

**THE HOUSEHOLD AS A WORKPLACE:  
The Articulation of Class and Gender in  
Filipino Middle Class Households\***

**Mary Alice P. Gonzalez-Rosero\*\***

*Abstract*

*Every society depends on household work for its reproduction, yet household work is one of the most undervalued work. It is often placed at the bottom-most rung in the hierarchy of human occupations.*

*This paper examines the development of household work in Philippine society, and tries to pinpoint the socio-economic political-cultural factors that may have brought about its present evolution.*

**BRIEF HISTORY OF DOMESTIC SERVICE  
IN THE PHILIPPINES**

**The Pre-Colonial Period**

The earliest known household workers can be found in 16th century pre-Hispanic Philippine society in the persons of alipin sa gigilid,<sup>1</sup> which the Spanish colonizers loosely trans-

\*Revised version of a paper presented during the 4th General Assembly and National Conference of the Women's Studies Association of the Philippines on April 14-16, 1999 at Miriam College, Katipunan Road, Quezon City.

\*\*A faculty member of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, and Assistant to the Vice President for Research and Development, she finished her Master of Arts in Women and Development at the Institute of Social Studies at the Hague, The Netherlands and her bachelor's degree in Anthropology at the University of the Philippines.

lated as “slaves.” (Scott 1992: 90) These “slaves” (both male and female), often unmarried, lived in the master’s house and were fed and clothed by him. They rendered service both inside the household — as servants — and outside — as swidden field workers or as the master’s companions in war.<sup>2</sup> The labor of the *alipin sa gigilid* belonged to the master, except for one day in which s/he could work for herself/himself or spend for leisure.

Those who became *alipin sa gigilid* were either war captives, or debtors who could not pay their debts, or were born in the master’s house by slave parents. Some of the *alipin sa gigilid* were only one-half or three-quarters or one-quarter slaves, such that it would be easy for them to be released after working off their debts. The war captives, specially aliens, could also be used as human sacrifices in the Visayas islands. The master had the right to sell the *alipin sa gigilid*, although he seldom did; at most he transferred their debts to other creditors. Those born in the master’s house were often suckled and raised together with the master’s children and given their own house when they married.<sup>3</sup> At such time they rendered only part time service to the master. (Scott 1994)

The “masters” could be the *datu* (local chieftains), the *timawas* (persons not bonded to anyone but were called upon by the *datu* in times of war), or even another “slave” (perhaps an *aliping namamahay* to whom one “slave” owed something.

In this 16th century society, the land, forests, and rivers were not owned by anyone, although a *datu* (community or kin group leader) would administer their use. Labor was among the most important commodities that were bought and sold, and extensively negotiated. While most historians believe that sexual division of labor existed in pre-Hispanic Philippines (Scott 1994), it is unclear where the demarcation line was. There was no clear division between productive

and reproductive<sup>4</sup> tasks; both men and women were engaged in work in the swidden fields and homes — e.g., clearing the fields, planting, weeding, harvesting, childcare, cooking, fetching fuel firewood, fetching water, tending the vegetable garden, raising pigs and chickens, etc. — although it is said that women did more reproductive tasks than men. (Eviota 1992: 34) Both sexes were also engaged in artisan work. Both sexes could own and administer their own properties and inheritance was usually primogeniture, i.e., the eldest inherited slightly more than the next offspring. Because of the unclear line that separates productive and reproductive tasks, domestic service as we know today, was not particularly prevalent although “slaves” who performed household tasks, besides working in the swidden fields, did exist.

### The Spanish Colonial Period

Domestic service took its present form during the Spanish colonial period of Philippine history. Household workers were employed by the Spanish *conquistadores*, the Spanish *mestizos* (half Spanish, half Filipino), the *principalia* (native ruling elite), the *ilustrados* (middle class educated Filipinos) and later, by the rising Chinese merchant capitalists.

Each employing household had more than one domestic worker, each with his/her own specific task. A usual retinue of household workers included a *mayordomo* (butler or head servant), a *costurera* (seamstress) and/or a personal maid (*criada*) to the mistress; a gardener or coolie who would carry bath water; *cochero* (coachman); *cocinero* (cook); about two *muchachos* (houseboys) who ran errands, lighted the lamps, pulled the *punkah* (big ceiling fan), and cleaned the house; and in even richer households, a laundrywoman. (Camagay 1995: 53) Except for the seamstress/ personal maid to the

mistress and the laundrywoman, the rest of the household staff were males.

The average salary of an adult *criada* in Manila was two to three pesos a month in 1892, equivalent to the salary of the *muchachos*. Those working for households in the outskirts of Manila or in the countryside, received less. Minors (15 years old and below) were also hired with the written permission of their parents/guardians. These household workers were literally at the beck and call of their employers. Regular days-off were unheard of, but they could, with permission, attend their family functions occasionally.

An 1852 document listed the names of the household workers in the then city of Manila, including their ages and their employers' names. This document was a result of the law that household workers should be registered with the *guardia civil* (police). Employers were encouraged to hire only registered household workers, and were fined five pesos if found to be violating this law. The law was for the protection of the employer, as household workers were often reported leaving without permission. Missing houseworkers were often accused of stealing or still owing the employer some money from cash advances. There were also complaints from *criadas* who reported having been physically or verbally beaten or sexually harassed. (Camagay 1995: 54-55)

Domestic service during the Spanish colonial regime, was a feature only among the propertied classes. These classes became well defined when the Spanish colonial government restructured the local economies away from self-provisioning towards the expanded production of specific products for global export, e.g., tobacco, abaca, sugar, and copra. This policy led to increased social differentiation between the propertied classes and the peasant and labouring classes. With the expansion of the material base of the propertied classes, the

women were no longer needed in any production activity as the men took over the management of production. Thus, the women of the propertied classes were withdrawn from the public sphere and their behavior and sexuality were more strictly circumscribed to ensure the legitimate paternity of would-be heirs. (Eviota 1992: 60-61) Concomitant to this withdrawal from public life came the strengthening of the ideology of familialism.

The ideology centered on the extension of women's procreative functions to women's responsibility for the home: women were not only child-bearers, they were also child-rearers, husband-carers, housekeepers, and overall system-maintainers. This social definition of women was encapsulated in the phrase 'woman's place is in the home'. (Eviota 1992: 14)

The expansion of the material base of the propertied classes and the stark separation between productive and reproductive work with its concomitant sexual division of labor strengthened by the ideology of familialism, kept the women in their homes and allowed them the luxury of employing a retinue of servants. These household workers were recruited from the peasant class, who were in turn displaced by the restructuring of the economy to expand the production of cash crops for export.

However, for most of the labouring women (except for the wage workers in select regions) who generally lived a subsistence way of life, there was hardly any distinction between productive and reproductive tasks. Subsistence farming, domestic handicraft production (such as weaving), and household tasks were all integrated together. The demand for increased agricultural production meant that women (as well as men) have to put in more work on the farm. Children became important labor reserves, both in the household and in the farms, and the pressure to produce more family la-

bor, i.e., more children, put further burdens on the peasant woman.

### **The American Colonial Period**

Domestic service increased during the American colonial period which began in 1901. It is interesting to note that the 1903 census showed that of the 571,955 persons employed in the sector of "family and personal services"<sup>5</sup>, 24.58% were women, (Gealogo 1995: 48) The number of women employed in family and personal services rose in 1918 to 72.05% and 96.45% in 1939.

The changes in the configuration of male and female workers in the service sector need to be seen in the context of the socio-economic changes that took place under the American colonial period. In the very early years of American rule, a huge majority of the work force was in agriculture and factory production was on a limited scale. The majority of men farmed and fished while women farmed, traded and wove. In Manila, women workers were in the cigar factories, the weavers in textile factories, and in the service sector.

As the American colonial period progressed, much of the major means of production, i.e., land, went out of the control of small farmers. Women's share in farm work increased, but as wage workers or as unpaid workers. They were either lowly paid wage workers in cash-crop plantations, e.g. sugar, coconut, and tobacco, or unpaid workers in staple-crop farms, e.g., rice and corn, as they were part of tenant families and their labor was subsumed under the labor of their farmer-husband. The then modernizing sector in the urban areas absorbed much male labor. The textile industry which used to employ a lot of women as weavers, brought in more mechanical mills so that it can be more competitive in the world

market. This change resulted in the preferential hiring of men, thus displacing female labor.

As changes in the agricultural and manufacturing sector continued to displace women, women either entered the service sector, specifically domestic service, or were forced to become “unproductive” housewives. With capitalist expansion taking roots in Philippine economy, the ideology of ‘woman’s place’ increasingly took roots among the working class. The separation between home and workplace, between reproductive and productive work, between woman’s and man’s place, became more defined. Women’s role in reproducing the labour force<sup>6</sup> was emphasized and women were put in situations where they were dependent on male incomes<sup>7</sup>. Towards the end of the American colonial period, a large number of women were found to be primarily engaged as housewives.

At the same time, the imposed American system of education resulted in a public life for a number of upper and middle class women. Women were educated as well as men, albeit in a limited number of fields such as teaching, nursing, pharmacy, and secretarial work. Their entry into the public life (when they practiced their professions) created an added demand for household workers in situations where there was not enough female kin support to do household work.

In summary, domestic service as a distinct type of work attributed to a particular class and gender did not come about until the Spanish colonial period. While there was the appropriation of the labor of indebted persons and prisoners of war by the *datu* and *timawa* classes (and sometimes by other “slaves” as well), there was no distinction between productive and reproductive work, so that no specific group was assigned the prime responsibility for household work. The “slaves” did both productive and reproductive work, although

it was deduced that the “slaves” and women did more reproductive work than the *datus*, *timawas* and men in general.

Household work clearly began as a class-based occupation during the Spanish colonial period, with the separation of productive and reproductive work in areas that produced cash crop for export. This led to the rise of the propertied classes and further distinguished them from the toiling masses. But even with the institution of the ideology of familialism, which made women primarily responsible for reproductive work, paid household work did not become ‘women’s occupation’ until the early American period which pulled men away from paid houseworking into the manufacturing sector.

The American colonial period inherited the ideology of familialism and domesticity and further intensified this separation of productive and reproductive work. With the mechanization of industries, together with the extension of the ideology of familialism to defining women’s jobs outside the home, the women of the working classes were forced out of their former jobs in the factories and pushed into occupations that were deemed appropriate to women’s reproductive functions. Thus, many women workers were forced to become “unproductive” housewives dependent on the male income, or to occupy the jobs left by men in the service sector, specifically domestic service, or fill in the labour gap left by women who opted to enter a profession outside of the home and who can afford to pay for domestic help.

## **DOMESTIC SERVICE IN CONTEMPORARY PHILIPPINE URBAN MIDDLE CLASS HOUSEHOLDS**

### **The Socio-Economic Context of Domestic Service**

When the United States gave back the political independence of the Philippines in 1946, it imposed a free-trade



relation between the two countries. This relationship resulted in the flooding of the Philippine market with American goods and draining the former of its foreign reserves. To control this, the Philippine government imposed import-export exchange controls in the 1950's which allowed a limited amount of industrialization to take place in selected sectors of the economy. This opened employment opportunities to a few workers, most of whom were men.

Meanwhile, the rural sector was beset by the expanding labor force and shrinking available land. In the 1950's about two-thirds of the rural population was landless and the country was threatened by a growing armed peasant rebellion. Eviota described the impoverished situation of the country:

In 1956, the richest 20 per cent of the population owned 55.1 per cent of the nation's wealth, the lowest 20 per cent, 4.5 per cent; by 1971, there had been little change: the richest 20 per cent still owned 53.9 per cent of the wealth, the lowest 20 per cent, now only 3.8 per cent. The decrease in the share of the poorest households was particularly pronounced among rural families. (Eviota 1992: 80)

As shift in economic policy occurred in the 1960's and emphasis was placed on external markets. The government adopted an export-oriented, import-dependent policy and kept the wages low to attract transnational investment. Lowly paid women workers figured prominently in the export-oriented industrialization programme of the government because of this policy, the economy became vulnerable to fluctuations in world economy, such that deficits in balance of payments turned from bad to worse. To cover the deficits, the government found it necessary to borrow heavily from international financial institutions.

In the rural areas from the 1960's to the 1970's there was a shift in the labor of women and men from unpaid work-

ers and farm operators respectively, to wage workers. This was brought about by the penetration of foreign capital into agriculture and the drive towards increased productivity. Farming households that were eased out of the market by competition and their inability to meet cash outlays, lost their small landholdings and became agricultural wage workers. Those who were still able to hang on to their small lands, had husbands working for inadequate wages and wives cultivating the small plots of land for the family's subsistence. While trends in these years showed a decrease in agricultural employment, the work intensified. Women specially, not only devoted more time to agricultural work but also performed added numbers of tasks as more men left to take on non-agricultural employment.

By 1975, the men had succeeded in edging out a large number of women workers in traditionally women industries such as the garments industry. At the same time, however, the number of women workers in manufacturing increased, specially in the electronics, food and food processing industries — industries that are labor-intensive and geared for export. These are the industries concentrated in the export processing zones — special enclaves of foreign-owned factories that are exempted from implementing labor protection laws on minimum wage and right to organize. As a whole however, male employment tended to be favored in the export-oriented industrialization programme of the government. In 1975, a high 78% of manufacturing workers were men. The informal sector absorbed the surplus female labor. The decline in the number of female agricultural workers during this decade, was matched by the increase in the number of women entering the service sector. And domestic service drew the largest number of women.

What we have is an overall picture of a society struggling to survive in a situation of dependency on foreign capital and always at the mercy of global market forces. Severely limited economic production occurs in the urban areas causing high unemployment. At the backdrop is a huge stagnant agricultural sector producing armies of landless peasants. And woven into these is a culture that proscribes the supporting roles of women in relation to men and relegates them into the hidden private sphere and pulled out only in times of war, and spurts of economic activities, to take on jobs left by men.

### **A General Situationer of Household Workers<sup>8</sup>**

A survey (1988) conducted by the (Philippine) Bureau of Women and Young Workers (BWYW)<sup>9</sup> on 481 “child domestic helpers”<sup>10</sup> in Metro Manila showed that 96% came from low income, large rural families. 93.2% of these child household workers are female. 65.3% were employed by middle class households. The BWYW survey also mentioned that a large number of the respondents (30.6%) graduated from elementary but did not start high school, (38.5%) started high school but did not finish, and only 11.2% finished high school. A small number (6.4%) are being sent to school by their employers.

Middle class households recruit their household workers directly from the rural areas, usually through a network of kins, townmates, friends, and former household workers. Potential household workers are young, falling within the range of 15 to 25 years old, and unmarried. They are the daughters of agricultural workers, tenant farmers or small leaseholding peasants, with a huge family. They have usually finished elementary schooling and may even have a year or two of high school education. (Palabrica-Costelo 1984: 241)

As many of these young women have lived all their lives in their rural barrios<sup>11</sup> and have not even seen the Big City, the prospect of going to Metro Manila to work is both exciting and scary for them. Parents also have to be assured that their daughters will be safe, so that successful recruiters are often kins or trusted barriomates. The usual practice is that the prospective employer pays for the new recruits' bus fares to Manila, with the deal that they pay back the employer if they leave their employ before one year is up.

Middle class households usually employ one to two workers. Among wage workers, household workers are the lowest paid. The legislated wage<sup>12</sup> of a household worker in Metro Manila is P1,000 a month<sup>13</sup> with SSS (social security system) coverage, free board and lodging, one day-off per week, and a 13th month pay at the end of every year of service. However, it is not uncommon to find household workers, specially those who just arrived from their rural barrios, receiving P600 to P800 a month, with the promise of an increase after a few months.

The 1988 BWYW survey of child household workers found that their mean average monthly pay was P979.21. There were 21 children (0.04%) who were not receiving any salary but were being sent to school with their employers paying for their education expenses. There were also 20 children (0.04%) who were "bonded-off", i.e., their parents or guardians have already received advance payment from the employers for an average period of six months.

In violation of the law on payment of SSS, most household workers do not have social security. This is usually with the consent of the worker herself, as she would not want to further decrease her wage by paying her share of SSS no matter how small. Regular days-off are also not very common, but in situations where the household worker does not get a

regular weekly day-off, she could avail of it by getting a number of consecutive days or weeks off several times a year to visit her family in her rural hometown. And at times, her transportation fares are provided.

One final element that goes in the remuneration of household workers is the board and lodging provided. In many middle class households, there is no separate food for the household worker. Household workers eat the same kind of food as their employers. Lodgings are often within the house or apartment, either a separate bedroom near the kitchen, or sharing the bedroom of the female children (but the household worker sleeps on the floor), or they may not have their own room at all and sleep in the living room. Bathroom and toilet facilities are often shared with their employers.

Household workers perform a variety of tasks, e.g., cleaning, cooking, marketing, laundry, ironing, and childcare, although one or two tasks are deemed her major responsibility. It is also possible that more tasks are added, e.g., running errands, gardening, etc., when the employer sees that the worker has "extra" time. (Rollins 1985; Laguerre 1990; Armstrong 1990) Sometimes, when the worker is deemed capable, other non-household-related tasks, such as "tutoring" the children, are also assigned.

Because the household worker's home and "workplace is the home of others where a family not her own lives and consumes and with whom she cohabits in a socially inferior status," she may find herself in a situation wherein she sacrifices her chances for a private life. (Galvez and Todaro 1989: 311) There is no distinction between her working time and her own leisure time, often resulting in long, irregular working hours. She is on call during her whole waking time. Even though she may not be actually working at certain times of the day, she should make herself available in case her employ-

ers need her. In some cases, she may even be awakened in the middle of the night to perform a service.

Isolation from workers in other households is also a characteristic of domestic service. Employers often do not approve of household workers spending time just talking with other household workers or with persons the former do not know. I think one reason behind this prohibition is that the employer feels like she is paying for the "talking time" of her employee. Another reason is the fear that the household worker, ignorant of the tactics of con persons, might unknowingly give out schedules and other information that could compromise the security of the household.

A third reason is to "protect" the household worker herself, from having a relationship with a man — a relationship that could end up either with the worker left pregnant or the employer left without a household worker. This is the same reason cited by Sanjek (1990: 44) behind employers' prohibition of sexual encounters of their "maid servants" in neo-colonial Ghana.

Because of their lower class origins, their lack of education, ignorance of city life, and relative isolation, household workers are helpless in the face of abuse. Reprimands can easily graduate to verbal abuse when the employers are dissatisfied with their performance. Physical abuses in the form of slapping the face, pulling one's hair, and hitting, do happen. Cases of houseworkers not being fed properly, being locked up, and being subjected to sexual abuse are sometimes reported in the news. Among the factors that check the harsh treatment of household workers are kin pressure (Sanjek 1990: 42), or if the household worker is related to the employer, age of the houseworker relative to the employer (younger houseworkers are more prone to ill-treatment than older houseworkers), townmate pressure, the frequency of

the houseworker's contact with her own family, and neighborhood gossip.

Many formal business relations in the Philippines are still colored by kinship terms. In situations where actual kin relations are absent, they are invented. Thus, in many workplaces, there is usually a "mommy" or a "nanay", a "tatay" (father), a number of "titos" and "titas" (uncles and aunts), "manangs/ates" (elder sisters) and "manongs/kuyas" (elder brothers), and hordes of "kumpares" and "kumares" (co-god-fathers/godmothers). Such fictive kinship go beyond mere terms of address and sometimes define actual relations between individuals. It comes as no surprise then, to find this practice of inventing kin relations in more non-formal situations such as the middle class households. Thus, employers' children address houseworkers who are older than they are but younger than their parents as "ate" (elder sister) and "nanay. . ." (mother) followed by the worker's first name if the worker is almost the same age or older than the employers. Employers also address their older workers with terms of respect such as "manang. . ." (elder sister) or "aling. . ." (aunt) followed by the worker's first name. In reciprocal manner, workers address their female employers who are older than they are with "ate" or "tita", and sometimes, even "mommy" or "nanay". Male employers are addressed correspondingly. There are times, however when class status prevails over age differences.

While fictive kinship is used in many houseworking situations to extract more work from the houseworker, as in the case of telling the worker that "she is one of the family" (Rollins 1985: 215; Colen 1990: 102), an element of respect is actually attached to these terms of address when used by Filipino middle class employers.

In houseworking situations, class differences are constantly reenacted and reaffirmed. Rollins (1985) particularly cites

maternalism<sup>14</sup> and rituals of deference<sup>15</sup> as the expression of the differential status of employers and household workers. Colen (1990: 100) also cites the "asymmetrical relations" between employers and workers as the major cause of the non-reciprocal respect that characterizes paid house-working. While both writers are describing employer-houseworker relations in industrialized America, similar asymmetrical relations can be found in Filipino urban middle class households. It seems to me however, that there are less rituals of deference and other status differentiating behaviors that are in operation in middle class houseworking situations.

While houseworking relations are basically governed by the wage relationship characteristic of employer-labor relations, it is much more tempered by feudal reciprocity (see Kerkvliet 1977). It is this lingering feudal relations — characterized by mutual reciprocity — embedded in the employer-houseworker relation, that enables me, for instance, to count on Aling Sabel to come in for a week at a time to train each new houseworker or to fill in for my houseworkers on long vacation or when I am in-between houseworkers — all for only a token fee. It is also this feudal relationship that made my mother pay for the university tuition of Aling Sabel's eldest daughter for two whole academic years (even though the latter did not work for us), and urged me to use my contacts to get this same daughter a clerical job in one NGO.

One final, yet very important point about houseworking is its gendered character. Despite the ideology of familialism and notions of 'woman's place', paid houseworking had not always been a 'woman's job'.<sup>16</sup> It was only when the men left paid houseworking to enter better-paying jobs created by the mechanization of traditional industries, e.g., the garment industry, and opening of other mechanized factories, that women went into the private homes to fill in the jobs left by



the men. The ideology of familialism and domesticity extended to the kinds of wage work women may enter. Historical, economic, political, and cultural factors have given houseworking not only its present class character, but also and specially its gender character.

It is not just paid housework, but domestic labor in general, that has a gender character. In many feminist writings (e.g., Williams 1988; Molyneux 1979; Garcia Castro 1989), the assignment of domestic labor — labor that is seen to be of no value — to women is seen as the concrete operation of patriarchy in the household. It represents Filipino women's subordinate position. The sexual division of labor has placed women in charge of domestic labor, and in situations where women with means cannot or will not do it, or need help in doing it, they are tasked with seeing to it that it is done — whether *with* the help of others or *by* others. It is this responsibility over domestic labor that is shared by Filipino women. But that is as far as the “gender unity” goes.

When the Filipino woman of means delegates housework to another Filipino woman of the displaced peasant class, she delegates not just actual houseworking tasks, but that part of her identity which she finds oppressed. She is attempting to free herself of this historically, culturally, economically and politically constructed oppression by leaving behind her “other self” (Pereira de Melo 1989: 260) so that she can go out (become visible) to do things “of value” (e.g. productive work) and realize her own personhood. In other words, domestic service serves to diffuse patriarchal conflict by pitting woman against woman in an institutionalized setting that gives one the leverage to exploit the other. Paradoxically however, the employing Filipino woman succeeds only in reinforcing the existing notions of ‘woman’s work’ and the sexual

division of labor, and furthering her own gender oppression by merely delegating domestic work to *another* woman. Instead of challenging the oppressive sexual division of labor, she merely deflects the immediate resultant tension (between husband and wife) by transferring the burden of domestic labor to *another woman*.

### **Exploitation of the Household Worker**

That household workers suffer from exploitation and oppression has been established with the above description of the houseworker's working conditions. However, to locate the houseworker's exploitation and oppression only within the employing household is to severely limit the scope of analysis. It is also important at this point, to mark out the boundaries within which exploitation and oppression is said to occur.

I do not use here the term "exploitation" in the Marxist sense, i.e., the use and control by one class over the surplus produced by another class, since the houseworker produces only use values that are directly consumed by the employing household. (Bottomore 1991: 183, 157) I use the term in its very general sense, i.e. the use of someone's labor or capacity for labor, for one's own advantage or profit.<sup>17</sup> Using this general definition, we can identify the points by which houseworkers are exploited and by whom (or by what). By this, I do not mean to say that the exploitation of houseworkers occurs in disjointed ways. On the contrary, gender and class articulate their exploitation and oppression of houseworkers.

Houseworkers are exploited when their labor is consumed by the employing household in exchange for a pittance. While the cumulative remuneration of houseworkers (in cash and

in kind) is enough to sustain herself, it is definitely not enough to sustain her family. Even though a large majority of them are young and unmarried, they send back their wages (or part of it) to their families to see a sibling through school or to tide the family over until the next agricultural hiring season. Palabrica-Costelo's comparative study (1984) of three occupational groups of urban migrant women, namely factory workers, small-scale service establishment workers, and household workers, found that the latter owned the least (almost none) number of desired consumer durables (e.g. watch, radio, shoulder bag, etc.) and had almost zero savings. In short, the household worker's earnings are so small that she would not be able to live decently if she were to spend for her own food and shelter.

Not only is the houseworker's labor exploited but also her status identity, as the employing household uses her not only as their status marker but also to enhance their own social status. This is among the findings of Rollins (1985), Davidoff (1973), and Schellekens and van der Schoot (1989). Garcia Castro goes even further and says that it is the houseworker's "identity as a person" that is bought by the *patrona* when she hires a houseworker to "serve her own family" (1989: 120-122).

Closely linked to the low wages that houseworkers receive is the (under) valuation of housework. One explanation for the undervaluation of housework is that it is seen as a low-skilled, even non-skilled job, and that women are *essentially* capable of doing it. Another explanation for the underevaluation of housework is the fact that it occurs within the *private* realm and therefore not even considered as real work.

As a whole however, I see the undervaluation of housework *in the context of* women's oppression. Even at the time when housework was predominantly done by men, there

already existed the differential wages between the sexes of the houseworkers, with adult women workers earning the same as young houseboys. It seems to me too, that when a type of job is taken over by women, it is devalued, as in the cases of teaching and secretarial work (which used to be "administrative work" when men dominated it). The undervaluation of a work occurs when men leave it, and women, considered the *reserve army of labor*, take over it. It is in this context of the sexual division of labor, strengthened by the notion of 'woman's place', that the undervaluation of housework occurs.

It is in this context too, that neo-marxists, such as Wally Secombe (1974) and Molyneux<sup>18</sup> (1979) but in a somewhat different sense, argued that capital does benefit from (and exploit) women doing housework (either for free or for pittance wages). While Secombe contends that it is capitalism that oppresses women and it is with its overthrow that women's oppression can end, Molyneux sees the articulation of both capitalism and patriarchy in the oppression of women in general and of housewives (and houseworkers) in particular.

As a whole, I locate the exploitative conditions of household workers in the present socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of society, which have been shaped by historical forces. Thus, household workers are exploited by virtue of their class and gender, which are in turn shaped by historical, socio-economic, political and cultural forces. To summarize: The slow pace of industrialization, coupled with (or related to) the stagnation of the agricultural sector, led to the growth of a huge reserve army of women's labor. This, strengthened by the ideology of familialism and notion of women's place, directed women into jobs that are considered low-skilled (e.g., housework), extensions of women's reproductive and male-supporting functions (e.g., teaching, nurs-

ing), adapted to women's "natural" capabilities (e.g., nimble fingers and a huge store of patience for repetitive tasks), and consequently, low-paid. In addition, articulating with gender is the class factor which allows some women to transfer the expression of their gender oppression (in this case, house-keeping) to other women of a lower class, usually of the peasant class. This now forms a whole subsector of women workers caught in between the two (usually considered) distinct spheres of paid work and private home. This situation in turn, brings about a different set of social relationships between house-workers and employers, which further defines the exploitation of household workers.

### **The Household Worker as a Subjective Agent**

After all that is said of the exploitative nature of household work, young women still continue to flock to the cities to work in households. Those who are already working in the cities usually opt to stay in the cities rather than go back to their hometowns. This can be seen more than simply stemming from a lack of choice; on the contrary it can be seen as the household worker agency at work, considering and negotiating between various possibilities. Aida whom I interviewed for instance, has considered her chances, both in the city and back in her rural hometown. She has decided that she has more opportunities and a better future by staying in her houseworking job despite the hardships. For another houseworker, her present job affords her an escape from a violent father and a life of starvation in her rural hometown.

For many household workers, houseworking, despite its low-value and low-prestige, is still a better alternative to staying in their hometown where they will be doing the same, if not harder, kind of work and without pay. To many of them,

houseworking provides them an opportunity to earn their own money which, at times, they send to their families and which gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment. For many of them, the opportunities provided by housework outweigh the exploitation that goes with it. At this point we witness a discourse shift from looking and analysing the situation of household workers as a product (and “victim”) of the historical, socio-economic, political and cultural forces of society, to viewing her as an active agent negotiating between various positions afforded to her.

Almost all houseworkers I know believe that their present houseworking job is temporary. Many aim at saving enough money to go back to school to finish their studies (some meant high school and others wanted to enter college) or enroll in a vocational course such as dressmaking or beauty science to prepare them for other jobs. Others aim to save enough money to put up a small business in their rural hometown. And all of them cast their hopes in their present houseworking job, and see it as their stepping stone to a better future.

### **Postscript From a Middle Class Feminist Employer**

Employing a houseworker causes mixed feelings in me. For one thing, I feel relieved at having someone to rely on to do the dirty, monotonous work that I hate doing, and to allow me my own time. Because of her, I do not have to worry that my son is not getting the amount of care and attention that he needs. I am also grateful for not being forced to discuss housework with my husband — a not very pleasant topic, I should say — to get him to do his share. At the same time, I feel guilty for exploiting the cheap labor of another woman. I know that no matter how fair I am in dealing with my houseworker in terms of wages and benefits,

I still take advantage of her cheap labor and allow myself the luxury of a relatively relaxed home life at her expense. However, the feminist in me tells me that I should share this guilt with my husband.

There is also the daily discomfort of sharing one's living space with a stranger. There exists a feeling that one's privacy is being invaded and a nagging feeling of vulnerability to this stranger's ability to do me harm (Although I can imagine that these same feelings must be more intense for the houseworker.). And finally, I feel the added burden of being responsible for another human being, and maybe for her family members as well (because of the feudal character of houseworking relations in my culture).

For someone who has lived a large part of her life with houseworkers at one's beck and call, I must admit that on the whole, I am enjoying the comfort that their services afford me. But at the same time, I also enjoy the sense of freedom I get when I do not have to live with a stranger everyday. Perhaps, provided with such alternatives as subsidized childcare, affordable cleaning and laundry services, varied and cheap takeout dinners, and a husband who would happily and equally feel responsible for the housework, I would be happier not employing any household worker at all.

### **Strategies for Change**

Faced with the question of whether or not housework as a means of earning income should disappear, I must say that it need not disappear, but it definitely needs to be reorganized.

Housework should be seen as not just the responsibility of the woman but also of the man and of the state. State responsibility will be in the form of subsidized childcare centers in the communities and workplaces. Affordable cleaning

and laundry services should also be made accessible to every household. Work hours should be shortened and reorganized so that parents can have more time with their children. The state should also take an active part in campaigning for shared parenthood and shared domestic labour.

The above proposals however cannot happen through mere legislation without the corresponding social, economic, political, and cultural changes that will remove discrimination against women. Cultural biases against women's full participation in a public life should be eradicated. Women and men should have equal training and employment opportunities and women's dependence on the male wage be dissolved.

As these are long term proposals, there should be immediate stop-gap measures to arrest the growing exploitation of young household workers. Organization of houseworkers into union-like associations that will negotiate for their collective interests is necessary. Stronger laws protecting the rights of houseworkers, such as just wages and definite working hours, plus the efficient implementation of such laws are definitely needed. And lastly, there should be a professionalization of housework such that the actual service and not the labor time is sold, e.g., selling laundry services or cleaning services.

As housework is part of the sustenance and reproduction of human life, I do not see it disappearing. Rather, what I hope to see is a change in the valuation and reorganization of housework such that it removes its exploitative components. At that point, we might cease to recognize housework for it could be in a form radically different from what we know at the moment.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is the Tagalog (language spoken in Metro Manila and the provinces of Nueva Ecija, Rizal, Laguna, and Quezon — all in the island of Luzon) term. The Visayan (a group of languages spoken in the islands south of Luzon) term is “ayuey”.

<sup>2</sup>Scott assumes that it is the male slave who accompanies the master to war.

<sup>3</sup>At such time, they rise one notch higher in social status and become *alipin namamahay*, which closely resembles the situation of a land leaseholder.

<sup>4</sup>I use the term “reproductive tasks” to include not just the child-bearing and child-rearing tasks but also all other work performed inside the private home to maintain both the family members and the infrastructure. I use this term synonymously with domestic labor.

<sup>5</sup>There was actually a category of “family and personal services” in the early censuses conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Census and the P.I. (Philippine Islands) Bureau of Census in the years mentioned.

<sup>6</sup>This refers to both the daily reproduction of the worker, i.e., reproductive work that sustains the worker-husband for the next working day, and the biological reproduction of the next generation of workers.

<sup>7</sup>This is the basis of the trade union demand for a ‘family wage’, a wage that sustains not just the worker himself but also his family.

<sup>8</sup>Unless otherwise stated, the data presented here come from my personal experience as an employer of household workers and from my years (actually, lifetime) of observation and interaction with various people with various households, most of whom employ at least one household worker.

<sup>9</sup>This is a bureau within the Department of Labor and Employment.

<sup>10</sup>The “child” was defined as 17 years old and below. The study showed that 85.9% of child domestic helpers were 15-17 years old; 14% were 14 years and younger, with nine being the youngest age.

<sup>11</sup>“Barrio” has the connotation of a remote rural community.

<sup>12</sup>Legislation states that a houseworker should receive P1,000 a month; yet the law also provides that the employer may pay the household worker below the amount if she (the household worker) is being trained or being provided with other form of payments, usually in kind, over and above the free board and lodging she should receive. This law however, is never followed; in fact, very few people, employers included, know of its existence.

<sup>13</sup>The legislated wage for other cities, semi-urban municipalities, and rural towns are different. Wages of Metro Manila household workers are the highest.

<sup>14</sup>Rollins used the term to describe the treatment the female employer accords her houseworker — a treatment characterized with caring, motherliness, and protectiveness, which is “a distinctly feminine way [of showing] her lack of respect for the domestic as an autonomous, adult employee.” (Rollins 1985: 186)

<sup>15</sup>Among the rituals of deference are: adopting a servile attitude by such utterances as “Yes ma’am,” not initiating a conversation with the employer, letting the employer probe into the worker’s private life but not the other way, not occupying the living room space except when cleaning it, eating in the kitchen and not in the dining room, etc.

<sup>16</sup>For other case studies in history on male houseworkers, see also Hansen, 1990; Gaitskell, et.al., 1984.

<sup>17</sup>The exploited and the exploiter here may be a person, a category of persons possessing some like characteristics, or an abstract system with its accompanying ideology, e.g., patriarchy.

<sup>18</sup>I am not sure she is a neo-marxist, but she does sound like one.

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