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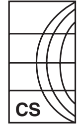

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Same work, same value? Paid domestic workers' and housewives' struggles for rights in Uruguay and Paraguay

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Abstract

Domestic labour has been historically undervalued. This article focuses on organizations of women who perform this activity – housewives and paid domestic workers – and their demands for recognition and rights, arguing that despite their shared interests, there are differences that interrupt their common experiences and add tension to their interactions. Drawing on interviews and participant observations, this article analyses the relationship between paid domestic workers' and housewives' organizations in Uruguay and Paraguay, highlighting social divisions around the distribution of domestic labour and discussing how the articulation of differences can lead either to further reproducing inequalities between these groups, or to contesting and overcoming them. The contrast between the cases shows how 'racialized' contexts use ethnic differences to naturalize the undervaluing of domestic workers, overlooking similarities and hindering collaboration between groups.

Keywords

Cross-organizational collaboration, domestic work, entangled inequalities, racialization, women's social movements

Introduction

Pictures of demonstrations in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. In all of them, women holding brooms, dusters, or mops, one with a young child in her arms, others carrying placards with demands. One could think that all these pictures were from the same protest, but they are not. Some were taken in the early 2000s and portray housewives claiming retirement rights, while others show a demonstration that took place in 2018, in

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which domestic workers demanded the right to the minimum wage. The similarities between the groups are remarkable. But even more striking seem to be – at least for some actors – the differences.

Housewives' and domestic workers' organizations have been present in Latin America for decades. They not only perform the same kinds of tasks but also share the interest in the valorization of care or domestic work – indeed, if this activity were recognized as work, housewives could claim retirement rights, and domestic workers would be granted the same labour rights as any other worker. Previous research has concluded that the creation of alliances between different groups making claims around care policies is a fundamental strategy to a fairer distribution and higher valorization of domestic work (Williams, 2018: 557). However, there are certain social hierarchies that interrupt the common experience of these women, making collaboration difficult.

Differences and similarities cut across the relations between domestic workers and housewives. This article analyses the way in which these are negotiated and the meaning that is attached to them, in particular, how the articulation of differences can lead either to further reproducing inequalities between these groups, or to contesting and overcoming them. The analytical framework draws on the entangled inequalities' perspective (Braig et al., 2013; Costa, 2011; Motta et al., 2018), which understands social inequalities as multidimensional asymmetries (economic, cultural and power-political) that derive from different power regimes (class, gender and race/ethnicity) and that interact with different spatial (local, national, global) and temporal (historical) scales. I discuss how the entanglements of different axes and dimensions of inequality that cut across this occupational field have an impact on the position domestic workers assume in the social structure and their interactions with other actors. Unlike other authors (Gorbán and Tizziani, 2014; Kofes, 2001; Lan, 2006; Vidal, 2007), the focus of my study and particularly the empirical data on which the analysis relies is not everyday interactions that take place within the domestic sphere at an interpersonal level, but rather on relations between organizations that seek to make an impact on political and legal arenas. Hence, I am interested in discussing how representatives of domestic workers' and housewives' organizations describe their relationship to each other, and the effect that this positioning has on their chances of building alliances to achieve their goals.

To illustrate this discussion, I analyse the cases of Uruguay and Paraguay, the two smallest countries in the Southern Cone Region of Latin America in terms of territorial extension, population and economy. Domestic work is an important activity for women in both: 13.13% of the female working population in Uruguay and 17.1% in Paraguay are employed in this sector (ILO/OIT, 2015). Furthermore, in both countries, most domestic workers are national citizens, unlike other cases like Argentina, Chile, or Costa Rica, where immigration rates tend to be high (Soto et al., 2016). But the similarities end there. Socially and politically speaking, the differences between these two nations are numerous and profound. Also, the way domestic workers organize and struggle for their rights in Uruguay and Paraguay differs at many levels, particularly regarding their relation to housewives' organizations. Analysing such contrasting cases highlights that although the underlying dynamic is the same – inequalities that cut across domestic work originate in the same regimes – it takes place in a context with its own characteristics, and hence produces differing outcomes. In this sense, the relationship between housewives' and

domestic workers' organizations exposes a series of historically rooted dynamics that affect their experiences and the image that they have of each other.

It is noteworthy that this is a complex relationship. Both housewives and domestic workers take care of the household and its members, but while the former do it for their own family, the latter carry out this work in exchange for money. Furthermore, many housewives – particularly those heading their organizations – do not perform most of the domestic duties themselves but hire domestic workers to do them. Nevertheless, they still identify as housewives, since their main occupation is to manage and supervise domestic chores, and they do not have a paid job outside the household. This means that housewives' organizations could be regarded either as allies of domestic workers – when claiming for the recognition of domestic work as *work* – or as their counterpart, when domestic workers are negotiating higher wages and better working conditions *from them*.

The analysis draws on data gathered through participant observations and interviews carried out in 2016 in Montevideo and Asunción, the capital cities of Uruguay and Paraguay, as part of a larger study on paid domestic workers' organizations and their allies. I contacted not only domestic workers, but also other actors that collaborated with them such as feminist groups, trade unions, multilateral cooperation agencies, universities and government representatives. It was not until I started my fieldwork in Uruguay that the important role of the housewives' organization became clear to me, and I became further interested in their rapport with domestic workers after noticing that groups with similar characteristics in Paraguay had a quite different relationship with each other.

This article is divided into five sections, ending with some concluding remarks. The next section describes the interpenetration of domestic work and gender conceptions, pointing out further social asymmetries that characterize the relations around *paid* domestic work. Subsequently, I discuss the link between the lower value attributed to this occupation and the characteristics of the people who perform it before presenting the data from my case studies. Finally, I seek to contrast the evidence of these two countries, discussing how the inclusion of a further axis of stratification adds yet another barrier that needs to be overcome for the recognition of similarities between groups.

For love or money, but always for women

Domestic chores such as cleaning, washing, cooking and taking care of other people have been historically socialized as women's responsibility. Ideas and assumptions built around the concepts of male and female are the basis of the distribution of tasks within and beyond the household and have a bearing on the value assigned to different activities. According to Federici (2004: 115), the sexual division of labour introduces not only differentiation in terms of tasks that men and women should perform, but also in terms of their experiences, their lives, and their relation to capital and other workers. The work performed by men and women is thus presented as if they were part of parallel and disconnected worlds, hiding the nexus between capitalist production and care (Carrasco, 2003; Jelin, 2010) and attributing value to one – that deserves a wage – while denying it to the other.

By definition, *domestic* work refers to the labour performed within the household. However, this does not mean that it must necessarily be carried out by a member of the

family; in fact, many people choose to outsource these chores. Yet even when someone is hired to clean the household and/or look after its members, the gender specificity remains. Different studies have indicated that when both partners are inserted in the labour market and a third person takes over the domestic duties, the woman of the household is still in charge of organizing, managing and supervising these tasks, which are, in turn, normally performed by another woman (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Lan, 2006). Therefore, instead of considering paid and unpaid domestic work as dichotomous categories, they can be seen as 'structural continuities that characterize the feminization of domestic labor across the public and private spheres' (Lan, 2003: 189). This does not mean that there is no difference between the labour performed and the position assumed by a housewife and a domestic worker. As I seek to show in the next pages, 'women have different experiences of housework, mediated by differences such as class, age and "race"' (Palmer, 1989 cited by Anderson, 2000: 17).

Many authors have pointed out that the liberation of women from the burden of domestic duties should be described rather as the liberation of *some* women, that is, those from the upper classes (Anderson, 2000; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Rollins, 1985). This liberation does not occur through a negotiation of the distribution of responsibilities within the household – e.g. between men and women – but through the outsourcing of these tasks to other people: more specifically, to other women.

The fact that this occupation is regarded as 'women's work' has to do with the belief that women are intrinsically suited to it, as well as that many women have lifetime experience of having performed domestic duties in their homes, perhaps from an early age. Not only this, there is unequal access to education linked to gender, social class and area of residence, which affects rural women's access to jobs that require certain levels of education.[1] As a consequence, paid domestic work has been historically performed by rural migrants and other women who have not been able to access higher-paying jobs, either because of their young age, their lack of training, or their pressing housing and food needs that tend to be covered through this occupation (Jelin, 1977).

In any case, domestic workers not only 'set free' their (female) employers from housework, they also play an important role in affirming the household's social status. Authors analysing this labour relation in the Americas (Anderson, 2000; Costa, 2018; Gill, 1994) have stated that hiring a domestic worker is how upper- and middle-class families demonstrate an advantageous position in the social structure. This status affirmation is even more important for the woman of the household (Anderson, 2000: 21) since it is she who, by hiring a domestic worker, can access better-paid jobs and/or enjoy more leisure time. At the same time, it is also she who tries the hardest to distance herself from the domestic worker (Kofes, 2001: 43), with whom she continues to share the responsibility of household duties. In addition to class differences, employers often resort to other – sometimes even more visible – differences, such as 'racial' or ethnic traits.

In fact, paid domestic work is not only an occupation typically performed by women from lower social classes, but also by racialized women. This is related to historical colonial relations (Bernardino-Costa, 2007; Cumes, 2014; Durin, 2014), as well as to migration processes. The fact that migrant women tend to be employed mainly as domestic workers is often linked to differences between employer and worker that are visible to the naked eye, such as skin colour or other physical features. But these differences are

sometimes more subtle, particularly when domestic workers are citizens of the country in which they work.

According to Lan (2006: 11), even if the construction of social boundaries is many times based on the political-legal regulation of citizenship and national borders, it also involves symbolic struggles and local negotiations in the interactions that take place between employers and workers. As I seek to demonstrate in this article, these struggles occur not only in relation to citizenship or more 'obvious' ethnic or 'racial' traits but can also rest on differences of language or place of origin (urban/rural).

Is it really work? Struggling for recognition and rights

Nowadays, domestic work is generally recognized as *work* by academia, governments and multilateral institutions. However, for a long time, this was not the case. Drawing from the classical political economy premise that considers the labour performed within the household as a 'reproductive' activity, domestic labour was depicted as something different from *genuine work*, insofar as it did not create 'productive surplus'.[2]

These ideas have been systematically refuted from the 1970s on by feminist studies (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 1975, 2004) that demonstrated that the activities carried out in the household are an integral (although invisible) part of wage or 'productive' labour. Nonetheless, the value of domestic work is many times still not recognized. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that the value assigned to any activity or its products, far from being derived from its 'essence', is mediated by social relations. Accordingly, an analysis of the connection between the value attributed to different occupations and gender reveals that 'what society deems valuable is in fact part of a field of social conflict, determined not by intrinsic value, "natural" merit, or abstract market forces but by power relations' (Blum, 1991: 17).

Although this leads to devaluation of both paid and unpaid domestic work, it is more severe in the case of the former, where the most vulnerable ends of the axes gender, class and race/ethnicity tend to converge. The intersection of these axes, and the interplay among them, affects the position domestic workers assume in society. While the economic dimension is the most obvious – domestic work it is one of the worst paid activities, regionally and globally (ILO/OIT, 2015) – their position is also linked to cultural and political inequalities. In this sense, all dimensions are interrelated and reciprocally affect each other, in a paradigmatic case of what scholars have called *entangled inequalities* (Braig et al., 2013; Costa, 2011; Jelin et al., 2018). In Gutiérrez-Rodríguez's (2010: 15) words:

> Domestic work is not only badly paid because it is signified as non-productive, but because those doing this work are feminized and racialized subjects considered as 'inferior' to the hegemonic normative subject. Again, the devaluation of domestic work is culturally predicated and reflects a hegemonic perception.

Accordingly, domestic work has long been pushed into the background when discussing labour codes. What is more, if labour laws have addressed domestic work at all, it has only been to mandate lower salaries and benefits for the sector, as well as longer working

hours (Barbagelata, 1978; Valiente, 2010). This situation started to change over the last decade when many Latin American countries – as well as some from other regions – changed their laws to guarantee more rights to this sector (see Blofield and Jokela, 2018). This was possible after many years of organizing and the creation of a broad transnational network of activism that supported domestic workers' organizations and their claims (see Goldsmith, 2013a; Mather, 2013; Pape, 2016).

Housewives, for their part, also organize – nationally and internationally[3] – to claim rights. However, since the work they perform is for their families and *unpaid*, their demands do not focus on labour rights, but on retirement and social security entitlements. The emphasis on the necessity of recognizing domestic work as *work*, nonetheless, remains.

I will now turn to domestic workers' and housewives' organizations in Uruguay and Paraguay, two cases that illustrate – in a contrasting way – how these groups articulate their differences and commonalities.

Two groups, one struggle: Housewives and domestic workers in Uruguay

The year 2005 marked a turning point in Uruguay. The country was still recovering from a serious economic crisis when the *Frente Amplio*, a left-oriented coalition and historical ally of the workers' movement, won the presidential elections. The new government introduced many reforms in different areas, promoting the resurgence of the welfare state. It is important to point out that Uruguay developed an early welfare state and a democratic culture that made it one of the most stable countries in the region, creating a deep link between social state, democracy and unionism (Padrón and Wachendorfer, 2017). This led to a more egalitarian society in a region of deep inequalities, as I will further elaborate in the upcoming sections.

One of the most important reforms regarding labour relations was the decision to reactivate wage councils, which are tripartite negotiation procedures that bring together workers' and employers' representatives of each branch of activity. With the government as the mediator, the representatives negotiate not only wages but all types of benefits, signing agreements that set working conditions for each activity.

The positive effects of these changes were seen most clearly in the case of domestic workers. In his inaugural speech in March 2005, the newly elected president, Tabaré Vázquez, mentioned that one of the medium-term objectives of his government was to launch wage councils for the domestic and rural sectors, both historically excluded from this right.[4] Before the end of the year, domestic workers had reactivated the *Sindicato Único de Trabajadoras Domésticas* (SUTD), the historical trade union of the sector, and by 2006 Uruguay had already approved a law guaranteeing domestic workers the same rights as any other wage worker. Uruguay was not only the first country in the region to legally recognize all labour rights to this sector, but it also implemented innovative strategies to perform labour inspections without violating the privacy of households, putting into place high sanctions for employers that did not comply with the law (see Goldsmith, 2013b; Palomeque, 2019). Fulfilling the government's promise of the bargaining procedure, however, proved to be more complicated.

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

After failed negotiations with a couple of employers' organizations, in 2007 the government proposed the *Liga de Amas de Casa y Consumidores del Uruguay* (LACCU), a housewives' and consumers' organization, as a possible employers' representative. The LACCU, a civil association created in 1995 to dignify the role of the housewife and defend the rights of consumers, was not created for the task proposed by the government but decided nevertheless to assume this responsibility. In August 2008 the tripartite bargaining council met for the first time, and by the end of the year, they had already signed their first agreement that included an increase in wages and other benefits. From there on, they continued to negotiate in the different rounds of wage councils, obtaining new salary increases and further benefits.[5]

When I discussed this experience with different actors in Uruguay,[6] many of them highlighted the fact that the LACCU is a 'very peculiar employers' organization'. For a start, employers' representatives in wage councils are normally business chambers, that is, organizations created to promote the interests of their sector. As pointed out, the LACCU emerged with a different objective, and although it assumed the counterpart's role in the negotiations with the SUTD, their members do not represent the interest of all employers of domestic workers. Households with domestic service are a large and highly heterogeneous group. Some hire the service for a few hours a week, while others have a live-in worker that leaves only on Sundays (if at all). Many times, the employers are also workers who need domestic help so that their children are supervised when they go to work; but in other cases, the family has a larger income that allows the woman to stay home and supervise the domestic worker(s). The board members of the housewives' organization, according to the information I gathered through my interviews, seem to belong to this last group. Nevertheless, nobody disputed the participation of the housewives' organization in the wage council and research in this respect has concluded that the LACCU is seen as a legitimate and representative actor (Ciapessoni and Nión, 2015: 132).

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

> [T]he labour performed within the household, whether paid or unpaid, has a special value; it is something that should be recognized, valued. . . . We always say that the labour performed by domestic workers deserves to be positioned in the best possible way and that it deserves to be considered a job like any other.[7] (LACCU representative)

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

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

Correspondingly, representatives of the LACCU and the SUTD, as well as members of other organizations that accompanied their negotiations, agree that the relationship between these organizations, which should have been conflictive 'by nature', was held within a framework of respect and collaboration, even when assuming different positions during negotiation procedures. This does not mean that conflicts were absent. Nevertheless, what this case highlights is that despite its role as the counterpart, the LACCU provided support by agreeing with the main claim of domestic workers – the need to be recognized as workers with rights – helping them achieve better wages and working conditions.

'From different universes': The Paraguayan case

After more than 60 years of rule of a conservative political party, Paraguay experienced a change in 2008 with the election of Fernando Lugo, the presidential candidate of a coalition of opposition parties and left-oriented social organizations. However, this experience ended abruptly after a crisis that removed Lugo from office in 2012. Not many profound changes were implemented in the three years and ten months of his government, and the unequal social structure remained relatively unchanged. Paraguay's inequality levels are among the highest in the region, with a Gini index of 0.497, surpassing Latin America's average (0.467) (ECLAC/CEPAL, 2017: 81). In comparison, Uruguay's Gini index is not only lower (0.391), but it also experienced a big decline in the period 2008–2014 (–2.4%), when Paraguay's went up by 0.2% (ECLAC/CEPAL, 2017: 45).

Given this context, the organizational process of domestic workers in Paraguay was quite different. Without strong support from the government and immersed in a social context marked by the weakness and high fragmentation of the labour movement,[8] domestic workers started to organize with the help of a feminist NGO that was working on projects funded by the ILO (International Labour Organization) and UN-WOMEN. Even if, with time, national trade unions and the government started to support domestic workers' struggle for more rights, the resulting process was much slower, more fragmented, weaker, and less positive compared to the Uruguayan experience. The first organization of this decade emerged in 2008, and by 2012, two more were active. After many years of struggle, in 2015, a new law for domestic workers was finally passed, but the results were not what domestic workers expected: the minimum wage for the sector was set at only 60% of the minimum wage for other activities.[9]

In contrast to the Uruguayan case, one actor that publicly opposed the new law was the *Liga de Amas de Casa del Paraguay* (LAC-Py), the Paraguayan Housewives' Organization. Their main objection was to the increase in the minimum wage for domestic workers (which went from 40% of the legal minimum wage to 60%). Although the aim of the LAC-Py is the same as that of the homonymous group in Uruguay – obtaining retirement rights for housewives – they do not see the demands of domestic workers as an integral part of their struggle. As one of the actors that took part in the negotiation table for the new regulation of domestic work puts it:

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

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

On this point, it is worth making some clarifications about the use of the Guarani language in Paraguay. Although only 2% of the population identifies as indigenous (DGEEC, 2012a), the percentage of Paraguayans who speak Guarani – either as their only language or in combination with Spanish – is 80.3% (DGEEC, 2012b). This means that speaking Guarani (an indigenous language) does not correspond directly with being identified – by oneself or by others – as having indigenous descent. That being said, Guarani is the predominant language in rural areas, being spoken exclusively in 62.2% of rural households, a percentage that sinks to 15.4% in urban areas, where the incidence of Spanish is vastly greater (DGEEC, 2012b). Yet the use of these languages is not only related to geographical differences – class divides are intertwined with linguistic ones: while 74.2% of the population in the poorest income decile is monolingual Guarani, those in the richest decile that speak predominantly this language represent only 11.2%. The opposite happens when considering Spanish, the language that is predominant for 8.5% of the population in the poorest decile, and for 53.6% in the richest (DGEEC, 2018). This does not mean that Guarani is the cause of poverty, but there is an important correlation between spoken language and opportunities for upward social mobility. In this sense, being a Guarani speaker means being excluded from the highest levels of education, quality education at all levels, as well as better-paid jobs (Ortiz Sandoval, 2012).

Regarding the population of domestic workers in Paraguay, three-quarters of them declare speaking Guarani, either as their sole language (30%) or in combination with Spanish (46%) (Soto, 2014). However, these data do not reflect the linguistic change that

many of them must undergo when migrating from rural areas to work in urban homes, where Spanish is spoken almost exclusively. This often generates a situation in which the worker is even more unprotected because she has not mastered the linguistic codes of this new environment and, consequently, is unable to negotiate better working conditions or resolve conflicts that may arise. In the words of one domestic worker:

> I left my home when I was 15 years old. I am from the countryside, and my problem then was that I couldn't speak Spanish well. I mean, I didn't even understand it. It wasn't just that I couldn't speak it well because, honestly, until today sometimes I still struggle to do so. At that time, I didn't understand many things and they [the employers] had to repeat everything to me many times. Moreover, I wasn't allowed to speak because they didn't want their kids to hear me speaking Guarani since they thought that that was going to hinder their development. (Representative of a domestic workers' organization)

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

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

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

> The law did not consider the socioanthropological-linguistic situation of the universes in question: employers and workers. (LAC-Py representative)

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

> Nowadays, most people don't work as live-in anymore. And the next day, they just don't show up. And if you ask them why they didn't come to work, they tell you: 'Oh, because it rained and the road was wet; it rained and the bus did not come – or – my neighbour died – that's a

> common one – my neighbour died and I had to help his wife', and so on. It's just absolute irresponsibility! This lack of responsibility towards work, which is a cultural thing, it's totally cultural. And it's those things, the cultural-anthropological part, I say, that were not considered in the new law. The anthropological or cultural issues related to the situation of the rural class were not taken into account. (LAC-Py representative)

Although culture as a basis for ethno-racial differentiation is more diffuse and difficult to demarcate than phenotypic traits, it is equally effective in establishing boundaries between groups. What is more, the distinction between culture and nature is many times blurred, as in the case of the previous quote that assumes that, by the mere fact of coming from rural areas, all domestic workers behave in a certain way: irresponsibly towards their obligations.

Overcoming differences . . . or legitimizing inequalities?

Differences are normally used to classify, organize and create boundaries between categories, defining groups and creating hierarchies. However, categories are culturally and symbolically produced (Reygadas, 2018), which means that the same traits can be read differently depending on the context. For instance, even though for an external observer there may not be remarkable differences between Paraguayan housewives and domestic workers – in terms of citizenship or 'race' in its most phenotypic sense – other elements such as place of origin and cultural identity have a symbolic impact that separates them and affects their relationship to each other. Inequalities in turn are generated and justified by way of difference (Reygadas, 2018: 150). Regardless of the criterion used for separating the groups, once the difference is constructed, symbolic processes interact with mechanisms which discriminate, inferiorize and segregate those marked as 'different' by the hegemonic normative subject, producing inequality by creating barriers that hinder access to desirable goods and positions (Motta et al., 2018: 10).

Drawing on differences regarding the place of origin, spoken language, or educational level, employers in Paraguay attribute a different culture and work ethic to domestic workers, constructing a stereotyped image of them and configuring their social inferiority. By doing so, they justify the undervaluation of the work performed by these women while reinforcing their class identity. It is through this discursive articulation of differences (Costa, 2019) and the construction of domestic workers' social stereotypes of inferiority that employers legitimize their dominant position in the social structure (see also Gorbán and Tizziani, 2014).

Having said this, it must be highlighted that while the identification of difference enables inequality, it does not automatically create it (Reygadas, 2018: 150). The relation between difference and inequality is contingent and empirical (Brubaker, 2015: 11). As the Uruguayan case showed, housewives were able – at least discursively and/or as a political strategy – to identify themselves with domestic workers and their claims, overcoming class differences and (at least temporally) dissolving the boundaries between them. But while class asymmetries are present in both cases, it is in Paraguay that ethnic or cultural differences play a major role.[10] Social class and cultural identity – expressed mainly through language – are two categories that are deeply intertwined in the

Paraguayan context. This example shows how racial or ethnic characteristics, intertwined with class affiliations, operate as a barrier for the recognition of similarities, leaving an image of 'difference' between housewives and domestic workers.

The Uruguayan case, on the other hand, presents a more ambivalent situation. Although housewives support the main claim of domestic workers – the need to be recognized as workers with rights – their relation to each other is still marked by asymmetries. In this sense, even if – discursively – they overcome their differences and focus on their similarities as women who perform an activity that has been historically undervalued, the mere existence of domestic workers presupposes the existence of employers who assume a higher position in society. However, by recognizing that domestic workers do deserve rights and accepting the intermediation of the state, inequalities are negotiated and the asymmetries between the groups can be reduced.

Concluding remarks

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

Women have different experiences of housework, mediated by class specificities and ethnic-racial origin which produce entanglements in which one category influences the other, and vice versa. Migrant, poor and Guarani speaker describes most Paraguayan domestic workers. The crystallization of these axes of stratification in their experience not only affects the position they assume in the social structure at the socioeconomic or political level but is also discursively used to legitimize the unequal treatment they receive. In this respect, the enunciation of differences by the representative of the housewives' organization in Paraguay is nothing more than the discursive articulation of social inequalities (Costa, 2019) that leads, ultimately, to their naturalization.

In the Uruguayan case, on the other hand, class differences did not represent a barrier to the identification of similarities between housewives and domestic workers, and ethnic or racial differences were not even mentioned. The interest in valorizing domestic work was greater, helping them to bridge their differences and act, to a certain extent, as allies. Yet it is important to consider the characteristics of the sociopolitical context to better understand this outcome. The social stratification system is much more homogeneous in Uruguay, not only in terms of class but also in relation to ethnic and racial differences, making cooperation between groups easier. For instance, when comparing income distribution by quintiles using data from ECLAC/CEPAL (2017: 42), it is easy to see the greater contrast between upper and lower classes in Paraguay, where the richest

quintile received 48% of income, and the lowest, only 5%. In Uruguay, on the other hand, the percentages are less extreme, since the richest 20% of the population received 36% of income, and the poorest, 10%. Similarly, when comparing the incidence of poverty in the indigenous (7%) and non-indigenous population (4%) in Uruguay, the difference is not as marked as in Paraguay, where the proportion is 61% to 30% (ECLAC/CEPAL, 2016: 30). Regarding the Afro-descendant population, 11% of them are below the poverty line in Uruguay, while in other countries in the region, for instance in Brazil, this percentage rises to 22%, in contrast to 10% of the non-Afro-descendant or indigenous population (ECLAC/CEPAL, 2016: 30).

Furthermore, Uruguayan political culture is based on cooperation and inclusion over ruptures and divisions, as expressed by the tradition of 'unity in diversity',[11] the foundation of the workers' movement. This differs greatly from the Paraguayan case.[12] In addition, the domestic workers' trade union in Uruguay proved to be much stronger than the three domestic workers' organizations in Paraguay, having a capacity for greater pressure thanks to the decisive support of the national trade union confederation, the government, and the institutionalization of negotiation mechanisms. The joint work of these groups helped domestic workers gain labour rights, while at the same time revitalizing the role of the housewives' organization, which before its involvement in the wage council was barely known within Uruguay.

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

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Notes

1. Even if the gender gap in access to education is decreasing, there are still fewer girls than boys in primary and secondary schools worldwide, and girls from poorer backgrounds are especially affected (UNESCO, 2015: 3). Nevertheless, the biggest gap in access to education

in Latin America is not found between men and women, but between areas of residence. In fact, the average years of schooling in urban areas is almost double that of rural areas, where girls, again, have less access to education than boys (Marchionni, 2018: 44–45).

2. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith defines productive labour as ‘the sort of labour which adds to the value of the subject upon which it is bestowed’. Marx, for his part, addresses this issue in his *Grundrisse* (1857–1858), defining productive labour as wage labour that produces surplus-value for the capitalist (see Dussel, 1985).
3. See http://ligadeamasdecasa.com.uy/relacionamiento-a-nivel-nacional-e-internacional/
4. See http://archivo.presidencia.gub.uy/_web/noticias/2005/03/2005030111.htm
5. For more detailed information about the content of the agreements, see BPS (2018).
6. Representatives of the national trade unions’ confederation, advisors of domestic workers and researchers that implemented projects with the SUTD.
7. My translation. All interviews took place in Spanish.
8. For an analysis of the crisis and stagnation of the Paraguayan labour movement, see Lachi and Rojas Scheffer (2017).
9. This legal discrimination was finally overcome in June 2019, after years of struggle by organized domestic workers.
10. Racial differences are also present in Uruguay, but their incidence is lower. For instance, while 9% of the employed population in Uruguay identifies as Afro-descendant, this proportion rises to 15% when considering exclusively domestic workers. However, even if the Afro-descendant population is overrepresented among domestic workers, when looking at the sector as a whole this is not the most predominant characteristic (see Batthyány, 2012).
11. ‘*Unidad en la diversidad*’ is the motto of the PIT-CNT, the Uruguayan national trade confederation. See www.pitcnt.uy/novedades/noticias/item/2580-para-quien-va-con-nosotros; https://www.facebook.com/notes/pit-cnt-oficial/finaliz%C3%B3-un-gran-congreso-de-la-unidad-en-la-diversidad/2055803548010987/; and Padrón and Wachendorfer (2017).
12. Unlike Uruguay, the Paraguayan labour movement is extremely fragmented. For a country with a working population of around 3.5 million people (DGEEC, 2018), of which only 6.7% are union members (data from ILOSTAT, 2015, www.ilo.org/ilostat), there are 10 national trade union confederations.

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Résumé

Le travail domestique a toujours été sous-évalué. Dans cet article, je m'intéresse aux organisations de femmes effectuant cette activité – femmes au foyer et travailleuses domestiques rémunérées – et à leurs demandes de reconnaissance et de droits, en montrant que malgré leurs intérêts communs, il existe des différences qui interrompent leurs expériences communes et rendent leurs interactions plus tendues. Sur la base d'entretiens et d'observations participantes, j'analyse la relation entre les organisations de travailleuses domestiques rémunérées et celles de femmes au foyer en Uruguay et au Paraguay, en mettant en évidence les divisions sociales autour de la répartition du travail domestique et en examinant comment l'expression des différences peut conduire soit à reproduire et exacerber les inégalités entre ces collectifs, soit à les contester et les surmonter. Le contraste entre les cas étudiés montre comment dans des contextes « racialisés », les différences ethniques sont utilisées pour naturaliser la sous-évaluation des travailleurs domestiques, au risque de perdre de vue leurs similitudes et d'entraver la collaboration entre les collectifs.

Mots-clés

Collaboration entre organisations, inégalités croisées, mouvements sociaux de femmes, racialisation, travail domestique

Resumen

El trabajo doméstico ha sido históricamente infravalorado. Este artículo se centra en las organizaciones de mujeres que realizan esta actividad, amas de casa y trabajadoras domésticas remuneradas, y sus demandas de reconocimiento y derechos, argumentando que a pesar de sus intereses compartidos, existen diferencias que interrumpen sus vivencias comunes y agregan tensión a sus interacciones. A partir de entrevistas y observación participante, se analiza la relación entre las organizaciones de trabajadoras del hogar remuneradas y las de amas de casa en Uruguay y Paraguay, destacando las

divisiones sociales en torno a la distribución del trabajo doméstico y analizando cómo la articulación de las diferencias puede llevar bien a una mayor reproducción de las desigualdades entre estos grupos, o bien a la contestación frente a estas desigualdades y a su superación. El contraste entre los casos muestra cómo los contextos 'racializados' utilizan las diferencias étnicas para naturalizar la infravaloración de las trabajadoras domésticas, pasando por alto las similitudes y obstaculizando la colaboración entre grupos.

Palabras clave
Colaboración entre organizaciones, desigualdades entrelazadas, movimientos sociales de mujeres, racialización, trabajo doméstico