

# In the Privacy of our own Home: Foreign Domestic Workers as Solution to the Crisis in the Domestic Sphere in Canada

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**D**espite marked increases in the participation of women in the labour force, neither the availability and quality of socialized child care arrangements nor the division of housework between men and women appear to have changed radically. The structure, demands and pressures of the labour market in Canada allow for less flexibility in the accommodation of family needs and responsibilities than is the case in several European countries. Under these circumstances, housework and child care remain private burdens to be shouldered mainly by women, who must either work double and triple days or find substitutes.

In this context, employment of live-in domestic workers, a long-abandoned practice in North America, is once again being presented as a solution to the burdens of housework and childcare among high and middle income groups. Yet the

organization of domestic service in capitalist society, and the specific conditions which most live-in domestic workers experience in Canada, make this type of work particularly oppressive. Not surprisingly, perhaps, 98 percent of these workers are women. As a collective ideal, this solution, therefore, presents a problem for the women's movement.

In discussing the implications of the domestic service solution to the housework and childcare problem, I will document and analyse the structural and historical conditions of live-in domestic workers in Canada. The primary focus is on foreign domestic workers with temporary work permits. The conditions of this group best demonstrate the complex articulation of gender issues with those of class and citizenship.

**The Crisis of the Domestic Sphere** There has been a significant increase in women's participation in the labour force in Canada since the 1960s. With around 43 percent of the labour force comprising women,<sup>1</sup> the percentage of couples in the man-the-breadwinner/woman-the-homemaker category has been reduced to less than 16 percent from around 65 percent in 1961.<sup>2</sup> More dramatic, however, is the change in the participation rates of women with family responsibilities. According to the most recent statistics, 70 percent of married women between ages of 25 to 54 years are in the labour force.<sup>3</sup> Among women with children of pre-school age, 65.1 percent work outside their homes.<sup>4</sup>

The response of society and the state to these changes in women's employment has been negligible. First, the behaviour of men in the home has changed very little in terms of their contributions to housework and parenting responsibilities. Although attitudes among men have changed positively,<sup>5</sup> the actual number of men regularly doing some housework has changed very little. Moreover, even when men regularly contribute to domestic labour, the sex-typing of duties continues, with men performing only certain tasks and rarely doing any pre-task planning. Overall, the contributions of men to housework do not very often go beyond "helping out."<sup>6</sup>

Second, as the *Report of the Task Force on Child Care* demonstrates, the child care situation in Canada is in a state of crisis. Licensed day care spaces only serve 9 percent of children whose parents work or study 20 or more hours each week.

Over 80 percent of children receiving non-parental care are in unlicensed arrangements. The quality and dependability of such care is unknown.<sup>7</sup>

Parents also suffer the inflexibility of work arrangements. Canadian employers and the state have provided little accommodation for the family responsibilities of working people. Except for an inadequate maternity leave system, egalitarian in gender terms, replacing only a relatively small portion of regular income, and covering a relatively short period of time — Canada has not officially recognized recent changes in the labour force. In stark contrast to most European countries, there are no systems of extended child care leave, leave for care of sick children or other types of family responsibility leave. Without the right to refuse shiftwork and overtime and to work reduced hours or flexible work weeks (rights that are almost commonplace for their European counterparts) working parents in Canada find that even privatized solutions fail to meet their needs.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of the squeeze on working couples from pressures in the public and private spheres, there are signs that employment of domestic servants, a rare practice since the 1920s, is on the increase again. Several governmental and mass media sources have approvingly cited the employment of domestic workers as a solution.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that employers of live-in domestic workers are now overwhelmingly dual-career couples with small children. For 71.4 percent of the employers the major reason for hiring a domestic has been to “free both spouses for the labour market.”<sup>10</sup> While the majority of employers are in upper-middle to upper income categories, the demand for live-in domestic servants among middle income families is likely to rise. An important reason for this is that user fees — as opposed to municipal, provincial or national government financing — constitute a high proportion of child care costs and middle class families cannot get subsidies for such services in Canada. Calculations suggest that especially for parents with two or more pre-school children, employment of a live-in nanny would cost significantly less than sending children to a day care centre or hiring live-out help.<sup>11</sup>

Though the demand for domestic workers rises, the conditions of domestic service in general, and live-in service in

particular, are so undesirable that it is very difficult to find Canadians willing to do the job. As a result, the Canadian Department of Immigration has devised mechanisms to allow domestic workers, usually from the Third World, to enter Canada with temporary status. Since the mid-1970s between 10,000 to 16,000 foreign workers a year have been issued temporary work permits. Almost all (96 percent) of these workers are in live-in service.<sup>12</sup>

Esther Boserup, writing in 1970, predicted a constant decline in domestic service in advanced capitalist countries in the 20th century. She argued that widespread employment of domestic servants corresponds to an intermediate stage of development, and that the commercialization of services in later stages of development would make the need for domestic servants redundant<sup>13</sup>. Yet the relation of "development" to domestic labour is not necessarily an even, evolutionary process that is determined by the unhindered, inevitable expansion of the market. Rather it is one that is also determined politically. The survival of domestic service in Canada today is politically determined by the lack of adequate and good quality child care services as well as the continuing availability, through immigration legislation and practices and discriminatory labour laws, of a cheap and vulnerable source of foreign domestic servants.

Although foreign domestic workers have certainly provided one solution to the pressures their employers face in meeting the demands of work and family, it is a questionable one considering the working and living conditions of the workers involved. Such a solution also has serious implications for the women's movement. Work in the domestic sphere becomes a source of division, rather than unity and 'sisterhood' among women.<sup>14</sup> For feminism, which has so far concentrated on relations in which men (as individuals and/or through the masculine role) and the structures of society, economy and the state oppress women, the analysis of the mistress-servant relationship, one in which women exploit women, poses an uncomfortable challenge. The complex articulation of class and citizenship status with gender inequality in the domestic worker's condition also poses a theoretical challenge to feminist theory which has only recently started to tackle such issues.

This discussion of the conditions of domestic workers is divided into three parts. The first part examines the labour process in domestic service and analyzes what the domestic worker shares with the housewife. The second part focuses on the ambiguous status of the domestic as a special type of worker who is neither a member of the family nor an employee in the public sphere enjoying the advantages of socialized work. Finally, the citizenship status of foreign domestic workers in Canada will be analyzed as a factor which contributes to, and perpetuates, the oppressiveness of their conditions.

**The Material Conditions of Privatized Household Work** The geographic, economic, social and ideological separation of a public work sphere from the home, which developed with socialized commodity production under capitalism, has led to a decline in the status of domestic labour — whether done by housewife or servant. One of the causes of this decline is the physical, economic, and ideological invisibility of domestic labour. Physically, what makes domestic labour invisible is the service or maintenance nature of the work whose products are either intangible or consumed very quickly. The domestic labourer is at a disadvantage compared to the factory worker in this regard:

The appropriate symbol for housework (and for housework alone) is not the interminable conveyor belt but a compulsive circle like a pet mouse in its cage spinning round on its exercise wheel unable to get off.<sup>15</sup>

Also domestic labour is performed in private, perhaps in greater isolation than ever in human history. As the production of goods as well as services such as education and health care moved out of the home, the husband and children left, and as the development of household technology made collaboration in certain tasks with other women less necessary, the household worker faced increased isolation, loneliness and invisibility.

Economically, domestic labour is invisible because it is not part of capitalist production which uses wage labour to produce commodities for the market. When performed by the housewife, domestic labour is unpaid, it produces use value

without producing profit. In comparison to that of the housewife, the labour of the domestic servant is somewhat more visible because it is paid for. As one domestic servant stated, however, it still can remain invisible, even in the eyes of her female employer:

You know how housework is; you could tidy up the house and wash the dishes twenty times a day. At the end of each day, especially with three growing boy child, the house look like a hurricane pass through it, so when she is in a bad mood she wants to know what I do all day.<sup>16</sup>

Domestic labour is physical as well as mental and psychological work which sustains the reproduction of labour power and the labour force. It is indispensable to the functioning of the economy. However, intertwined as it is with intimate, personal relations, domestic labour is considered a private matter, a 'labour of love.' As such, it is ideologically invisible as a form of real work, a status that is hard to change even when it is paid for.

Domestic labour generally does not appear on paychecks or in GNP figures; it is not considered real work, and is defined as non-productive. Yet it involves very long working hours.<sup>17</sup> Especially for care-givers of young children who have to be always on call, such work can be never ending — there is no clear boundary between work and leisure. For the housewife and the live-in domestic servant, the place of work is also the place of leisure. She does not go to work but wakes up to it. This makes her "leisure" vulnerable to interventions and her work hours stretchable to 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Contrary to its safe, comfortable image, for the domestic labourer the home is often a hazardous and stressful place. Besides working with dangerous chemicals and in several activities that are accident prone, the domestic worker is also placed under stress. Stress is a typical facet of occupations that involve the worker in high demand and low control situations.<sup>18</sup> In domestic work, the need to adjust to the different schedules of family members and to juggle the conflicting demands of housework and childcare both create stressful conditions. The notion that the housewife is her own boss is

largely a myth. The domestic worker, whose schedule and standards of work are controlled by others, does not even have the consolation of myth.

Unlike wage labour which is, at least theoretically, mobile, the labour of the housewife is a life-long, or at least marriage-long commitment. Compared to the housewife, the domestic servant should fare better in this respect. However, this is only the case when we consider the free labourer. Domestic servants in Canada, however, have very often been restricted in changing employers, and have not been free to change jobs, or to decide whether or not to sell their labour power.

While domestic labour under capitalism assumes several universal characteristics such as invisibility, isolation and low status, the way these are experienced by individuals performing such labour may vary significantly by class, race and citizenship. In the case of foreign domestic workers, isolation and the resulting loneliness, imposed by the privatized nature of housework and childcare, are perpetuated by racial, cultural and linguistic barriers. Likewise, the invisibility of domestic labour and the low status attached to it are further reinforced by the powerlessness of domestic labourers when they are visible minority women from the Third World on temporary work permits and who lack basic political rights.

**Neither a Wife nor a Worker: The Contradictions of the Domestic Worker's Status** While sharing with the housewife many of the material conditions of privatized housework and child care, the domestic worker also has an ambiguous status. She is neither a wife nor a full-fledged worker with corresponding rights and privileges. Squeezed between the private and public spheres, she belongs to neither one or the other and probably combines the worst aspects of both.

Historically, with the privatization of the family, the domestic worker has been excluded from membership in or close bonding with the employing family. Lost are the co-operation and companionship apparently characteristic of rural America.<sup>19</sup> The domestic worker today is like a stranger, "being in the family, but not of it."<sup>20</sup> She is involved in the work of a *house*, but not the pleasures and intimacies of a *home*. Positive aspects that are rightly or wrongly attributed to the private

sphere — love, intimacy, nurturance, companionship — are not even part of her realistic expectations.

I feel as if this is my home. It is my home, this is where I live. It's not like I come to work for them and then evening time I leave and go home. When you are living with them, they make you feel as if you really don't belong, and where the devil do you really belong? It's a funny thing to happen to us, because it make us feel like we don't know if we coming or going. This live-in thing really puts us in a funny situation.<sup>21</sup>

Potentially, lack of intimacy with the employing family is liberating. Since class differences turn close employer-employee relationships into paternalistic ones, many domestic workers actually prefer maintaining a business-like professionalism. Professionalism in relations, however, is not a matter of choice for the domestic worker but requires relative power in social, political and legal terms. Historically, the social construction of domestic work in Canada has deprived domestic workers of these forms of power.

In losing the close relationship of a family and becoming an employee, the domestic worker has not been compensated by the advantages other employees enjoy. The isolation of domestic service makes organization of workers as well as standardization and regulation of working conditions very difficult. This difficulty is greater for live-in workers for whom there is no separation between home and work. The result is generally a vulnerable and often exploited worker whose conditions are at the mercy of the employer:

Wages are too often regulated by the employer's bank account, hours of service by his personal caprice, and moral questions by his personal convenience.<sup>22</sup>

Labour standards legislation, which is under provincial jurisdiction in Canada and therefore not uniform, either does not apply or only partially applies to domestic workers. Domestic employees in private homes are excluded from labour standards legislation in Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, the Northwest Territories, and the Yukon. In other provinces they are only partially covered; in many, only with provisions providing lower than the general minimum wage, longer than the 40 hour work week and rarely any overtime pay.<sup>23</sup>

In Ontario, which has about two-thirds of all domestic workers in Canada, the Employment Standards Act was finally extended to domestics in 1984. It set daily and weekly rates of pay based on a standard work week of 44 hours. This change, however, was almost meaningless for live-in domestic workers because they were not covered by the hours of work and overtime pay provisions of the Act. Since it is not uncommon to see live-in domestic workers working on or on call 60-80 or more hours per week, the actual hourly wage can in many cases fall substantially below the minimum wage. Working very long hours and having little or no time off are, in fact, some of the most common complaints of live-in domestic workers:

I want something where I can go home to my house at night, close my door and pray to my God in peace. I want to know that when I go to bed at night, I don't have to listen out for people shouting at me to come and look after their food or come and change diapers.<sup>24</sup>

After two years of negotiations and a Charter of Rights case filed by the International Coalition to End Domestic Exploitation, INTERCEDE, against the Ontario government, on the grounds that the existing legislation discriminated against domestic workers as women and as a group of workers different from other workers, the issue of live-in service was finally addressed in October 1987. New labour regulations gave live-in domestic workers the right to claim overtime pay after a 44 hour work week.<sup>25</sup> Whether or not the new provision is enforced will depend on how much *de facto* bargaining power domestics will have in relation to their employers. So far, even when protective legislation did exist, governments have generally failed to enforce it. In practice, especially when they are dealing with vulnerable workers who have no choice but to keep their jobs, employers are able to change work hours, duties and pay rates.

In Ontario, the government not only fails to enforce already existing legislation, but also prevents domestic workers from defending their rights in an organized, collective way. The Ontario Labour Relations Act denies the domestics employed in private homes the right to unionize. The same act also denies domestics access to the impartial tribunal for unfair practices.<sup>26</sup>

In some cases, existing regulations may even sanction abuse. One serious problem domestic workers face is the lack of clear job definitions. The *Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations* (used by the immigration officials in connection with employment authorizations) may add to the problem. In this system "baby sitter" is defined as someone who, besides doing other work, "keeps children's quarters clean and tidy" and "cleans other parts of home." On the other hand, the "maid/domestic. . . may look after children" also.<sup>27</sup> The specific combination of the class status of the domestic worker and the fact that domestic service takes place in the private sphere creates the potential for a very peculiar relation of domination between the employer and the domestic worker, especially if there is a live-in arrangement. This latter is compulsory for foreign domestic workers on temporary work permits. There are social-psychological dimensions to the subordination of a domestic worker that make it different from the subordination of housewives (who also do domestic work) and workers (who also stand in an unequal class relation to their employers).

While a factory worker experiences subordination and control during work, once she leaves her job at the end of the day, she is a free person in relation to her employer. The live-in domestic worker, on the other hand, cannot leave her workplace and her employer's supervision. Sharing private space with the employers, and yet not part of their family, the domestic also finds it difficult to create her own private space and private life:

Some domestics have to share a room with the children in the household or have their room used as a family room, TV room, sewing room, etc. One woman had to keep her door open at all times in case the children started to cry, others say their employers do not respect their privacy and walk in without knocking. In one case the piano was moved into the domestic's room for the children to practice on!<sup>28</sup>

Living in the employer's home, makes it difficult to invite friends over. Other specific complaints about lack of privacy refer in certain cases to the scrutiny of mail and phone calls, the search of personal belongings and inquiries into activities on days off.<sup>29</sup>

With live-in domestic service creating the possibilities for full-time monitoring of the whole life of the domestic worker, it is probably not an exaggeration to call it a "total institution."<sup>30</sup> Clearly, during the development of the present historical form of domestic service, those performing such work lost only some of the elements of child-like status in the patriarchal household. Gone are the protection, security and bonding to the family that were typical of service in feudal society. Remaining are the supervision and the personal nature of the authority relationship which strip the domestic worker of full adult status. Linguistic practices are often reflective of this. For example, domestic workers are commonly referred to as "girls," regardless of their age, both by employers and by domestics themselves. It is also common for domestic workers to be addressed by their first names while they are expected to address employers as Mr. or Mrs.<sup>31</sup>

Besides heavy physical work, domestic service involves a personal relationship with the employer. Unlike factory work which requires completion of clearly defined tasks in clearly defined ways, domestic service is very unstructured. Especially in live-in arrangements, a domestic is not just hired for specific tasks, "but for general availability; above all, a servant ha(s) to take orders as well."<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the display of deference, obedience and submissiveness can sometimes be as important or more important than the actual physical work.<sup>33</sup> The domestic worker, therefore, is hired not for her labour alone but also for her personality traits.

Also unique to the employer-employee relationship in domestic service is that both the domestic and the mistress are designated, on the basis of gender, as responsible for domestic work. Many female employers indicate that they need domestic workers to help them because their husbands will not.<sup>34</sup> Employment of a domestic worker has enabled these women to avoid confrontations with their husbands about sharing domestic work. In this sense, the presence of the domestic worker "emphasizes the fact that women — all women — are responsible for cleaning the house, at the same time that it releases the housewife to become a lady of leisure or a career woman."<sup>35</sup> Given the gendered division of labour in the household, the labour of the housewife and the domestic worker are interchangeable: the domestic worker is employed to replace an

absent full-time housewife; but when the domestic worker can't work, the housewife must. Given the social degradation of domestic work and the class inequality between the domestic worker and the mistress, however, their shared subordination does not often lead to solidarity.

[T]he domestic represents the employer in the most devalued area of the employer's activities. . . Any identification the employer has with the domestic is a negative identification.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than solidarity, shared subordination can lead to "housewife power strategies" through which "many housewives seek to maintain class and race privileges vis-a-vis their domestics."<sup>37</sup> What characterizes servant-mistress relationships is deference from the worker and maternalism from the employer.

**Good Enough to Work, Not Good Enough to Stay: Implications of Citizenship Status for Foreign Domestic Workers** From the nineteenth century on, the Canadian state has actively recruited and controlled domestic labour.<sup>38</sup> The amount of planning and energy involved tells us a great deal about the importance of domestic service for the Canadian economy and society. The low status and unfavourable conditions of the workers involved, however, stand in stark contrast to the attention given their recruitment and control. Working conditions have been so undesirable that, not only has it been difficult to find Canadians interested in the job, but sometimes the only way of keeping immigrant domestics in domestic work has been through indenturing them.

Active state involvement in recruitment and control of domestic workers started in the late nineteenth century when industrialization diverted women into other occupations and it became difficult to find enough Canadian-born women interested in domestic service. This involvement ranged from making the immigration of domestics easier through occasionally sending immigration employees to England and Scotland to select domestics, to encouraging and even enforcing the so-called "assisted passage" agreements that bonded servants to their employers for a certain period of time<sup>39</sup>. Bonding became such a necessary part of controlling the domestic labour force

that the Department of Immigration sometimes evaded legislation in order to fulfill its policing function. For example, around the turn of the century, master and servant legislation was enacted in most provinces, which aimed to protect servants from an exploitive contract which they might have signed in order to immigrate. According to this legislation, contracts signed outside the province were not legally binding. The immigration department, however, aiming to enforce bonded status, avoided this legislation by having immigrant domestics re-sign their contracts upon arrival in Canada.<sup>40</sup>

Immigration of British and Scottish domestic workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shared with later domestic immigration the practice of bonding. What made immigration practices in this period different from later periods, however, was that recruitment of domestics from abroad was closely linked to Canada's nation-building efforts. Until the 1920s, the middle class women and social reformers involved in female immigration work voiced racist, nationalist and moralistic concerns that went beyond a simple interest in meeting demands for the domestic labour force. Through their efforts in selecting, protecting and supervising domestics, the organizations involved in female immigration wanted to ensure that recruits would become more than servants: that these women of the "right" national and racial stock and character would, in the long run, constitute the "pure and virtuous mothers of the ideal Canadian home and the foundation of the moral Canadian nation."<sup>41</sup> While these expectations were certainly restrictive for domestic workers, they also conveyed the message that these women "belonged" in Canadian society, a message that would be missing in later immigration practices.

Although the demand for domestic servants has decreased since the early part of the twentieth century, it has still exceeded the supply. This has been especially true for live-in workers. As a result, the Department of Immigration has developed new schemes in the post-war period to bring domestic workers to Canada and to keep them doing domestic work. In 1955, for example, the Domestic Worker Program was started with the aim of importing domestic workers from the Caribbean region (primarily from Jamaica). Under this scheme single women of good health, between 18 and 40 years of age, with no dependents and with at least grade 8 education,

were allowed into Canada as landed immigrants on the condition that they would spend at least one year as domestic servants before choosing other types of work.<sup>42</sup> Between 1955-1960, an average of 300 domestic workers per year were admitted through this program, and between 1960-1965 the numbers rose to 1,000 per year.<sup>43</sup>

According to the Department of Immigration the Domestic Worker Program did not help to solve the labour shortage in domestic service because most of the women who came found their working conditions unacceptable and left service for other work once they fulfilled their one year obligation. To solve this problem the government started issuing temporary work permits in 1973 which only allowed these workers to remain in the country for a specified period of time (usually a year), doing a specific type of work, for a specific employer. The new employment visa system is a version of indenture. Foreign domestic workers who come as "guest workers" — instead of immigrants — have no rights to stay in Canada or claim social security benefits. Although foreign domestics may be allowed to change employers with special permission from immigration authorities, they cannot leave domestic service without also having to leave Canada. Extension of the employment visa beyond the first year is possible and common, but the foreign worker must inevitably leave. Under this new scheme increasing numbers of domestic workers are brought into Canada every year. The numbers of employment visas issued to domestics has risen consistently from around 1,800 in 1973 to more than 16,000 in 1982.<sup>44</sup>

The official purpose of the employment visa system is to meet the urgent and temporary needs of Canadian employers to fill jobs that cannot be filled domestically without ultimately threatening the employment opportunities of Canadian residents.<sup>45</sup> When we consider the case of domestic service, however, both the unwillingness of Canadians to take live-in work as well as the century-long efforts of the Canadian state to import domestic workers from abroad, suggest that neither the need nor the solution is temporary. Despite the persistence of a high demand/low supply situation, domestic workers are only accepted to Canada with temporary status. Except for foreign agricultural workers (who do seasonal work), domestic

workers are the *only* occupational group to whom temporary work permits apply on a permanent basis.

In fact, when we look into Canada's immigration practices since the mid 1970s we see a tendency, to resort increasingly to temporary employment visas as opposed to permanent immigration to meet labour demands not only in domestic service but also in several other job categories. Since 1975 the annual number of people entering Canada on temporary employment visas has consistently exceeded the number of landed immigrants destined for the labour force.<sup>46</sup> Migration to Canada, therefore, has changed in part from a movement of people to a movement of labour power. The benefits of this to Canada as a labour-importing country are enormous. As the literature on migrant workers in Western Europe, South Africa and California has demonstrated, recipient countries benefit not only by avoiding the costs of developing a young and healthy labour-force, but also by avoiding a commitment to supporting them during old-age, sickness and unemployment.<sup>47</sup>

Behind the term 'guestworker' (is) a belief that such workers (are) like replaceable parts. Like cogs in a machine, for every part that breaks down, there (is) a seemingly endless supply of replacements.<sup>48</sup>

There are also significant political advantages to employing workers without citizenship rights. Lacking electoral and political rights and freedoms, and dependent on their employers not only for wages but also for their continued stay in the country, workers on employment visas are expected to create a docile and acquiescent labour force. Historically, the presence of migrant workers has also been frequently associated with racist and xenophobic divisions in the working class.

Canadians have the feeling that we are coming here to rob them, to take away their jobs, yet we are the ones who clean up their mess, pick up after them. We take the jobs they wouldn't take and yet they hate us so much.<sup>49</sup>

One significant ideological implication of temporary work permits is that the designation of a group of workers as temporary and foreign encourages a desensitized attitude to-



out being able to claim benefits. The nature of the employment visa makes access to unemployment insurance benefits impossible because the worker must either find a new employer or leave the country if she loses a job. Benefits from Canada Pension Plan are also inaccessible because the "guest worker" is expected to retire in the country of origin.<sup>55</sup> Revenue Canada has calculated the total of revenues from CPP and UIC premiums collected from foreign domestics between 1973-1979 to be more than 11 million dollars.<sup>56</sup> Foreign domestics pay a very high price, for services that they do not expect to receive.

Since November 1981 changes in the Temporary Employment Authorization Program have enabled foreign domestics who have worked in Canada continuously for two years, to apply for landed immigrant status without leaving the country. While this is a progressive step, it fails to solve the problem of foreign domestic workers in Canada. First, there is still a two-year period of bonded service before domestics may apply. Second, there is no guarantee that landed immigrant status will be granted. Applicants need to meet Immigration Dept. assessment criteria and demonstrate a "potential for self-sufficiency."<sup>57</sup> Not surprisingly, given societal notions about domestic labour skills, these women get very low points for the Specific Vocational Preparation category.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, they also receive low points in the Occupational Demand category.<sup>59</sup> As a result, immigration officers require that domestic applicants (again without any guarantees to grant them landed status) take upgrading courses (with high foreign student fees) and do volunteer work in the community.<sup>60</sup> For live-in foreign domestics, it is difficult to find both the time and the money to fulfil these requirements.

Another problem is that domestics with children back in the home country, and older domestics face discrimination.

They say Immigration say any woman over 45 soon can't clean house and will be just a burden on the government, and woman with over two children will bring them into the country and take away the opportunities other Canadian children have.<sup>61</sup>

So-called "rationalized" immigration policies, oriented towards the demands of the market, aim to import labour power rather

than people. It is not, therefore, surprising to see dependents being treated as "superfluous appendages" (as they are called in South Africa) to the labour market.

The overall effect of the 1981 change in the Temporary Employment Authorization Program has been to create the possibility for *individual* upward mobility of (some) domestic workers while providing no *structural* solution to the problems of domestic service or foreign domestic workers in general. Indeed, it is ironic that a domestic must move out of domestic service altogether in order to accumulate enough points to get landed immigrant status. The implicit message that immigration policies and practices give is that domestic workers are "good enough to work, but not good enough to stay" in this country. This message says a great deal about the status of domestic labour in general.

It is also interesting to note the parallel between the modern attitude of the Canadian government and the historical treatment of domestic workers. Domestic servants did not receive legal equality and citizenship rights until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. In France and England, for example, because they were considered to be too dependent on their masters to be recognized as civil persons, domestics (together with women) were the last groups to be enfranchised.<sup>62</sup> Many of the basic workers' rights and freedoms we take for granted and often associate with capitalist society are, in fact, connected to citizenship rights. With the alleged attempt to meet the temporary labour requirements of the Canadian economy without threatening the jobs of Canadians, the Employment Visa system has created a *permanent* temporary work force without citizenship rights.

By treating both the need and the presence of foreign workers as *temporary* the Canadian government may avoid doing anything *permanent* either to improve their conditions or to find other solutions to problems of housework and child care. As long as it can maintain a captive labour force without citizenship rights to do live-in domestic service the government has little incentive to improve conditions of domestic work.

It is not simply the availability of a supply of foreign workers and the market implications of this supply that creates the conditions of their vulnerability. As Castells put it:

immigrant workers do not exist because there are "arduous and badly paid" jobs to be done, but, rather, arduous and badly paid

jobs exist because immigrant workers are present or can be sent for to do them.<sup>63</sup>

The state plays an active role in structuring and controlling not only the volume but also the conditions of these workers. There is a striking contrast between the *laissez faire* approach the liberal state has taken, which favours private solutions to problems in the domestic sphere, and its rigid intervention in the provision, organization and control of "help" for that sphere. Given the specific combination of state policies in areas of child care provision, labour legislation and immigration, domestic service is not simply a private but a politically constructed solution to the crisis of the domestic sphere.

Recently, the positions put forward by both the federal and provincial governments in policy debates on child care indicate the persistence of a clear preference for privatized solutions — with little concern about the quality and conditions for either children or caregivers. The new federal child care plan, revealed in December 1987, emphasizes a tax-credit approach to child care with no commitments to providing universal access to dependable and affordable licensed care spaces. The plan proposes to double the number of day-care spaces available in seven years. Even with the number of children remaining constant this plan would meet less than 20 percent of the need. While the government claims to have recognized the plurality of parental preferences for child care arrangements, the lack of socialized child care spaces means that parents are left with no choice but to make private arrangements.

In Ontario, during the recent struggle for amendments in the Employment Standards Act to provide set hours and overtime pay for domestic workers, the government fought against these changes arguing that the potential increase in costs would "upset the child care arrangements of parents some of whom may already be in financial squeeze."<sup>64</sup> Even the Labour Ministry report which itself proposed the amendment expressed reservations about its extension to all live-out domestic workers, including baby sitters, on the grounds that it would jeopardize the inexpensive informal care arrangements which included 400,000 children in Ontario.<sup>65</sup> While the financial squeeze that many parents face in relation to

child care needs is a serious problem, the assumption of these legislative debates and proposals is that domestic workers should subsidize the child care system by remaining underpaid and overworked.

Current domestic service arrangements bring the interests of employers and employees into conflict. Given the pressures on budget and time that some middle-class working couples face, a domestic service relationship may turn into a zero-sum game in which the improvements in the pay and working conditions of domestic workers will mean losses for the employers. As a relationship between female employers and workers, domestic service emphasizes, most clearly, the class, racial/ethnic and citizenship differences among women at the expense of their gender unity. Since gender is a social construct formed through relationships rather than a static biological category determined by sex, it would be interesting to see how domestic work as a power relationship between employer and employee shapes women's identities.

**Feminism and Domestic Service.** The domestic service question is a feminist question not just because 98 percent of domestic workers are women, or because it potentially may create divisions among women that feminism needs to solve to make "sisterhood" a reality. It is also a feminist question because it is so closely linked with the privatized nature of domestic labour in our society. Domestic service, as it is organized in Canada, is not just a question of human and workers' rights. It is a question of women's oppression and liberation. Women's liberation has been defined by some as the upward *mobility* of individual women *out of* some subordinate positions and occupations. According to this definition, "women's liberation" can be compatible with general devaluation of the subordinate positions and occupations many women hold.<sup>66</sup> If we choose, however, to define women's liberation as a collective and transformative struggle — in addition to being one of individual liberation — that deals with class and racial inequalities and aims to re-structure society to eliminate subordinate positions, live-in domestic service is revealed as a very conservative solution for the crisis of the domestic sphere.

Domestic service leaves housework and child care as women's work, still isolating and of low status and low value.

Rather than solving the problem of gender inequality, it adds class and racial dimensions to it. Instead of housework and childcare being the responsibility of *all* women, it becomes the responsibility of *some* with subordinate class, racial and citizenship status, who are employed and supervised by those who are liberated from the direct physical burdens.<sup>67</sup> By reinforcing divisions of mental and manual labour, this helps perpetuate low status and low pay for domestic service.

The domestic service solution is also conservative because it does not solve the problems posed by the separation of spheres. Given the availability of a cheap source of vulnerable workers, it discourages a struggle for socialized services and more flexible work arrangements.<sup>68</sup> Rather than easing the public/private split in society, therefore, this solution polarizes and deepens it, with added class and racial dimensions.

The structural approach used in this paper has so far treated domestic workers as victims of unfavourable conditions that have shaped their work and living. The history of domestic service has shown, however, that domestic workers can and do act as subjects. Full of attempts to unionize and to standardize and improve working conditions, the history of domestic service and the political practice of domestic workers have a lot to offer to the women's movement. First, domestic workers help to "denaturalize" housework and childcare by doing domestic work for a wage rather than as a labour of love and doing it as an outsider to the family. Second, the struggles of domestic workers can help to decrease the invisibility of the domestic sphere and contribute to making the personal, political. While politicization of all domestic relations, including those between women, is not a comfortable task, it promises to enrich, deepen and extend the equality principle that feminism upholds.

While the issues raised and goals set by domestic workers' organizations can contribute to feminist theory and practice, these organizations and workers also need feminist support in their struggle. There are limits to how much can be achieved by domestic workers alone. Besides the obstacles domestic isolation places on organization and unionization, there are the legal restrictions imposed by provincial labour relations acts and the employment visa programs. In addition, the temporary, outsider status sustained by the employment visa

system serves to increase the invisibility and marginality of foreign domestic workers and desensitize others to their conditions. Domestic workers need the wider women's movement to help overcome these obstacles and to liberate their struggle from its corporate boundaries.

The women's movement also has to address the larger domestic labour question. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, during the first wave of feminism, there were some efforts to transform domestic labour through collectivizing it. Feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Melusina Fay Pierce and Mary Livermore developed radically creative and elaborate proposals for a changed architecture of the home, collective kitchens and cooperative housekeeping schemes. While the theory and practice of these feminists have been extremely useful in offering alternatives to privatized domestic labour, they did not deal adequately with the gender and class aspects of the issue. These feminists not only failed to demand increased male participation in domestic labour, but they also generally disregarded the interests of domestics as women and workers. They articulated their concerns as finding efficient and rational solutions to the "waste," "annoyance," "unreliability" and "laziness" of servants through rigid supervision and factory-like discipline imposed by collective housework schemes.<sup>69</sup> Domestic workers have been neither agents nor intended beneficiaries but rather the ground of change in these projects which seemed to prioritize extension of the principles of industrialization over concerns for equality.

The contributions of the new wave of feminism have been indispensable in terms of the critique that has been brought to sexual division of labour in society and in the family. The domestic labour debate of the 1970s and radical feminist analyses have, in different ways, also provided a critique of the privatized home. As Dolores Hayden has pointed out, however, the second wave of feminism still lacks a clear vision of positive alternatives to privatized and gendered home life.<sup>70</sup> In the absence of an honest, open debate around each solution and its gender, class and racial implications, and a vision of concrete, constructive alternatives that would emerge from these debates, individualized ad hoc solutions may bring more harm than good to both individual women and to the struggle for the emancipation of all women.

## Notes

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1. Statistics Canada, *The Labour Force, July 1988*, Ottawa: 1987, p. 26.
2. The Task Force on Child Care, *Report of the Task Force on Child Care*, Ottawa: 1986, p. 7.
3. Statistics Canada, *The Labour Force*, p. 27.
4. Statistics Canada, *The Labour Force*, pp. 36-37.
5. 1981 Gallup poll cited in Meg Luxton, "Two Hands for the Clock: Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division of Labour in the Home" in Meg Luxton and Harriet Rosenberg, *Through the Kitchen Window. The Politics of Home and Family* Toronto: 1986.
6. Luxton, "Two Hands"; and Joann Vanek, "Household Work, Wage Work, and Sexual Equality", in A.S. Skolnick and J.H. Skolnick (eds.), *Family in Transition* Toronto and Boston: 1983.
7. The Task Force on Child Care, *Report of the Task Force*, pp. 45, & 277.
8. The Task Force on Child Care, *Report of the Task Force*, Chapters 11 and 12.
9. See Nancy C. Hook, *Domestic Service Occupation Study: Final Report*, Winnipeg: 1978; Royal Commission on the Status of Women, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, Ottawa: 1970; Ellen Vanstone, "The Heaven-Sent Nanny" *Toronto Life*, April 1986.
10. The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Workers on Employment Authorizations*, Ottawa: 1981, pp. 35-45.
11. Vanstone, "The Heaven-Sent," p. 51.
12. The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Servants*, p. 53.
13. Esther Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, New York: 1970.
14. Christine Delphy suggests that the appropriation of women's labour power in housework by men in "family mode of production" constitutes the major form of women's oppression and the material basis for "sisterhood". See "The Main Enemy" in *Close to Home*, Amherst: 1984.
15. Jan Williams, Hazel Twart, Ann Bachelli, "Women and the Family" in Ellen Malos (ed.) *The Politics of Housework*, London: 1980, p. 114.
16. Noreen in Makeda Silvera, *Silenced*, Toronto: 1983, p. 25.
17. According to one study, in Sweden, 2,340 million hours a year have been spent in housework, as compared to 1,290 million hours in industry (cited in Sheila Rowbotham, *Women's Consciousness, Men's World*, Harmondsworth: 1973, p. 68.
18. Harriet Rosenberg, "The Home is the Workplace: Hazards, Stress and Pollutants in the Household" in Luxton and Rosenberg, *Through the Kitchen*; and Harriet Rosenberg, "Motherwork, Stress and Depression: The Costs of Privatized Social Reproduction" in Heather J. Maroney and Meg Luxton (eds.), *Feminism and Political Economy* Toronto 1987.
19. In Canada and the U.S. North, egalitarian relationships prevailed between "help" (as they were called, not "servants") and their small farmer and artisan employers. Participating in the hard work of the family economy, "help" shared the conditions and the table of the families they worked for, suffering no exclusion. These conditions contrasted sharply with relations

- in bourgeois households in the cities where the social distance between the employers and the employees had grown. The *Canadian Settlers' Handbook* advised immigrant domestics that they would enjoy "social amenities" in rural Canada and that "no lady should dream of going as a home-help in the cities, for there class distinctions (were) as rampant as in England" (cited in Helen Lenskyj, "A 'Servant Problem' or a 'Servant-Mistress Problem'? Domestic Service in Canada, 1890-1930" *Atlantis*, 7:1 (Fall 1981) p. 10.
20. Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920" in *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, Toronto: 1974, p. 87; emphases mine.
  21. Gail in Silvera, *Silenced*, p. 113.
  22. Lucy M. Salmon, cited in Leslie, "Domestic Service," p. 112.
  23. See The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Workers*, 74-78; and Alma Estable, *Immigrant Women in Canada: Current Issues*, Ottawa: 1986, pp. 51-53.
  24. Noreen in Silvera, *Silenced*, p. 26.
  25. While the new regulations may be a progressive step in recognizing the principle of overtime for domestic workers, they do not necessarily provide standard overtime protection since it is the employers who are given the option to negotiate with their employees to take the overtime in time off rather than in money for actual overtime worked. In this respect, regulations covering domestic workers still deviate from provisions of the provincial Employment Standards Act.
  26. Estable, *Immigrant Women*, p. 51. There is also the "Subversive Activities" provision in the 1977 federal Immigration Act which, through its vague wording, provides an intimidating message to all non-citizen residents in Canada that engaging in union activities may become grounds for deportation. See Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos, *Problems of Immigrant Women in the Canadian Labour Force*, Ottawa: 1979, pp. 41-45.
  27. The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Workers*, p. 76.
  28. Rachel Epstein, "I Thought There Was No More Slavery in Canada: West Indian Domestic Workers on Employment Visas" in Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, *Union Sisters*, Toronto 1983, p. 26.
  29. Makeda Silvera, "Immigrant Domestic Workers. Whose Dirty Laundry?" *Fireweed*, 9 (1981); and Silvera, *Silenced*.
  30. Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams*, Johannesburg: 1980, pp. 58-60; and Cissie Fairchild, *Domestic Enemies: Domesticity and Their Masters in Old Regime France*, Baltimore and London: 1984, pp. 102-104.
  31. Hook, *Domestic Service*, p. 63; Judith Rollins, *Between Women. Domesticity and their Employers*, Philadelphia: 1985, p. 158.
  32. Leslie, "Domestic Service," p. 83.
  33. It is wrong, however, to confuse this appearance with real thoughts and feelings of the worker. Responding to Lockwood who referred to the domestic worker as the "most socially acquiescent and conservative element" of the working class, Jacklyn Cock emphasizes the need to differentiate between deference and dependence. While the domestic recognizes her dependence on and powerlessness in relation to her employer, her deference is only "a mask which is deliberately cultivated to conform to employer expectations, and shield the workers' real feelings" Cock, *Maids and Madams*, pp. 104-106.
  34. Elaine B. Kaplan, "'I Don't Do No Windows'" *Sojourner*, 10: 10 (August 1985); Rollins, *Between Women*.
  35. Kaplan, "'I Don't Do..,'" p. 17.
  36. Rollins, *Between Women*, p. 185.
  37. Kaplan, "'I Don't Do..'"

38. See Marilyn Barber, "Sunny Ontario for British Girls, 1900-30" in Jean Burnett (ed.), *Looking into My Sisters' Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History* Toronto 1986; Varpu Lindstrom-Best, "'I Won't Be a Slave!' Finnish Domesticity in Canada, 1911-30" in *ibid.*; and Leslie, "Domestic Service."
39. Leslie, "Domestic Service," pp. 95-105.
40. Leslie, "Domestic Service," pp. 122, ff.79.
41. Barbara Roberts, "'A Work of Empire': Canadian Reformers and British Female Immigration" in Linda Kealey (ed.), *A Not Unreasonable Claim. Women and reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s*, Toronto: 1979, pp. 188-189.
42. Arnopoulos, *Problems of Immigrant*, p. 26.
43. B. Singh Bolaria and Peter S. Li, *Racial Oppression in Canada*, Toronto: 1985, p. 178.
44. Bolaria and Li, *Racial Oppression*, p. 178; Silvera, *Silenced*, p. 15.
45. Lloyd T. Wong, "Canada's Guestworkers: Some Comparisons of Temporary Workers in Europe and North America" *International Migration Review*, 18:1 (1984), p. 86.
46. Epstein, "Domestic Workers", 237; Wong, "Canada's Guestworkers," p. 92.
47. See Michael Burawoy, "Migrant Labour in South Africa and the United States" in Theo Nichols (ed.), *Capital and Labour* (1980); Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack, *Immigrant Workers and Class Structure in Western Europe*, London: 1973; and Andre Gorz, "Immigrant labour" *New Left Review*, 61 (1970).
48. Ray C. Rist, "Guestworkers and Post-World War II European Migrations" *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 15:2 (1979), p. 51.
49. Primrose in Silvera, *Silenced*, p. 100.
50. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: 1966, Chapter 9.
51. Here I have drawn on an argument made by Gerda Lerner in a different context. Commenting on the origins of slavery, Lerner has suggested that the process of marking a group of people as an out-group and "designating th(is) group to be dominated as entirely different from the group exerting dominance," has been essential to the mental constructs involved in institutionalization of slavery. See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York and Oxford: 1986, pp. 76-77.
52. The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Workers*, pp. 26-27. The criteria for tolerability used by immigration officers can sometimes be very flexible. Silvera reports the case of a domestic from the Caribbean who wanted to leave her employer for reasons of sexual assault. Because the assault was less than sexual intercourse, her complaint was not found legitimate and she was deported from Canada. See Silvera, "Immigrant Domestic," p. 58.
53. Kelly Toughill, "Domestic Workers Praise Rule Change" *The Toronto Star*, September 22, 1986, p. C2.
54. Hook, *Domestic Service*, pp. 107-108.
55. The Task Force On Child Care, *Report of the Task Force*, p. 121.
56. The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Workers*, p.70. In January 1986 the immigration department introduced a fee of \$50 for issuing, extension and renewal of employment authorizations. In addition to being under-paid and over-taxed in a society that offers them no privileges and freedoms of citizenship, domestic workers are now being asked to "take the burden off the Canadian taxpayer" and pay the costs of their own processing and policing.
57. Many domestic workers who have had years of experience supporting themselves (and others) find it very offensive to have to prove such potential: "I

- supported five children *before* I came here, and I've supported five children *since* I came here, and they want to know if I can manage on my own?" Mary Dabreo, cited in Judith Ramirez, "Good Enough to Stay" *Currents*, 1:14 (1983-1984).
58. A point needs to be made about conceptions of the value of different occupations that immigration partly borrows from CCDO. CCDO has a rigid and static conception of skill as a "thing" that is largely determined "objectively" by the time spent in formal education. As Jane Gaskell ("Conceptions of Skill and the Work of Women: Some Historical and Political Issues" in Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett (eds.), *The Politics of Diversity*, Montreal: 1986) has argued, however, "skill," far from being "a fixed attribute of a job or a worker which will explain higher wages or unemployment," is a result of a political process determined by the relative power (through supply/demand advantages, organizational capabilities, etc.) of different groups of workers.
  59. The Task Force on Immigration Practices and Procedures, *Domestic Workers*, pp. 18-21.
  60. Doris Anderson, "Ontario Should Heed Domestic's Plight" *The Toronto Star*, January 24, 1987.
  61. Noreen in Silvera, *Silenced*, 29.
  62. Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution. The Modernization of Household Service in England and France 1820-1920*, New York: 1976, p. 15.
  63. Manuel Castells, "Immigrant Workers and Class Struggles in Advanced Capitalism: The Western European Experience" *Politics and Society*, 15:1 (1975) p. 54.
  64. Leslie Fruman, "Ontario's Domestic: The Fight for Basic Rights" *The Toronto Star*, March 30, 1987, p. C1.
  65. Ann Rauhala, "Amended Labour Law Would Give Domestic Overtime, Set Hours" *The Globe and Mail*, January 27, 1987.
  66. This is Betty Friedan's position on housework. She approvingly cites others in *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: 1963, who think housework can be done by "anyone with a strong enough back (and a small enough brain)" and find it "peculiarly suited to the capacities of feeble-minded girls." See pp. 206 & 244.
  67. With the emergence of surrogate motherhood, the same potential also applies to childbearing. The employment of surrogate mothers of working-class backgrounds may indeed become the solution upper class and career women opt for to avoid the time and inconvenience a pregnancy would cost.
  68. During the 1920s, in the southern United States where there were more servants, the growth of commercial bakeries and laundries lagged behind such developments in the North and West. See David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week. Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, New York: 1978, p. 275.
  69. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* Cambridge: 1981.
  70. Hayden, *The Grand*, p. 303.