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Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo
University of Southern California

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Latina Immigrant Women and Paid Domestic Work: Upgrading the Occupation

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo
University of Southern California

ABSTRACT

This article discusses sociological research and practice with Latina immigrant women who do paid domestic work. Community activism and participant observation methods were integral parts of the research process, and the study findings were later used in an innovative information and outreach campaign aimed at Latina immigrant domestic workers. Research on immigrant women and work, scholarship on paid domestic work, and the emergence of the immigrant rights movement contextualize the discussion of the research and the applied focus.

Until recently, the orientation of the scholarly literature on immigration and the activist immigrant rights movement shared one significant feature: a traditional androcentric bias that obscured women's issues as immigrant women. This began to change in the 1980s, with the proliferation of new scholarship on immigrant women, and 1991 saw the first national conference on immigrant and refugee women, where activists discussed a diverse array of issues including alternative employment strategies for immigrant and refugee women.¹ A key breakthrough in these developments is understanding immigrant women as agents in their own right, as workers with their own particular migration trajectories and employment needs.

This article discusses the intersection of research and activism with immigrant women who do paid domestic work. After discussing some of the limitations of both scholarship and activism on immigrant women's issues, I describe the methodology and research findings from a study I conducted in a San Francisco Bay Area community where many undocumented immigrant women are employed in domestic work. Participant observation was an integral method in developing an understanding of the issues facing Latina immigrant women who do paid domestic work, and it was also key in providing a framework for simultaneously conducting community activism with research. Research findings were later applied and disseminated in *fotonovelas*, didactic, illustrated leaflets, through an advocacy project aimed at Mexican and Central American immigrant women who do paid domestic work in Los Angeles.

The themes in this article reflect the convergence of concerns and issues drawn from three arenas: research on immigrant women and work, scholarship on paid domestic work, and the emergence of the immigrant rights movement. The section below examines the intersection of some of these issues in order to situate the discussion.

Intersections: Immigrant Women, Immigrant Rights, and Paid Domestic Work

Immigrant Women Work?

The myth that Latina women, and especially Mexican immigrant women, do not typically seek employment still persists in spite of evidence to the contrary (e.g., Fernandez and Garcia 1990; Kossoudji and Ranney 1984; Simon and DeLey 1984). This stereotype is perpetuated by research that implicitly characterizes Mexican immigrant women as "dependent migrants" who migrate principally for family reunification.² Typically, dependent migrants are posed dichotomously with independent labor migrants, but in reality, even immigrant women who enter a country as "dependent" migrants often exhibit high rates of labor force participation. Women often migrate both to be reunited with their families and for financial reasons. Since they work to help support their families, who may either remain behind in the country of origin or may accompany them in the new country, family and employment are intrinsically linked.

The myth that immigrant women do not participate in the labor force is also contradicted by numerous cases of "female-first" migration streams to the United

States and Western Europe, where women have in fact preceded the men (Brettell and Simon 1986). Mexican immigration does not fit this pattern, because the temporary contract labor programs instituted during WWI and between 1942–1964 recruited primarily Mexican men for work in U. S. agriculture. Evidence suggests, however, that in other instances, Latina women have pioneered labor migration streams. These female-led streams are often induced by immigration policies or practices that favor the entrance of paid domestic workers.³ For example, sociologist Terry Repak (1990) discovered that in Washington, D.C., the pioneer settlers of the substantial Central American population that grew during the 1980s were Central American women who came to the U. S. in the 1960s and 1970s as live-in domestic workers with families involved in the diplomatic corps.

Although immigrant women in the United States work in numerous sectors of the economy, most of them cluster in a few occupations: paid domestic work, the garment industry, family enterprises in the ethnic enclave, and in highly skilled service sector jobs, such as nursing (Pedraza 1991). Mexican undocumented immigrant women are faced with even a narrower set of alternatives. They are concentrated in jobs as factory operatives, domestic workers, low-level service sector jobs, and in informal sector jobs such as vending. This concentration reflects more the labor market interplay of race, class, gender, and legal status/citizenship, than it does human capital resources. Due to discrimination, and the difficulty of obtaining legal permanent resident status, work authorization, and the transfer of credentials, even Mexican and other Latina immigrant women who were teachers and nurses in their home countries often find themselves working in the informal sector in the U.S., as street vendors, domestic workers, or doing garment assembly. Increasingly, the particular employment issues of these women are becoming issues for research and mobilization.

Immigrant and Refugee Rights Advocacy

Passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) signaled a new era in the immigrant rights movement in the United States. While IRCA offered amnesty-legalization for some undocumented immigrants, it also created problems for many undocumented immigrants by imposing employer sanctions. IRCA effectively criminalized employment for undocumented immigrant workers, since it prohibited the hiring of anyone without legal permission to work in the U. S. An unanticipated and paradoxical consequence of this legislation is that it generated and rejuvenated activism in defense of immigrant rights. In every major U. S. city with a large immigrant population there are now large umbrella

coalitions that include community, church, legal, and labor groups working to define, establish, and defend civil rights and work place rights for immigrants and refugees. These advocacy groups are working outside the traditional and exclusive category of U. S. citizenship. Advocacy groups have developed many innovative strategic approaches but, until recently, many of these efforts were directed only at men.

Work is a key issue for immigrants and refugees, and on street corners in cities across the U. S., immigrant men congregate to find jobs in construction, packing, gardening, painting, or as temporary furniture movers. Day laborers wait for potential employers to hire them for a few hours, for a day, or a week. Abuses by employers, police, and immigration authorities are rampant, and immigrant rights advocates in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York have responded by meeting with elected officials, local business owners, and police officers, by setting up hiring halls, and they have attempted various organizing efforts.⁴

The plight of day laborers is certainly serious, and in the context of continued levels of immigration, the ongoing recession, and employer sanctions, the numbers of immigrant workers offering their services as day laborers appear to be increasing. Immigrant women, at least in California, do not gather or wait on street corners to be picked up by strangers for potential employment, but immigrant women, like immigrant men, also work in many unprotected, unregulated, informal sector jobs. Immigrant women workers and their jobs, however, are often less visible than are their male peers. For various reasons, among them the "invisibility" of immigrant women's employment, immigrant rights advocates have been slower to defend immigrant women's labor rights. In the fall of 1990, I began meeting with a group of lawyers and community activists associated with the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles (CHIRLA) to organize an advocacy program for paid domestic workers, the majority of whom in Los Angeles are Latina immigrant women. Some of the research findings from my project were integrated into this information and outreach program.

Paid Domestic Work

The sociology of occupations has traditionally overlooked paid domestic work. This may be due to the belief that paid domestic work would soon become obsolete in modern society because the job is atavistic, based largely on ascribed status, and requires the performance of non-specialized, diffuse menial tasks (Cosser 1974). Feminist scholarship, however, has drawn attention to this hidden

occupation, and much of this research has been guided by efforts to examine the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender (Chaney and Castro 1989; Clark-Lewis 1985; Glenn 1986; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992).

Paid domestic work is currently organized in various ways. The dominant form of organization, however, has historically shifted from live-in employment, to day work, and ultimately, to job work (Romero 1988, 1992). In "job" work, the house cleaners work for different employers on different days, and are paid not by the hour, but a certain amount for performing agreed upon tasks. Under these arrangements, domestic workers are able to position themselves as "experts" to sell their labor services in much the same way a vendor sells a product to various customers, and since they work for several employers, they are less likely to become involved in deeply personalistic employer-employee relations (Romero 1988).

Regardless of these improvements, paid domestic work continues to occur in an isolated, largely non-regulated and privatized environment. When paid domestic workers negotiate job terms and pay, they generally do so without the benefit of guidelines established by government, unions, employment agencies, or private firms. A labor agreement established by two lone individuals who are operating without standard guidelines heightens the asymmetry of the employer-employee relationship, and domestic workers must locate and secure multiple sources of employment to survive. Paid domestic work is increasingly performed by Latina and Caribbean immigrant women, a group of workers who, due to their class, race, gender, and legal status, are among the most disfranchised and vulnerable in our society. I examined and then later disseminated research findings on how immigrant women domestic workers strategize to improve their employment in job work. The research process itself was also contextualized by community activism.

Research Description

My research on domestic employment comprises part of a larger study on changing gender relations among Mexican undocumented immigrant women and men in a San Francisco Bay Area community (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992). This well-defined immigrant barrio is bordered by middle-class and more affluent residential areas, and the women seek domestic employment in these surrounding communities. Some of the surrounding residential communities are characterized by lavish suburban and semi-rural estate residences; three of the nearby cities rank

among the top ten wealthiest cities in California, each of them surpassing the per capita income of Beverly Hills.⁵

I had not initially entered the field with the intention of examining how the women organize paid domestic work. In fact, as I started my research, numerous leads had led me to believe that most Mexican immigrant women in this community worked in laundries, hospital cafeterias, and convalescent homes. As it turned out, jobs located in these types of institutions were more typical of women who had secured legal permanent resident status. As I became immersed in many activities and groups in this community, I quickly learned that although undocumented immigrant women worked in numerous jobs, they typically held jobs as paid domestic workers in private households, usually working for different employers on different days.

I began the research in November 1986, just as the Immigration Reform and Control Act was signed into effect. At that time, I attended a large public forum held in a community center where I had once been employed. Several hundred undocumented immigrant women, men, and children had crammed into a multipurpose room to learn more about this then highly publicized, but poorly understood law, and it was on that evening that I accepted an invitation to join a small neighborhood service and advocacy organization that was forming to address many of the issues arising from IRCA. This group began meeting on a bi-weekly basis, on Friday evenings in a classroom at a local elementary school. The meetings initially drew as many as forty people on a regular basis. We typically sat on folding chairs arranged in a circle, and at each meeting we educated ourselves about the new immigration law and discussed how it might impact the local community of undocumented immigrants. We planned various strategies for organizing community members and for disseminating information, and as employer sanctions went into effect, we monitored and tried to ensure the protection of civil liberties. The group also circulated petitions, sponsored public forums, and organized fundraising events. Discussions of strategy and concrete work tasks were sometimes superseded by conversation about everyday experiences, including shared employment and discrimination experiences. My participant observation extended to various other venues where people were also talking about the new immigration law and how it might affect their work and family lives. These topics dominated discussions at social events, in small clusters of individuals gathered to eat at taco trucks, in private homes, and in other organizations and church groups.

In these venues, I began to pay particular attention to what the women were saying. As a participant and as a "known" observer in many settings, I saw women

talking about how they managed paid domestic work. Everywhere, it seemed, employment issues and concerns surfaced as a popular, everyday topic of conversation. As I focused part of my research on these issues, I began to read broadly in the historical and sociological literature on the topic. The ideas and approaches used in these studies prompted new questions for me, and so my ethnographic and interview research emerged in dialog with both the research literature and community activism.

Much has been written about the solitary quality of the housecleaning job, but the social interactions I observed among immigrant women domestic workers provided a sharp contrast to the portrait of privatized employment. In various social settings, at picnics, baby showers, at a parish legalization clinic, and in people's homes, I observed immigrant women engaged in lively conversation about housecleaning work. Women traded cleaning tips, tactics about how best to negotiate pay, how to geographically arrange jobs so as to minimize daily travel, how to interact (or more often, avoid interaction) with clients, how to leave undesirable jobs, remedies for physical ailments caused by the work, and cleaning strategies to lessen these ailments. The women were quick to voice disapproval of one another's strategies and to eagerly recommend alternatives. These interactions were not embedded in formally organized cooperatives, as they are for some Latina immigrant women domestics (Salzinger 1991), but neither were the consultations with one another as haphazard as those that have been described among some African-American domestic workers (Rollins 1985; Kaplan 1987).

My discoveries about how the domestic work occupation is organized derive mainly from participant-observation and informal conversations that occurred in various public and private locales. It is also supplemented by interviews with seventeen women who were at the time of interview working as non-live in domestic house cleaners, or had done so in the recent past. The majority of the seventeen women interviewed were between thirty and fifty years old, although one woman had begun working as a domestic in the United States at the age of 15 and another was still energetically working at the age of 71. Fifteen of the seventeen women were currently married or living in consensual unions, and they came from diverse class and occupational backgrounds in Mexico. All interactions and interviews were conducted in Spanish.

To date, most studies of domestics are largely based on information gathered from interviews and historical materials (Dudden 1983; Glenn 1986; Katzman 1981; Romero 1988, 1992). An exception is Rollins's study (1985), which is based on interviews with domestic employers and employees, and on participant-observation material gathered by Rollins when she went "undercover" as a

domestic worker, a method that provided a wealth of insights. The novelty and strength of participant-observation in this study is that it occurred in tandem with community activism and it was conducted in multiple settings. I participated with the women and gathered information at parties, church and community events, and in people's homes. Observing paid domestic workers in their daily social life reveals that many social connections and exchanges undergird what appears to be a privatized economic relationship.

Research Findings and Advocacy

Research findings from this study were disseminated in Los Angeles through an information and outreach project sponsored by an immigrant rights group, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles. The key people in this project are the outreach workers, who are Latina immigrant women who have experience doing paid domestic work. As they ride the public buses and visit certain westside parks and bus stops to distribute the informational materials, these outreach workers advise domestic workers on their employment rights, and they provide resource information on where to obtain legal assistance for job related problems. The outreach workers also distribute small notebooks and encourage domestic workers to daily document all work hours, tasks performed, and pay received, so that if a labor dispute should arise in which they pursue a legal remedy, they will have documentation to present in court.

"*Fotonevelas*" are the key materials for disseminating information in this program. *Fotonovelas* consist of booklets with captioned photographs that tell a story, and in Latin America, where they are widely read for entertainment, they are typically aimed at working-class men and women. The Dignity for Domestic Workers advocacy group developed the text for several didactic *fotonovelas*, and hired an artist to draw the corresponding caricatures. Based on the research with paid domestic workers, I prepared a *fotonovela* that is primarily aimed at newcomer immigrant women who lack experience and peer information about the occupation. In this section, I summarize some of the major findings on occupational organization, and describe how these were applied in the production of *fotonovelas* for domestic workers in Los Angeles.

The ongoing activities and interactions among the undocumented Mexican immigrant women that I observed in my study led me to develop the organizing concept of "domestics' networks," a concept that counters the view of the domestic occupation as an entirely privatized and individualized labor relation

(Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Domestic workers' networks are immigrant women's social ties among family, friends, and acquaintances that intersect with housecleaning employment. These social networks are based on kinship, friendship, ethnicity, place of origin and current residential locale, and they function on the basis of reciprocity, since there is an implicit obligation to repay favors of advice, information, and job contacts. In some cases these exchanges are monetarized, as when women sell "jobs" (i.e., leads for customers or clients) for a fee. Generally, however, more informal reciprocity characterizes these interactions. Immigrant domestic workers rely on their network resources to resist atomization and enhance their work, but the networks themselves can also be oppressive.

Although the domestic workers' networks played an important role in informally regulating the occupation, jobs were most often located through employers' informal networks. Personal references were very important to employers of domestic workers, and employers typically recommended a particular house cleaner to their own friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Although immigrant women helped one another sustain domestic employment, they were not always forthcoming with job referrals, since there was a scarcity of well-paid domestic jobs. Competition for a scarce number of jobs prevented the women from sharing jobs leads among themselves, but often male kin who worked as gardeners or as horse stable hands provided initial connections. Many undocumented immigrant women were constantly on the lookout for more housecleaning jobs. Indeed, part of the occupation seems to be the search for more jobs, and for jobs with better working conditions and pay.

Since securing that first job is difficult, many newly arrived immigrant women first find themselves subcontracting their services to other more experienced and well-established immigrant women who have steady customers for their services. In interviews and informal conversations, many women told me that this served as their entry into the occupation. In some cases, this arrangement provided an important apprenticeship and a potential springboard to independent contracting. The relationship established by the two women, however, was not characterized by altruism or harmony of interests.

While a subcontracted arrangement is informative and convenient, especially for an immigrant woman who lacks her own transportation or minimal English language skills, it can also be very exploitative, and one part of the didactic *fotonovelas* focuses on this aspect of the occupation. Through a series of caricature drawings, a simple comic strip narrates the story of a modestly dressed, newly arrived immigrant woman, who is picked up on the street by a more prosperous looking immigrant woman driving a large car. The woman with the

car offers to take the newly arrived woman in as her housecleaning "helper," and in the subsequent drawings, we see that the newly arrived woman is indeed working, but her subcontracting employer is withholding her pay until she performs the job "correctly." The leaflet is intended to warn domestic workers, especially those who may be newly arrived immigrant women, of the dangers of this arrangement.

The pay for domestic work varies widely across different regions in the country and even within a given area. There is no union, government regulations, corporate guidelines, or management policy to set wages. Instead, the pay for housecleaning work is generally informally negotiated between two women, the domestic and the employer. The pay scale that domestics attempt to negotiate for is influenced by the information that they share among one another, and by their ability to sustain a sufficient number of jobs, which is in turn also shaped by their English language skills, legal status, and access to private transportation. Although the pay scale remains unregulated by state mechanisms, social interactions among the domestics themselves serve to informally regulate pay standards.⁶

Unlike employees in middle class professions, most of the domestic workers that I observed talked quite openly with one another about their level of pay. At informal gatherings, such as a child's birthday party or at a community event, the women revealed what they earned with particular employers, and how they had achieved or been relegated to that particular level of pay. Working for low-level pay was typically met with murmurs of disapproval or pity, but no stronger sanctions were applied. Conversely, those women who earned at the high end were admired.

Since most women obtain jobs through employer referrals, in their new job, they generally ask for at least the same rate they are presently earning elsewhere or they ask for a slightly higher rate. Women at the upper end of the pay scale were able to clean more than one house a day, and they generally asked to be paid by the job. They wanted to be paid a fixed fee for the house cleaned, rather than by the hour. Women who could clean quickly, and who drove, found that they could clean two, sometimes even three houses a day, so their earnings put them into the upper levels of the occupation. Other women who lacked private transportation also often preferred to be paid by "the job" as opposed to "the hour" because it allowed for greater scheduling flexibility and job autonomy. So another *fotonovela* was designed to advise domestic workers to charge by the house, not by the hour, and this leaflet shows a paid domestic worker negotiating for higher pay with a new employer.

Domestic work is a very unstable job. Paid domestic workers are always at risk of underemployment as some employers go on vacation, remodel their houses, or periodically decide that they can no longer afford cleaning services. Women who are not well connected to networks of employers who provide referrals, and to other domestics who offer strategic advice, run the risk of severe underemployment. One final part of the *fotonovela* shows several women chatting about their work as they watch their children play at a birthday party in the park, and advises the workers to share job information with their peers. In my study I found that information shared and transmitted through the informal social networks was critical to domestic workers' abilities to improve their jobs. These informational resources transformed the occupation from one of a single employee dealing with a single employer, to one where employees were informed by the collective experience of other domestic workers.

In the instance described in this article, community activism contextualized participant observation, and it was this method that led to a particular set of research findings about the domestic work occupation that were then later disseminated in an advocacy project. Domestic work is typically thought of as one of the least desirable occupations. It is a low status, stigmatized, dead-end job with no avenues for promotions; there are no guaranteed benefits, written contracts are the exception rather than the rule, and the job requires hard physical labor for relatively low wages. Moreover, the legacy of slavery and servitude linger in the occupation, since paid domestic workers are treated condescendingly and are often required to express deference in exchange for their employers' maternalism (Rollins 1985). Yet for many immigrant women, domestic work is not the worst possible job. In fact, when it is properly organized and recompensated, many women view it as a relatively desirable job that offers more flexible hours, job autonomy, and potentially higher pay than other job alternatives.

Paid domestic workers have used various strategies to upgrade the occupation. Previous research has shown that Chicana women upgraded the occupation by claiming expertise (Romero 1988; 1992), Black women have sought to improve their working conditions and maintain their dignity by finding "one good employer" (Dill 1988), and Latina immigrant women have attempted to impose standards and allocate jobs by organizing in domestic worker collectives (Salzinger 1991). My research focused on how Mexican undocumented immigrant women have improved their working conditions and pay by informally sharing job information and techniques among themselves (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). As transborder capital mobility and immigrant settlement signal the waning of nation-state borders, we see the emergence of membership rights and claims of

those who are neither “insiders” with official citizenship status nor “outsiders” who work and reside elsewhere. Together with the increasing visibility of occupations such as domestic work, and the recognition of immigrant women as workers, this sphere has provided a rich location for community activism and participatory research. The proliferation of new scholarship on immigrant women, and the simultaneous increase in xenophobia and the immigrant rights movement suggest new avenues and needs for innovative sociological research and practice.

NOTES

1. In October 1991, the first national conference on immigrant and refugee women drew more than 300 hundred women, most of them Latina and Asian immigrants representing a myriad of organizations and agencies. The conference, titled “Dreams Lost, Dreams Found: Women Organizing for Justice,” was held in Berkeley, California, October 5–7, 1991, and was sponsored by the Family Violence Prevention Fund and the Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Services, a San Francisco Bay Area coalition that includes over 85 organizations.

2. Studies that implicitly characterize women as dependent migrants generally examine only male heads of households who are assumed to be independent labor migrants. The two most highly acclaimed studies released in the late 1980s on Mexican immigration are based solely on responses from male immigrants. In Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach’s book, *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (University of California Press, 1985), the researchers restricted their sample to “male family heads,” and in the book by Douglas Massey *et al.*, *Return to Aztlan: The Social process of International Migration from Western Mexico*, (University of California Press, 1987), the researchers interviewed heads of households as well as those with migration experience, whom they characterize as “a few older sons” (p. 19).

3. For similar instances in different international contexts, see the article by Foner and Caspari and Giles in Rita James Simon and Caroline B. Brettell, editors, *International Migration: The Female Experience* (New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1986).

4. See “Workers of the World on U. S. Street Corners,” *Network News: Newsletter of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights*, Vol. 5, No. 3, April–May, 1992.

5. An article entitled “California Cities: Rich and Poor” in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1992, reports that the 1990 census listed per capita income ranging from \$55,721 to \$68,236 for these three municipalities.

6. In the study, I did not interview the employers of the domestic workers, although I know that they represented different socio-economic classes, because they included teachers, nurses, and secretaries as well as residents of very affluent, upper-income neighborhoods. Salzinger (1991) suggests that in paid domestic work there is a dual wage structure that is set according to the economic means of employers, so that high-income employers pay at the top of the scale, and single mothers or elderly on fixed incomes pay toward the bottom of the scale. This proposition is contradicted by the reports of outreach workers in the Dignity for Domestic Workers program in Los

Angeles. They found that many live-in domestic workers in exclusive residential areas such as Beverly Hills and Pacific Palisades were earning as little as \$90–140 a week in 1992 and 1993.

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