the recognition of similarities, leaving an image of “difference” between housewives and domestic workers. The symbolic charge of some ethnic traits, intertwined with class affiliations, proves to be particularly strong. Thus, differences are articulated in order to (re)produce inequality, building and maintaining highly asymmetrical convivial models in which domestic workers' struggles, far from fostering solidarity, generate resistance because their success would imply employers losing the capacity to hire domestic work at an extremely low cost, consequently causing them to lose their higher position in the social structure.

The Uruguayan case, on the other hand, presents a more ambivalent situation. Although housewives support the main claim of domestic workers – the need to be recognised as workers with rights – their relation to each other is still marked by asymmetries. In this sense, even if, discursively, they overcome their differences and focus on their

¹² Racial differences are also present in Uruguay, but their incidence is lower. For instance, while 9% of the employed population in Uruguay identifies as Afro-descendant, this proportion rises to 15% when considering exclusively domestic workers. However, even if the Afro-descendant population is overrepresented among domestic workers, when looking at the sector as a whole, this is not the most predominant characteristic (see Batthyány 2012).

similarities as women that perform an activity that has been historically undervalued, the mere existence of domestic workers presupposes the existence of employers who, as highlighted earlier, assume a higher position in society. In fact, unequal and contrasting positions are the basis of labour relations. However, by recognizing that domestic workers do deserve rights and accepting the intermediation of the state in their relations, inequalities were negotiated and the asymmetries between the groups could be reduced.

When analysing convivial relations around domestic work, most studies prioritise – as a point of departure for their analysis – the *intimate* sphere of the household, where employers and domestic workers interact on an everyday basis (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2011; Wasser 2018). The cases presented in this paper, on the other hand, focus on relations at a collective or organisational level, switching the focus to political and legal arenas and the public sphere. By doing so, the intention was to shift the centrality normally conferred to daily relations when the concept of conviviality is discussed, contributing to its analysis in terms of macrostructural social relations (Costa 2019b: 27).

7. Concluding Remarks

Housewives and domestic workers not only interact at an interpersonal level, within the domestic sphere. They also constitute collective actors that seek influence at a political and legal level, taking part in public debates about public policies. In this respect, they tend to share interest in the valorization of domestic work and the recognition of rights to those who perform domestic duties, either for a wage or “for love”. However, despite these commonalities, there are differences that distance these groups and their experiences, adding tension to their relations. This paper sought to discuss how the articulation of differences and the meaning attached to them could result in the further reproduction and legitimization of inequalities or instead could help reduce asymmetries. In this vein, the case studies showed that although housewives’ organisations in Uruguay and Paraguay were created with the same objective, they assume opposite positions towards domestic workers’ claims.

As I have discussed in the paper, women have different experiences of housework, mediated by class specificities and ethnic-racial origin which produce entanglements in which one category influences the other, and vice versa. Migrant, poor and Guaraní speaker describes most Paraguayan domestic workers. The crystallization of these axes of stratification in their experience not only affects the position they assume in the social structure at the socioeconomic or political level but is also discursively used to legitimise the unequal treatment they receive. In this respect, the enunciation of

differences by the representative of the LAC-Py is nothing more than the discursive articulation of social inequalities (Costa 2019a) that leads, ultimately, to their naturalization.

In the Uruguayan case, on the other hand, class differences did not represent a barrier to the identification of similarities between housewives and domestic workers, and ethnic or racial differences were not even mentioned. The interest in valorising domestic work was greater, helping them to bridge their differences and act, to a certain extent, as allies. The sociopolitical characteristics of the local context might have also played a role in this. In that respect, the Uruguayan political culture is based on cooperation and inclusion over ruptures and divisions, as expressed by the tradition of “unity in diversity”,¹³ at the foundation of the workers’ movement. This differs greatly from the Paraguayan case.¹⁴ In any case, this joint work helped domestic workers gain labour rights, while at the same time revitalised the role of the housewives’ organisation, which before its involvement in the wage council was barely known within Uruguay.

The case studies showed empirically how the articulation of differences is intertwined with disputes over inequality, and in particular, how in more “racialised” contexts differences are used to legitimise and naturalise inequalities around domestic work. In this sense, and in line with the entangled inequalities perspective, the inclusion of a further axis of stratification (race/ethnicity) in Paraguay translates into a more complex entanglement, adding yet another barrier that needs to be overcome for the recognition of similarities between groups.

Whether at an interpersonal level, through everyday interactions, or on a collective scale, in political and legal arenas, domestic workers and housewives engage in processes of negotiation and resignification of their social positions and cultural identifications, leading in turn to the negotiation of differences and disputes over social inequalities. As I have sought to highlight with these examples, the way differences and inequalities are articulated could result either in more cooperative or more conflictual relations, and consequently, in more horizontal or more asymmetrical ways of living together.

13 “*Unidad en la diversidad*” is the motto of the PIT-CNT, the Uruguayan national trade confederation. See <https://www.pitcnt.uy/novedades/noticias/item/2580-para-quien-va-con-nosotros>; <https://www.facebook.com/notes/pit-cnt-oficial/finaliz%C3%B3-un-gran-congreso-de-la-unidad-en-la-diversidad/2055803548010987/>; and Padrón and Wachendorfer (2017).

14 Unlike Uruguay, the Paraguayan labor movement is extremely fragmented. For a country with a working population of around 3,5 million people (DGEEC 2017), from which only 6.7% are union members (data from ILOSTAT 2015, www.ilo.org/ilostat), there are nine national trade union confederations.

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Contact

Coordination Office
Maria Sybilla Merian International Centre for Advanced
Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences
Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America

Rua Morgado de Mateus, 615
São Paulo – SP
CEP 04015-051
Brazil

mecila@cebrap.org.br

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