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**A very private business:
migration and domestic work**

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A very private business: migration and domestic work

Abstract

This paper examines demand for domestic work in private households, whether there is a specific demand for *migrant* domestic workers, and if there is why this should be. In considering this I draw on research conducted on the labour markets for migrant sex and domestic workers conducted with Professor Julia O'Connell Davidson at the University of Nottingham. Such developments have to manage practical and theoretical contradictions. The public/private dichotomy elides both the market and the state as the "public". Thus one response to abuse of migrant domestic workers is to focus on the deficiencies of working in private households, and to argue that domestic work should be considered as just another job. A different approach is to invoke the protection of the state, and to consider migrant domestic workers who are abused by employers or agents as "trafficked victims". Both these options will be explored and reviewed. I conclude by considering some of the challenges and possibilities for migrant domestic workers and other stakeholders.

Key words: migrant, domestic worker, labour markets, trafficking, public/private

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Introduction

Paid domestic work. Who are the workers? Who are the employers? Why do they employ domestic workers? What is the relation between householder and worker? What should the relation be? Is it just another job? Is it necessarily exploitative? Are all exploited migrant domestic workers “trafficked”? These are all questions beginning to exercise theorists, activists and policymakers. This paper gives an overview of some of these new developments, with a focus on demand for domestic work, whether there is a specific demand for *migrant* domestic workers, and if there is why this should be. In considering this I draw on research conducted on the labour markets for migrant sex and domestic workers conducted with Professor Julia O’Connell Davidson at the University of Nottingham.¹ It is also informed by a project on Filipino nurses, care assistants, and elder careers undertaken with Lourdes Gordolan at COMPAS. These new developments have to manage practical and theoretical contradictions. The public/private dichotomy elides both the market and the state as the “public”. Thus one response to abuse of migrant domestic workers is to focus on the deficiencies of working in private households, and to argue that domestic work should be considered as just another job. A different approach is to invoke the protection of the state, and to consider migrant domestic workers who are abused by employers or agents as “trafficked victims”. Both these options will be explored and reviewed. I conclude by considering some of the challenges and possibilities for migrant domestic workers and their supporters.

New Developments

There is a resurgence of interest in Europe in issues of paid care, domestic labour and immigration. One of the reasons for this is the ageing population.

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While in the past there was a focus on the requirement for paid domestic workers to enable parents, women in particular, to work outside the home, attention has increasingly shifted to the ageing of the population. This is taking place within a broader debate about the impact of the ageing population on migration in general, e.g. does this mean that Europe will have to import a youthful labour force to do productive work once its elderly citizens have retired? But there is also the more specific matter of the provision of care for older people. While in Japan robots are being considered for such work (Wakamaru, developed by Mitsubishi is the first human sized robot made to provide companionship²), costs, technology and culture make it unlikely for this to be an option that is widely available for the foreseeable future. The elderly will continue to be cared for by human beings, either in care homes, or in private households, and both have consequences for migration.

At the same time as this demographic change there has been an expansion in forms of care delivery called “cash payments for care”. Under these systems care users receive an allowance from the state (at local or national level) rather than care services. They then use this cash to pay people to provide them with care. Such arrangements can now be found, in different forms in several European states including France, Spain, and the UK. In some states such as Italy and the Netherlands relatives of care users are among those eligible to receive such payments, and as Ungerson (2003) points out there are interesting ramifications for the construction of what is considered to constitute “work” and “care”. In all states these changes have had, and will continue to have impacts both on the labour market for care and on individual care relationships. They may also foster the development of an informal market for care in which migrants, and particularly undocumented migrants, may be regarded as desirable workers.

² Masayuki Kitano July 20th 2005 “Japan looks to robots of elderly care” Gulf News. <http://www.globalaging.org/health/world/2005/robot.htm>

By leaving the recruitment, management and payment of these workers to individual care consumers, the likelihood is that such consumers will seek out labour that is cheap, and yet authentically 'caring'. The cheapest labour will be 'grey': invisible and hence untaxed, and yet visible enough to be relatively easily accessed by elderly care users with good local networks built up over long biographies. Thus, such caring labour will be unprotected by social rights and employment regulation, and in the long run, is at considerable risk of poverty, especially in their own old age.

Ungerson (2003: 382)

Ungerson and Yeandle's research in Europe³ discovered in Milan, for example a culture of "taking a foreigner" as a careworker. Cash payments in Italy are unregulated, and such careworkers may often be without residence rights. They also found that the practice of employing migrant domestic workers that pre-dated cash payments was also important in constructing the current labour market for paid care.

In contrast to Italy, in the UK cash payments for care have had relatively low take up since they first became an option for elderly people in 2000. Despite this low take up at a local level, councils were indicating that personal domiciliary care services were already compromised by the "unavailability of suitable staff and low pay rates" (Parrott 2002 para 3.17) and noting that:

People are reluctant to take on relatively low paid jobs that involve unsocial hours and demanding tasks such as personal care. Home carers are hard to recruit and retain, especially in rural areas, as are personal care assistants for those living independently, and care assistants in residential homes.

Wiltshire County Council (2005)

In this context a much-heralded government policy paper on social care launched for consultation in 2005 indicated that cash payments would be heavily encouraged in future. That is, individualized payments for care undertaken in private households would be promoted but with no clear plan as to who will do this work. Moreover the UK has no plans to develop legal

³ Funded by ESRC within the Future of Work Programme, grant number L212252080

migration in this sector. The changes in social care were announced at the same time as the UK government launched its proposed five-year strategy on immigration, in which it was clear that there was no intention of introducing the possibility of legal entry as a domestic worker. The assumption seems to be that for domestic labour, as in other low wage sectors, the demand will be met by citizens from the newly enlarged European Union. However, the demand for migrant labour is generally extremely complex (Anderson, et al. 2006) and this is particularly true in the private household where, as will be discussed, ideas of “race” and otherness, as well as practical considerations of retention and reliability, are extremely important. There is a serious possibility that the demographically and policy constructed demand for careworkers will be met in the UK as in other European states, by undocumented migrants. There is clearly much for academics, activists and other concerned actors to do to encourage governmental “joined up thinking” across the borders of social care, employment and immigration or migrants who work as domestic workers will fall between the cracks.

Demand for elder care is only one of many factors shaping the labour market for migrant domestic workers. Domestic work involves cleaning as well as caring (Anderson 2000). While of course caring work in private households almost inevitably involves some cleaning work – even if it is simply washing a client’s cup – it is useful to disentangle the two when it comes to questions of demand. When not associated with caring the demand for cleaning services in private households is rather differently constructed and is typically overlooked in discussions of demand for workers in private households. When analyzing why people “need” cleaners the invisible and gendered hand of social institutions and practices is important, as is labour supply, the availability of someone to do the work (Anderson and O’Connell Davison 2002). Supply influences demand, as one UK Home Office published discussion paper indicated, explicitly referring to domestic services:

If migrants do not fill these jobs, they simply go unfilled or uncreated in the first place. (Glover, et al. 2001)

This does not mean that these jobs have no social or economic value. Paying for domestic work facilitates the maintenance of standards which in turn has social implications as we go “out” into the world marked by the home. Thus although themselves hidden, the results of those who labour in private households are everywhere apparent – how many of those smart politicians, senior executives and newscasters who appear on our television sets night after night have had their shirts and blouses ironed by paid domestic workers, and how many by migrant women? The home itself is a site of consumption and status where “personality” and social status are expressed (Bourdieu 1984).

The relations of social reproduction are “both the medium and the message of social reproduction” (Katz 2001: 714). Interrogating demand for cleaning services is necessarily complex, and more messy than simply ascribing a value to it. There is a notable lack of literature on demand specifically for cleaning services inside the home but it has been recognized as increasing (Cancedda 2000, Smet 2000). There has been some policy interest in the sector, both as a potential generator of jobs and of state income. In 2000 the European Parliament held a public hearing on “Regulating Domestic Help in the Informal Sector”. The report discussed noted that

Domestic workers who are paid but not declared... have a considerable impact on the black economy. This form of work, which is hidden and not easily quantifiable, provides a significant proportion of women with a source of income which is not subject to any form of state control.

Smet (2000)

It examined different European models for attempting to formalize cleaning work, but noted that any policy initiatives in this direction needed to

recognize the presence of large numbers of female migrant workers “many of whom endure very hard and unfair conditions”.⁴

Such acknowledgement is important, but may be helpfully refined. Interest in migrant domestic workers has tended to assume either that they are working on a particular kind of domestic workers’ visa or that they are working irregularly. In fact there are a wide range of legal possibilities for entering as a domestic worker in different European states. Importantly there are many systems whereby migrants may enter legally to do domestic work, but are not constructed as **workers** even though in practice they are performing the same tasks. Take the UK for example, where migrants may work/“help” legally in private households on au pair visas, working holidaymaker visas and volunteer visas. While much of the discussion, including my own work, has concentrated on migrants who are working irregularly in private households, we need to recognise that there is not a straightforward division between those working with papers and those working without – indeed there are entire legal frameworks constructed to explore and develop the grey area in between. It is more useful to conceive of irregularity/regularity as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy (Ruhs and Anderson 2006), and this is particularly important when considering the status of domestic workers. Again taking the case of the UK, domestic workers may be resident legally, but working illegally (e.g. spouses, asylum seekers), they may be people who have permission to work, but who are not working in the sector that they were given the permit for. More generally, work permit holders are not permitted to undertake additional work that is below their skill level, so a nurse supplementing her income by working as a domestic worker would be working in breach of her conditions. There are people who have permission

⁴ Migrant domestic workers have received attention at an international level. In 2004 the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights of migrant workers produced a report on the human rights of migrant domestic workers. This observed that “in developed countries migrant domestic workers are becoming indispensable to enable women to advance in employment and society” (para 66), and contained significant recommendations to both sending and receiving states, agencies, employers and domestic workers.

to work, but who are working more hours than they are supposed to – students for example, are allowed to work, but only for 20 hours in term time. Finally there may be people whose employment conditions are breaking the regulations governing immigration status. Au pairs' "pocket money" is described as a "reasonable allowance" at approximately £55 a week. "Any sum significantly in excess of this might suggest that the person is filling the position of domestic servant, or similar, which would require a work permit" (UK Visas, Entry Clearance general instructions).

In the UK and indeed in any European state, those doing domestic work in private households may have a wide range of immigration statuses. These statuses are not static and individuals can move to different points on the irregularity/regularity spectrum and change statuses, whether through their own efforts, change in their circumstances or bureaucratic/legal developments. A Czech citizen who had overstayed her visa and was working as a nanny would have been subject to removal in April 2004, but in May 2004 could no longer be deported because she automatically became an EU citizen.

Public/Private: the Market and the State

For many of those academically engaged, a key debate that has emerged in recent years is around whether paid domestic work is "just another job"? Does payment for domestic work necessarily further inequality, particularly between women (Romero 2002, Tronto 2002), or should domestic work should be regarded as any other job, requiring recognition and professionalisation rather than elimination (Meagher 2003)? Those taking the latter position may recognize that, while certain aspects of reproductive labour may be susceptible to commodification, others, particularly those involving care, can be more problematic or "contested" (Radin 2001), but nevertheless advocate a pragmatic response. Given the unrecognized

contribution that domestic work in private households makes could one not argue that paying for it at least recognizes that is labour and that it has value? If a hard-pressed working mother in Europe (and current social and economic structures ensure that there are plenty of these) employs a migrant worker who not only needs the money, but perhaps the chance to leave a violent husband or a militarized province, is this not a satisfactory and mutually beneficial solution to all concerned? Moreover, is there not a danger of a portrayal that presents migrant domestic workers as passive victims? The impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes, of histories of colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy, of national debt, of the growth of agribusiness and so on, can get lost in microstudies, but neither women nor men are simply flotsam on the immense forces that these generate. Migration to work in domestic service can represent an opportunity to be creatively grasped, and it is important not to either over-romanticise or to victimize those who might be seizing such opportunities to escape poverty or violence, or to see the world.

I have previously argued that the logic of social reproduction is such that the employment of a domestic worker reinscribes gendered, classed and racialised roles, and that what is being purchased is not simply labour power but "personhood" (Anderson 2000). This seems to rule out the possibility of contracts being applied. But surely calls for contract to be applied to the private household are in effect arguing that domestic work should be treated as just another job. Moreover, while some may want women back at home being wives and mothers, placidly facilitating male productivity (or activism) I am not one of them, and let us be clear, the social relations surrounding domestic labour do not have to be commodified to be abusive and unjust. In the light of the growth in demand for domestic workers, and the large numbers of people looking for work overseas, perhaps we should re-consider the merits of taking domestic work in private households to be just another job?

The notion of the “public” in the dichotomous presentation of the public/private divide elides state and market, both of which separately may be set in a dichotomous relationship with the “private” (Olsen 1983). The home is imagined in opposition to the market, the home structures our affective lives as the market structures our productive lives. The market, while esteemed for self-reliance, rationalism and modernity is also decried for being driven by self-interest and instrumentalism. Market actors are not woven into relations one with another, but are imagined as individuals fiercely competing for resources who may enter into agreements to cooperate, each for their own interests. Market relations are amoral and are forged between atomized actors, governed by contract, in which individuals buy and sell their labour. This transaction is imagined as separated from notions of the “real” self. The home in contrast is imagined as governed by mutual dependence and affective relations, altruism, responsibility and duty. The opposition of these spheres is mutual reinforcing. As Olsen notes in her examination of the history of these dichotomies:

The family and home were seen as safe repositories for the virtues and emotions that people believed were being banished from the world of commerce and industry. The home was said to provide a haven from the anxieties of modern life.

Olsen (1983: 1499)

As the home is imagined in opposition to the market, it is also imagined as a refuge from the state. The family is imagined as a “natural” formation to be protected from state interference, and any intrusion of the “nanny state” into private life is highly contentious. Of course in practice this depends on the kinds of family and private life one is talking about – the families of the poor, and particularly of migrants are viewed as legitimate subjects of state control. Concretely this can be a reason why migrants, particularly those without legal permission to work, work in private households, as they do at least provide some refuge from the police and from immigration officials.

Analysing (migrant) domestic workers as a challenge to the market/private dichotomy shifts the emphasis from immigration to employment. The

questions raised continue to be extremely complex. One can apply the notion of spectrum of irregularity to employment as well as immigration status, and this is particularly useful with reference to domestic work. In countries for which estimates are available 50-80% of those cleaning in private households were working in undeclared jobs (Cancedda 2000). Some may be combining declared and undeclared work, while in other instances workers and employers may collude in presenting the work done as part time when they are in practise full time workers, in order to avoid taxation and social security laws. Spectrums of formality might be a better expression, offering the possibility perhaps of relating practises such as the payment of relatives for doing domestic work (most obviously care of course, but other forms as well), to the employment of domestic workers, giving an opportunity to enrich our analysis through comparisons with indigenous low wage/informal labour.

Domestic work in private households, particularly cleaning, is often performed at the informal end of such a spectrum. It shares characteristics with other forms of precarious work: low pay, long hours, temporary work, insecurity, labour standards inapplicable, or if applicable, difficult to implement. Atypical employment relations, and fiercely competitive labour markets, are also features of informal sectors. Since they are largely working in the informal sector domestic workers are theoretically free to leave at any time. Indeed the freedom to retract from an employment relation is one of the only means that workers have of limiting employers' powers over them, being not subject to statutory legislation and having limited opportunities to organise. Since domestic work is badly paid and often entails working for long hours, workers have every incentive to move frequently until they find the most rewarding job. This can clearly be problematic for employers, particularly for those who are looking for paid carers, or who have particularly precise requirements in the doing of household work. An employee who knows how the household "works", or who has established a relationship with a child or elderly person in the home is, for all the work being "unskilled", can be extremely difficult to replace. In research

conducted with Julia O'Connell Davidson with employers in private households we found that retention was an extremely important reason for their choosing migrant workers over citizens. One of the reasons that migrant workers are valued can be because employers believe they are less likely to quit without notice, as one UK employer put it:

“especially with the illegal, they're so desperate for work, they're not looking to get fired, they're looking to keep their job, so if you respect them and just let them get on with it the loyalty that comes back to you and the hard work that comes back to you more than pays off... believe me, especially if they're migrant worker, they're so frightened of getting kicked out that they're not going to pull any stunts”

(Brit/American housewife aged 39)

Conversely migrants may also be easier to retain if they are bound into more formalized arrangements through immigration status. Expat employers in Thailand who have lived in various countries in Asia, expressed great satisfaction with the systems in Hong Kong and in Singapore precisely because migrant workers were legally tied to them. It's much harder they argued in Bangkok, because workers are local and so are more likely to leave.

In analysing the conditions and employment relations experienced by migrant domestic workers it is therefore important to look at these two spectrums of “illegalities”: with respect to employment and with respect to immigration and how they inter-relate. Focusing only on irregular migration can take away our attention from important factors such as labour markets, the gendered division of labour, gendered employment patterns, and the role of agencies. It can mean that we look at immigration laws and practice as sole solutions to the difficulties experienced by migrant domestic workers, and divert us from common ground shared with indigenous informal and low wage labour. However focusing only on employment misses the crucial processes by which immigration status reinforces employers' power and control over labour. The particularities of an individual's immigration status

and employment relations, as well as the particular relationship they have with their employer are key to analyzing the extent and limitations of their self-determination and autonomy. It is these three elements, working together, not simply the personality of their employer, that determine the texture of migrant domestic workers' experiences. Migrants who are overstayers, or illegal entrants, or who are in some way breaching their immigration conditions may find their employment contract is illegal. In the UK this group cannot sue for non-payment of wages for instance, even in theory, because it is an illegal contract. Moreover, according to the UK Tax Authorities, those who are only intending to be in the UK for a specified period (approx 120 days) do not come under UK employment law. Here we have a serious lacuna. This leaves domestic workers entering with employers who only intend to be in the UK for a short time extremely vulnerable, and for instance not eligible for the minimum wage. Indeed some employers have argued that it is legal for them to hold their worker's passport because it is permitted in the country they have just left and they are planning to return soon. Workers' dependence on their employer to renew their visa gives employers a powerful control mechanism. This power may be direct and unmediated as with undocumented migrants whose employers have the power to "report and deport". More insidious is the structural, materialistic and mediated power given to employers who, by withholding a letter confirming employment, can ensure workers are deported "by default". This power, vested in an individual employer with whom the migrant is in intimate contact, makes the migrant extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. It seems that domestic workers are caught between public, formal employment, and private relations, between materialistic and personal forms of power, between contract and dependence. Moving between both of these makes them vulnerable and works to the advantage of the employer. An obvious way round this impasse is for workers who do have legal immigration status to become self-employed, but quite apart from the obvious shortcomings of this proposal regarding workers' rights, it can be difficult for domestic workers to take this type of employment status without changing

their visa. A domestic worker's immigration status typically does not permit her to be "self-employed", which is a particular category of visa. Thus those who have registered as self-employed for tax purposes run the risk of being discovered to be in breach of their immigration conditions.

Domestic work: just another job?

Domestic work in private households, whether or not it is performed by migrants, has widely different forms and relations, some of which are more easy to commodify than others (Meagher 2003). Services provided by franchises and agencies for example are arguably easier to commodify because they do not involve personalized relation between householder and worker, the worker may not technically be an employee of the householder at all but is self-employed or an agency worker. This does not mean that workers employed under such circumstances are protected from exploitation. Sub-contracting chains are rife within the commercial cleaning sector, and the person at the end of a long sub-contracting chain may often be in an extremely exploitative relation with the person above them on whom they depend for work (Anderson and Rogaly 2005). The research I am drawing on for the purposes of this discussion is where workers contract direct with an employer to do either cleaning or caring work or both, and may live in or live out. The original research project was funded by Save the Children Sweden. Employers of domestic workers, and agencies/third parties placing domestic workers were interviewed and surveyed in 4 sites, Delhi, Catania, Bangkok, and Malmo. This pilot was extended to London and Barcelona thanks to a grant given by the Economic Social Research Council (award no: R000239794).

The reasons why migrants so often dominate low wage, low status sectors, tend to be given as "local workers won't do these jobs" – the pay is too low, conditions too harsh etc. These kinds of explanations over simplify complex

labour market processes. The labour market for domestic workers is one where word of mouth is crucial and so it is both globalised yet highly local, with invisible boundaries crossed between streets: Portuguese predominate in one neighbourhood, Filipinas in another – “you get hooked into one nationality, once they finish they... refer you on” explained one employer. The employers we interviewed employed migrants, and were asked about their understanding of the market for migrant domestic workers and their relation with their worker.

We surveyed 50 employers in each of our research sites. London employers were more likely than those in cities in other cities to say that migrants were the only ones available to do this job (30% of UK employers as compared with 18% overall – including 16% in Italy), but in neither the survey nor the interviews was this experienced by employers as being the chief or only reason why they employed a migrant. Only one employer (who was extraordinarily wealthy with a landed estate) complained that she would prefer to employ an English woman but could not find a suitable candidate. Of course, this is not to say that in objective labour market terms, availability isn't important, only that it is not perceived by individual employers as being the reason that they personally, employ migrants.

Employers were often not happy with applying the logic of the market to the home, they often found paying for domestic work uncomfortable. In some cases this seemed to explain their anxiety to discover coincidences of interest between themselves and their worker. Such coincidences are not simply fantasies: employers seeking a worker who may potentially be available whenever they need them, a worker who is looking for safe housing, both with access to overlapping networks through local friends and relatives. Both, for different but overlapping reasons, may be concerned to avoid state control. Workers may be as concerned as employers to avoid tax though it should be noted that when workers want to pay tax, as after the 1998 regularisation of domestic workers in the UK, this can be a source of

considerable conflict with employers. Of course such a conflict does not arise when the worker is “illegal”.

Employers were often quite clear about the advantages of hiring a migrant over a worker with independent rights to live in the state:

“They (*migrants*) are generally more flexible.....Migrants don't question the kind of work they are expected to perform...(natives) always talk about rules formulated by their unions”
(Swedish female purser aged 51)

“they have a greater incentive to work because they desperate need the money... she's dependent for money, so I think it's a circle that works well so that I can keep her”
(British housewife aged 53)

“And if they are going to come over here, they know the score. I mean, I'm not saying it's right that they should be exploited, but you know, I think they would know what they would be letting themselves in for”
(British female architect aged 40)

Migrants are easier to control because they had fewer options. The advantages are thus acknowledged as a consequence of the workers' vulnerability and lack of choice. This creates a problem for employers, for in common with most consumers of services, they typically wish to feel that their employees want to serve them. A sense that somebody is serving you only because they are desperate is not very relaxing. Between labour power and its manifestation in labour steps the conscious purpose. It is this conscious purpose that makes the employers we have spoken to anxious. This desire to be served *with affection* is obviously particularly important in questions of paying for care. Gregson and Lowe's study *Servicing the Middle Classes* (1994) found that one of the reasons employers opted for nanny care rather than sending their child to nursery, was that this was felt to be providing the child with a particular kind of intimate relationship, a relationship that was “like a mother's”. In interviews, favourite employees, those spoken of in the most glowing and expansive terms, were those for

whom the work and its social relations appeared to be a pleasure. One of our Italian interviewees expressed this perfectly:

“The kind of relationship between me and the local girls was very instrumental, of economic dependence, there was no human element to it, strictly professional. As soon as she got married she went without much explanation. I was so angry, disappointed, that I decided to have a girl from Mauritius. Now she’s like part of the family. We make sure she doesn’t need anything and I never have the feeling that she’s staying one hour extra only because I’m paying her that hour. These coloured girls are really in need. They have strange relationships with their families. They send money to them.”

(Italian female teacher aged 39)

As the sociologist Orlando Patterson observes, “Human beings have always found naked force or coercion a rather messy, if not downright ugly business, however necessary” (Patterson 1982). How then to clothe the “beastliness” of power, and make this palatable? When we have power we are often adroit at this, while we may exercise the power nakedly over people – Patterson’s “personalistic power” it can be disguised and wear the clothes of power over things, in particular that wielded through money what Patterson terms “materialistic power”. Such power be further clothed by structural constraints, those individuals who exercise it can feel they are caught in systems over which they have no influence and hence limited moral responsibility. These techniques face particular difficulties with reference to the private household however. Not least because as discussed above the home is imagined in opposition to the market: indeed it is a “strange” thing to send money to your family. Nearly three quarters of the British employers we surveyed felt that their home was a refuge from a competitive world, and nearly all felt that their home was an expression of themselves. Not only then may the introduction of market relations into the home be experienced as deeply discomforting, one cannot abdicate moral responsibility with the ease with which this is possible “outside”. This is not only because the home is a repository of moral values, but also because the power exercised over a domestic work may be very direct, and “personalistic” as well as

“materialistic”. In general the power exercised by an employer in the informal economy is not hedged about by protections of contract or other legal safety nets. The worker may have the power to withdraw their labour, but other response to abuse or exploitation may be very limited. For migrants this power is particularly brutal, and for live-in domestic work the employer has the power to control access to the means of survival – accommodation and food– as well as power over wages and social intercourse. This power is quite naked, and one can appreciate how uncomfortable it can make an employer feel. If domestic work is to be “just another job” employers must divest themselves of this personalistic power while themselves managing an employee working in the private home.

In fact those employers we interviewed dealt with the discomfort of power by using the language of “helping”. The trick seems to be to view the gap in personal wealth between employer and worker as “unbridgeable”. As one employer put it, her migrant employee would no more be envious of her than she would of someone who owned three personal planes – she could not begin to aspire to this. Here the racial, ethnic or national “otherness” of a migrant is also helpful in managing troubling aspects of the relationship between employer and worker, as one British employer said quite explicitly:

“It’s difficult having someone working for you from the same race because we have this idea of social class in our minds, don’t we? And that would be uncomfortable in your house. Whereas when it’s somebody from a different country, you don’t have all that baggage... There’s none of that middle-class, working-class, upper-class thing... it’s just a different race.”

(British female teacher aged 41 working in Hong Kong)

There is little one can do to remedy the injustices of the world, but employing a desperate migrant is a small contribution. Fifty four percent of UK employers gave one of their reasons for employing a migrant as being that “They need the opportunity more than locals”

"I really feel strongly that it's a positive thing you can do for somebody... I think it's liberating for a girl from the Philippines to ...leave the rice paddy fields and the village and to be able to send back huge amounts of money and to be able to get a job in England"
(British housewife aged 40)

So the beastliness of power is clothed in the language of obligation, support and responsibility, rather than power and exploitation. The relationship is presented as one of mutual dependence: the domestic worker is impoverished and needs money and work, the employer needs a "flexible" worker, and both fulfil the other's need. The relationship draws on notions of protection and responsibility, with the master/mistress having a duty of care towards the servant or helper, who is subject to the employer and bound into their family through a set of hierarchical relations but with some degree of reciprocated responsibility. One can see how this is a particularly convenient model for employers when the worker is very vulnerable as a result of immigration status. By entering into such a relation, the employer not only demonstrates social status, but also kindness, for which the migrant can be grateful, a gratitude that is expressed in pleasure in service.

One problem with gratitude is it can tip over into envy or resentment. Once one acknowledges inequality migrant domestic workers may be potentially more threatening, for one rarely invites desperate strangers into one's home. It seems to me that we have a variation here on the infamous 3D's commonly used to describe the kinds of employment undertaken by migrants (Dangerous, Difficult, Dirty). Employers feeling that migrants are Desperate and Dependent, but the third one here too is Dangerous.

"The only reason why that might ring alarm bells... is that the sole reason for them being here is to make money. But I would not generalize and say all Filipino women are so money-conscious or would steal from you, but the fact is, that's why they're here".
(British female architect aged 40)

To effectively resolve the employer's anxieties about sharing a home, the "otherness" of the worker needs to be combined with vulnerability described above:

"They're foreign and they're illegal and they're scared and timid and so they're not going to take up space. They're going to be very, very small, and that is generally easier to live with than someone who feels that this is their home. They're in really bad situations.... They're terrified".

(Brit/American housewife aged 39)

Allowing self-interested market relations into the home may be potentially dangerous, but under these circumstances the employer need have no fear.

The difficulty from the migrant domestic workers' point of view is that such relationships of kindness and gratitude have little space for rights. If domestic work is to be just another job it entails certain rights, that it seems that some employers are reluctant to give their workers. Forty eight of survey respondents did not think they had a right to a contract with their employer, 70% thought workers should not have a right to join a trades union, 52% thought they should not have a right to the minimum wage, and 45% thought they should not have a right to fixed hours of employment.

Respondents were asked to describe their relationship with their domestic worker, and the majority, except for Sweden, described this as "friendly and professional". This has interesting consequences for the perceived rights of domestic workers, as there are sharp differences in the rights deemed appropriate to domestic workers depending on how the employers characterise their relationship with their employees. Those who define the relationship as both friendly and professional have lower expectations of rights for domestic workers than either those who define the relationship as professional, or, more surprisingly, than those who define the relationship as friendly. In Sweden, the most regulated of the markets, of those who characterise the relation as a professional one more than 60% do not feel

that the minimum wage is a right for domestic workers, and similarly, 40% do not consider a regular day off as a right. Rights which would be typically considered “normal” labour rights in the formal economy are clearly not so considered with reference to domestic labour, despite the “professionalising” rhetoric. Moreover, while the Swedish respondents’ most sought after quality in a domestic worker was professionalism (71%), of those who were searching for professionalism, nearly three quarters were also avoiding expense. Only one of the ten Swedish interviewees felt that employment rights were appropriate in their case and it was the fact that they were employing in the informal/illegal economy, which made these rights in some way irrelevant.

Because it is a matter of an illegal employment in our case, the mentioned rights are not valid. Generally I feel, of course, that employees in households should be entitled to the same rights as employees in general.

(Swedish male company chief executive aged 51)

So although workers have these rights *in principle*, they somehow lose them because they do not work in the formal economy, even though their employers may feel that they should be entitled to them.

Employing a migrant domestic worker may also free employers from the burden of responsibility that personal relations bring. It is striking that, for all the recognition of personal power, the desire to “help” and the imagination of the employment relationship as “friendly and professional”, many employers interviewed were clear that the advantage of employing a migrant was that one did not *have* to communicate with them. Thus it was clear that “friendly” did not necessarily denote reciprocity and whether in any particular instance professional or friendly are to dominate is up to the employer.

“I really feel like we’re doing a favour to them. I like how they don’t expect to always be friends. Everyone knows their particular niche”.

(British housewife aged 40)

“Filipinos are very hard workers, and she’s very quiet... she just seems to dissolve into the background. She seems to disappear”
(British housewife aged 45)

Thus migrants not only are more flexible and easier to control by virtue of their immigration status, they are also less visible.

One of the most striking aspects of employers’ comments on the advantages of hiring migrants was their emphasis on embodied characteristics and “race”. It was hard to imagine interviewees talking about employment and managerial issues outside the house using the language that they were happy to use when talking about their domestic workers. Several employers stated that they would not employ “fat” workers, and one woman who ran an agency refused to meet any employers because she was overweight and claimed that employers (who presumably never are “fat”) don’t like fat people so she would lose business. Employers, while admitting when directly asked that e.g. flexibility and retention were reasons for employing migrants, generally far prefer to expound on the virtues of Filipinas or Colombians or whatever their preferred ethnicity/nationality is. “Caring”, “warm”, “docile”, “natural housekeepers”, “happy”, there is no compunction about using such wild generalizations – for since these are construed as positive qualities, then they are not imagined as racist. Of course this works both ways, and interviewees in the UK had no problems in expressing an unashamed racism, often contrasting one nationality or ethnicity negatively with another:

“they’re [*Nepalese*] so quiet and discreet. Filipinos are brasher. They’re more social and they like to chat and gossip. They are quite pushy. Some people would say they were greedy”
(British housewife aged 40)

This racism was often so blatant that in the UK were it to be expressed with reference to any other employment sector, would be in contravention of the Race Relations Act:

“It’s very risky to say this... I think that white people look cleaner. Maybe it’s silly to say that just because they are black. It doesn’t mean they are dirty, but it seems to me that in many ways they are more untidy. Dark people, right not just black people, dark people are not so clean”

(Spanish housewife, aged 48 living in London)

In the particular area of London where we conducted interviews, Filipinos and South American were commonly employed – although several interviewees made very negative comments about Filipinos as is apparent above. They were perceived as different, but not too different, unlike Black Africans and Muslims who are “culturally too different”. As one interviewee put it “I mean, when I meet Muslims and see them in Portobello then I think that’s great, but to actually have one in your house...” (British housewife aged 53)

While employers in private households are exempted from the Race Relations Act and are legally allowed to discriminate on the basis of colour and/or nationality, this tolerance of racism does not extend to employment agencies. Although generally unregulated, they nevertheless do have to conform to such public legislation whilst on the other hand satisfying employers’ racist requirements. While some agencies recognize employer racism as a problem, others have little compunction in reinforcing racist stereotypes. As Bakan and Stasiulis (1996) found in Canada, placement agencies thereby both conform to and reproduce profoundly racist ideas⁵:

“When I interview, I smell [sniffs]. I smell them as well. Don’t worry. It’s the Indians and the ones from Nepal that smell because of their spicy food”. ... So when I interview I do it like that, and sniff, sniff, sniff. Employers like that. It’s a highly personalised service.”

(Interview with domestic placement agency, London 2003)

⁵ Worth noting that the racism of clients also causes them difficulties. Several of the au pair agencies I have interviewed have remarked on the problems caused by their being unable to ask for the ethnicity of host families, as apparently many au pairs will refuse to work for black or Asian families

The state: nanny or police?

If domestic work is to be just another job, how will minimum standards be monitored and regulated? In particular, what would the role of the state be under such arrangements? While promoting contractualised relations when confronted with the private/market divide as an unhappy response to commodification, what of the private/state divide? How can laws governing for example the treatment of domestic workers be implemented in private households? Are we comfortable with advocating an expansion of state powers into spaces to which it currently has limited access? How have states fared so far in their protection of the rights of domestic workers, and migrants in particular? States have framed their concern for the human rights of migrant workers and their protection of these rights as covered by "trafficking". The trafficking protocol has been signed by 117 states, to be contrasted with 30 the number who (over 15 years) have ratified the International Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and their Families. There has been a proliferation of legislation on trafficking throughout the world, and European states are no exceptions – fifteen European states had signed the Council of Europe convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings only one month after the treaty was opened for signatures. The Council of Europe Convention mentioned above for example has as its first fundamental principle "the protection and promotion of the rights of the victims" and claims, "The main added value of this convention is its human rights perspective". How then does the state protect such victims? On 29 April 2004 an the EU Council Directive setting out the criteria for issuing a residence permit to victims of trafficking came into force. In order to obtain such a permit trafficked victims must have demonstrated that they are prepared to co-operate with the authorities. The residence permit is not permanent. Given that the victims of trafficking this is aimed at are those most brutalized by their employers and agents, and the links that are emphasized between trafficking and organized crime a six month residency permit seems a rather small incentive.

Most of the research has been conducted on trafficking for commercial sex, but there has been some work on trafficking for the purposes of domestic work in private households. States' responses to the abuse of migrant workers, and migrant women and children in particular, are typically expressed as a struggle against trafficking. In November 2000, the UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime was adopted by the UN General Assembly, and with it two new protocols - one on smuggling of migrants and one on trafficking in persons. The latter protocol defines trafficking as:

- a) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;
- b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;
- c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;
- d) "Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.

The protocol does not specify precisely what is meant by "coercion", "exploitation", "abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability", and other problematic phrases and terms. The absence of clarity on these issues may

be pragmatic in the sense that it means the trafficking protocol can be adopted “without prejudice to how States Parties address prostitution in their respective domestic laws” (Interpretative note 64 to the Protocol), but it also allows space for conflicting interpretations of what does and does not constitute trafficking. In the light of the previous discussion on employment, it should be noted that trafficking for forced labour is explicitly recognised within the protocol definition. Forced labour does have a legal definition under the ILO convention on Forced Labour. The Experts group on Trafficking in Human Beings, convened by the EU in 2003 identified forced labour as the “crucial element” of the protocol, and as offering a way out of some of the definitional dilemmas “By policymakers concentrating primarily on the forced labour outcomes the Trafficking Protocol can overcome its current definitional and practical operational difficulties”. Nevertheless there are problems too with the definition of forced labour, and notions of consent and voluntariness.

There is not a simple division between the oppressed, forced labourer on the one hand, and the empowered, free wage labourer on the other. This is partly because the freedom of workers to change employer is always subject to constraints – contractual obligations and degrees of economic consequences being among the obvious ones. But there is also huge variation between economic sectors and states in terms of what are socially and legally constructed as acceptable employment practices. Questions about what constitutes an exploitative employment practice are much disputed - indeed they have historically been, and remain, a central focus of the organised labour movement’s struggle to protect workers. There is variation between countries and variation between economic sectors in the same country in terms of what is socially and legally constructed as acceptable employment practice. In the absence of a global political consensus on minimum employment rights, and of cross-national and cross-sector norms regarding employment relations, it extremely difficult to come up with a neutral, universal yardstick against which “exploitation” can be measured. The protocol definition of trafficking thus leaves open questions about

precisely how exploitative an employment relation has to be before we can say that a person has been recruited and transported “for purposes of exploitation”. Likewise, we need to ask just how deceived a worker has to be about the nature and terms of the employment prior to migrating before s/he can properly be described as a “victim of trafficking”? There are numerous different elements to the employment relation: hours of work, rates of pay, job content, work rate, working practices, living conditions, length of the contract, and so on. Is it enough for a worker to be deceived about just one of these elements by a recruiter, or must s/he be entirely duped about every aspect of her work in order to qualify as a trafficked person?

It is less straightforward than may be initially imagined to distinguish trafficking and forced labour from legally tolerated employment contracts (also from legally tolerated forms of exploitation of women and children within families). Forced labour and trafficking is not a single problem that results from individual bad practices, neither is it a discrete category. It can be used to describe a continuum of experiences and exploitative relations. At one end we can find people who have been kidnapped, forcibly transported and forced to labour through the use of violence and death threats, at the other we can find people who are well paid and work in good conditions in an environment protective of their labour rights. Between the two lies a vast range of experiences. It must be recognized that ideas about the precise point on this continuum where labour can be described as “forced” is a *political* decision.

Despite all these definitional problems, trafficking in persons (which in the most general of terms is understood to involve the transportation of persons by means of coercion or deception into exploitative or slavery-like conditions) is currently recognised as a serious problem by a wide range of different agencies, organisations and lobby groups. And yet different groups identify trafficking as a problem for very different reasons and often have very different political agendas with regard to the issue. Three broad groupings

are of particular significance for debates on trafficking: states, radical feminists and labour and migrant activists (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson 2002).

The 2000 Protocol, unlike the 1949 convention, does not restrict trafficking definitions to prostitution. Nevertheless research and practice have continued to focus very strongly on trafficking for sexual exploitation. The debate about the relationship between trafficking and prostitution reflects the deep divisions that bedevil international debate on prostitution more generally. On one side of the divide stand those who might be termed "feminist abolitionists" and on the other "sex workers' rights" activists, who regard prostitution as a form of service work, rejecting the idea that it is intrinsically degrading, distinguishing between free choice and forced prostitution. In contrast feminist abolitionists argue that prostitution reduces women to bought objects, and is always and necessarily degrading and damaging to women. Thus, they recognise no distinction between "forced" and "free choice" prostitution, and hold that in tolerating, regulating or legalizing prostitution, states permit the repeated violation of human rights to dignity and sexual autonomy. All prostitution is a form of sexual slavery, and trafficking is intrinsically connected to prostitution. From this vantage point, measures to eradicate the market for commercial sex are simultaneously anti-trafficking measures, and *vice versa*.

Migrant workers' and other labour organisations, child rights' NGOs, sex workers' rights activists, and other human rights agencies and NGOs approach trafficking on the basis of more general concerns about a range of human rights abuses and abusive working conditions to which particular groups are especially vulnerable. The International Labour Organisation for example, argues that "trafficking" has given an impetus to understanding of forced labour and presents new options to law and policy-makers in combating abusive recruitment and employment practices (ILO 2005). More generally even the most committed, humanitarian and selfless NGOs, lobbyists and academics need funding to continue their work, and in a world

of scarce resources it is unsurprising if they try to fit their own preoccupations with topics that are currently viewed as politically important, “sexy” and worthy of funding.

The interest of states in trafficking is often grounded in concerns about irregular immigration and/or transnational organised crime, which are viewed as a threat to national security. However, trafficking is also invoked by state actors as the discourse when recognizing the presence of migrants who are victims of exploitation and abuse. Because the various groups that are involved in debates on trafficking view the issue through the lens of different political concerns and priorities, attempts to produce a precise definition of “trafficking in persons” and to identify appropriate policy responses to it have provoked, and continue to provoke, much controversy. I will focus on state interest in trafficking and the tensions between governments’ obligations to protect and promote human rights, and their desire to control immigration and in particular to restrict irregular migration and claims for asylum.

States claims to proactively protect the human rights of migrants are largely through trafficking legislation. Trafficking enables states to capture the moral high ground at a time of increasing restrictions on migrants’ rights. Indeed it may facilitate an apparent coincidence of interest between states and those asserting migrant workers’ rights. Julia O’Connell Davidson suggests that state concerns with trafficking may be

at least at on one level, an attempt to reassert the old boundaries and binaries of migration (voluntary/forced, legal/illegal, male/female, adult/child), and so to reclaim the old certainties of a world order in which modern liberal states occupy the moral, as well as the economic, high-ground. The corpses that wash up on the beaches of Southern Spain and Italy, or found suffocated in container lorries at Dover... are not tragic testimony to enormity of global political and economic inequalities and the inhumanity of the affluent world’s immigration regimes – they speak only to the barbarity of the Other (the ‘snakeheads’, the ‘mafia’, the ‘slave traders’).

O’Connell Davidson (2005)

It should be noted that anti-trafficking legislation is very concentrated on criminalizing movement and facilitators of movement. It is a component part of immigration/asylum legislation (or prostitution legislation) rather than labour law. Trafficked migrants are 'victims', of morally 'evil' employers, pimps and gangmasters who are more often than not, foreign. They inhabit a murky dangerous world that, while physically in Europe, seems far removed from the living rooms, offices and cafes. These 'victims of trafficking' are contrasted with the other kind of migrant, the 'one legged roofer' and the 'bogus asylum seeker' who defraud benefit systems, taking accommodation, health services and jobs from EU citizens. Trafficked people are "victims in genuine need" (Command Paper 5387, 2002) who must be distinguished from "illegal immigrants" who are "willing customers" (ibid). Trafficked victims are victims of evil masterminds, not structures of immigration and employment. Because trafficking debates have been so fixated on sex and to a lesser extent domestic work, sectors where personalized relations are so important, attention has been further directed away from these structural matters and towards individual bad employers, pimps or agencies.

Victims of trafficking are also imagined as being "illegal", usually illegal entrants. However, as previously discussed, the distinction between legal and illegal migrant is in itself rather problematic, and even legal migratory processes often have illegal elements (illegal payments for facilitation of valid passports for example). The Protocol Definition has no reference to legal status and indeed, despite being supplementary to the Transnational Organised Crime, the victims themselves do not have to be moved across international borders. It is also the case that trafficked persons can enter a state legally. For instance, women may enter as "wives" and be forced into work, including in prostitution, and not allowed to keep their wages. Legal systems of labour migration are not immune from abuse and exploitation either. Very often workers are vulnerable to abuses such as non-payment of wages, passport retention, and violence precisely because they have migrated legally under work permit schemes that tie them to a named

employer. Such schemes make it virtually impossible for workers to change their employer or retract from the employment contract without consequence for their immigration status, even if they discover that have been deceived as to terms and conditions of work by the recruiting agents. To retract from such employment contracts would also often lead to demands to repay recruitment and travel costs to the agents who arranged their transport, or leave the worker unable to recoup payments already made to such agents.

There are cases in which legally regulated employment agencies have recruited and transported workers through means of deception. Furthermore, the fees of perfectly legal recruitment agencies are often so high that would-be migrants have to borrow money in order to pay them, and in some cases, such loans are offered by the recruitment agencies themselves (Anderson and Rogaly 2005). This effectively constructs a type and degree of dependence between migrants and third parties that would almost certainly be regarded as coercive if organised within the informal economy. The co-existence of personalistic and materialistic forms of power can be acknowledged and condemned in the informal sector but within formal systems of labour and migration management may be so troubling it has to be ignored. On the other hand the mutually reinforcing combination of relations operating outside the reach of any state control, and personalized power facilitate an approach to abuse that is concerned with individual behaviour rather than structures of power, with solutions residing in changing or punishing morally reprehensible individuals, throwing out the rotten apples and not examining the rotting barrel the apples have been placed in. The questions of how an unregulated space is created and maintained which facilitates abusive relations, and how gross inequalities of power can be supported by the state, are not asked.

Because international debates on "trafficking" have been so firmly situated in the context of concerns about organised criminal involvement in international and internal migration, and because they have conflated two fields of

experience that are not always or necessarily conjoined (exploitation and abuse within irregular migration and exploitation and abuse at the point of destination), the dominant discourse on “trafficking” allows both national and international policy-makers and agencies room for a certain amount of doublespeak. When asked whether their primary concern is the breaching of immigration controls, or the breach of migrants’ human rights in transit and at the point of destination; or whether they seek to combat the illegal movement of people, or traffickers, or the exploitative and abusive practices to which trafficked persons (among others) are subject; it is possible for them to answer that they are equally concerned with all of these alternatives. This obscures the fact that a) policies designed to control irregular forms of migration can actually encourage, permit or exacerbate violations of migrants’ human rights, and b) policies that focus on the prevention of illegal movements of people do nothing to address the factors that make it possible for employers and others to engage in exploitative and slavery-like practices at the point of destination.

Conclusion

There are features of domestic work in private households that make it very difficult and very expensive to regulate effectively and balancing the regulation of domestic work with fears of state intrusion into private lives is deeply problematic. Moreover the regulation of workers’ protection has been focussed on the legal concept of the employment relationship based on a distinction between dependent workers and self-employed persons. The rise in the informal sector has brought to the fore a confusion with regard to this concept: the employment relationship may be disguised – as a relationship with a different legal nature (civil, commercial, family etc) or as a short-term relationship when it is actually a stable and indefinite relationship (as in persistent renewal of short term contracts); or as a relationship with an

intermediary/agent rather than an employer. With domestic work, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that domestic work is often not constructed as proper work at all. It is not subject to approved procedures, not subject to public criteria, not socially ratified. There continues to be a non-recognition of reproductive work. While the UK case demonstrates that there is space for recognising the violation of human rights that can take place in the reproductive sphere (for want of a better phrase!), this is different from giving reproductive work prominence.

Even if a well-regulated formal sector were established, illegal or informal market segments would not automatically or necessarily disappear. In those states where there have been attempts to formalise and regulate domestic work, or certain aspects of it such as France, there is still a significant informal market for domestic services. While there is a collective agreement on domestic labour, which professionalises domestic work into specialisms and hierarchies the problem broadly speaking, there are two categories of workers, those *sous responsabilite de l'employeur*, and those with *employeur present ou non*. The former earn less and their job is less defined, the latter are specialised professionals. I will leave you to anticipate where migrants are congregated. Legally protected and recognized work in private households is not open to some groups (such as undocumented migrants) and regulation of domestic work does nothing, in itself, to counteract racism, xenophobia and prejudice against migrants and minority ethnic groups. Indeed, the desire to apply and enforce labour standards can co-exist with the wish to drive migrant women out of these sectors. Unless governments do something to address the social devaluation of migrants, and their social, political and economic marginalisation, regulation may merely serve to reinforce existing racial, ethnic, and national hierarchies in domestic work. We must recognize too that not everyone who works in this sector necessarily wishes to be incorporated into civil society as a "domestic worker".

I am suspicious of the win-win approach that argues both female employer and worker benefit from the commodification of domestic labour. This emanates in part from the ease with which it lets middle-class women off the hook. Researchers, policy-makers, politicians, activists, trades unionists wrestling with ambivalence and guilt at their dependence on a carer for a child or elderly relative for example, are those which have easiest access to the fora where such debates are articulated and responded to both theoretically and empirically. Treating domestic work as just another job is not the solution to managing the immense contradictions and inequalities inherent in the migrant domestic worker/employer relationship. There is no "quick fix". Nevertheless I have long advocated that written contracts for paid domestic workers are important and require special arrangements for monitoring and enforcement given that the worksite is a private household. There is a difference between short term, practical responses and long term goals. Contracts and enforcement mechanisms for domestic work that recognize its particular and peculiar nature and power imbalances would represent an important step forward that would do much to alleviate abuse and exploitation. But it is only one step. In an ideal world we would not have domestic workers, but neither would we have inequality, injustice and poverty. But calling for contracts for domestic work does not necessarily contradict a long, long term goal of not having domestic workers at all. Indeed it is a step along the way. Given the imbalances of power between employers and workers in private households, any process that can facilitate the organizing of workers themselves represents important progress.

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