

# Maid in the USA: 10th Anniversary Edition (Perspectives on Gender)

Pages: 240

Publisher: Routledge; 2 edition (May 13, 2016)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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**MAID IN THE U.S.A.**

**10th Anniversary Edition**

**Mary Romero**

First published 1995 by Routledge

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

First issued in hardback 2015

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Sections of [chapter 1](#) appeared in the following:

“Coping with Exploitation of Domestic Workers,” in *Sociology*. Beth B. Hess, Elizabeth W. Markson, and Peter Stein (eds.) pp. 322–23. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company (1991).

Sections of [chapter 5](#) appeared in the following:

“Sisterhood and Domestic Service: Race, Class, and Gender in the Mistress-Maid Relationship,” *Humanity and Society* (1988) Volume 12, Issue 4, pp. 318–46.

Sections of [chapter 6](#) appeared in the following:

“Not Just Like One of the Family: Chicana Domestic Workers Establishing Professional Relationships with Employers,” *Feminist Issues*. (1990) Volume 10, Number 2, pp. 33–41.

“Chicanas Modernize Domestic Service,” *Qualitative Sociology*. (1988) Volume 11, Issue 4, pp. 319–34.

“Day Work in the Suburbs: The Work Experience of Chicana Private Housekeepers,” In *Worth of Women’s Work: A Qualitative Synthesis*. Anne Statham, Eleanor Miller, and Hans Maulksch (eds.). pp. 77–91. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press (1988).

Abridged Version Reprinted in John J. Macionis and Nijole V Benokraitis’ *Seeing Ourselves Classic, Contemporary, and Cross-Cultural Readings in Sociology* pp. 174–80. Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall (1989).

Sections of [chapter 1](#) and [6](#) appeared in the following:

“Domestic Work in Transition from Rural to Urban Life: A Case of La Chicana,” *Women’s Studies*. (1987) Volume 13, Issue 3, pp. 199–200.

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Romero, Mary.

Maid in the U.S.A. / by Mary Romero. — 10th anniversary ed.

p. cm. —(Perspectives on gender)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-415-93541-8 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-1-138-13940-4 (hbk)

1. Women domestics—United States—History. 2. Hispanic American women—Employment—History. 3. Minority women—Employment—United States—History. I. Title: Maid in the USA. II. Title. III. Perspectives on gender (New York, N.Y.)

HD6072.2.U5 R675 2002

331.4'8164046'0973—dc21 2002021960

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the constant support and encouragement of my husband, Eric Margolis. He has lived with the book as long as I have and willingly provided the everyday love and humor needed to write a book. He read every draft carefully and offered supportive criticisms and suggestions. We both knew the end of the book was near when we both preferred to do housework rather than to write, read, or talk about it.

I owe countless debts to my family, who have always given me their love and support and in every way enriched my life. My mother, Amalia Romero, my sister, Frances Romero, and my sister-in-law, Trinnie Romero, helped me make initial contacts with Chicanas currently employed as household workers and shared their own work experiences.

Many colleagues have contributed to the development of my ideas. I am particularly indebted to Arlene Daniels, who encouraged me to explore the importance of the labor process in workers' experiences of domestic service and their struggles and resistance against demeaning housework. Over the last six years, I have benefited from the ongoing dialogue with Judith Rollins, Evelyn Glenn, Phyllis Palmer, Elaine Kaplan, Bonnie Thornton Dill, and Margo Smith.

I appreciate the careful reading and valuable comments that Myra Marx Ferree offered on each manuscript draft. I am fortunate to have found a series editor who understood my concerns and offered important criticism to strengthen my arguments. I also want to thank Lisa Freeman for her extensive comments and constant encouragement throughout the project.

I want to thank Elizabeth Higginbotham, Louise Lamphere, and Arlie Hochschild for contributing generous amounts of time in reading various drafts of the manuscript; and Denise Bielby, Tomas Almaguer, and Ramon Gutierrez for extensive comments on early chapter drafts. I appreciate the comradely assistance of numerous friends who sent me newspaper articles, advertisements, and other items on housework.

The research on Chicana private household workers was supported by a Sally Butler Memorial Fund for Latina Research grant from the Business and Professional Women's Foundation. The visiting-scholar positions funded by the University of California President's Fellowship Program provided the support for writing several manuscript drafts. I am grateful for the support and assistance received from the Chicano Studies Department at the University of California, Davis, and the Sociology Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Special thanks to Adaljiza Sosa Riddel and Arlie Hochschild for their support during the fellowship.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the women whom I interviewed and thank them for sharing their experiences.

## [INTRODUCTION TO THE](#)

In dedication to the memory of Elsa M. Chaney who lost her battle against ovarian cancer two summers ago. Elsa's co-edited book, *Muchachas No More, Household Workers in Latin America and the Caribbean*, remains the most informative volume on the plight of girls and women hired as domestics and their struggles in Latin American homes and is a model of action research advocating policy change from the perspective of workers.

When I first started interviewing Chicana household workers in the early '80s there was essentially no research on Latina domestic workers, and as maids and nannies they had only the most shadowy existence in popular culture. My analysis contributed to the field of literature that drew attention to the importance of paid domestic labor as a window into race, class, and gender relations and reproductive labor. In the decade since the first edition of this book, much has changed. Research and writing on Latinas in domestic service has blossomed. Important studies have been conducted on Latina immigrant day workers and live-in workers in Los Angeles,<sup>1</sup> San Diego,<sup>2</sup> Santa Barbara,<sup>3</sup> the South Texas Mexican border,<sup>4</sup> and New York City.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on immigrant women rather than women of color born in the United States, these studies capture the changing demographics in domestic service and the increasing significance of citizenship in shaping workers' choices and constraints. These studies indicate that undocumented women are more likely to face the lowest wages in the occupation and are more vulnerable to abuses including employers refusing to pay, increasing their workload, not paying on time, and threatening to call the INS. Undocumented women who possess citizen-like characteristics, such as speaking English and driving a car, are more likely to obtain higher paying positions. Still, descriptions of the working conditions that Latina immigrants encounter in domestic service are similar to those I described in *Maid in the U.S.A.*: informal networks among domestics and their employers are used to arrange employment; workers report that employers voice preferences for specific ethnic groups; employers frequently request a wide range of tasks and do not necessarily exclude cleaning when they request childcare; and employees seek autonomy on the job. However, most of the women that I interviewed were less vulnerable: they were citizens; did day work; managed numerous employers; were married to blue collar workers who received health benefits, social security, and other employment benefits; and were able to move in and out of the underground economy. The women I interviewed thus had more negotiating options with individual employers. Although many of the studies reported similar verbal and spacial deference, researchers conducting interviews with live-in immigrant women are more likely to argue the positive aspects of personalism in the employer-employee relationship<sup>6</sup> than researchers studying the work experiences of indigenous African American, Chicana, and other women of color.<sup>7</sup>

In an occupation that has always been dominated by the most vulnerable workers, it is not surprising to find that the pre-civil rights movement image of the African American woman toiling in the kitchen, cleaning the house, and caring for white people's children has largely been replaced by images of immigrant women speaking Spanish and living as undocumented workers in the U.S.

But, when the first edition was published, Latina domestics remained largely outside the popular imagination. The popular cultural images that did exist consisted of old-fashioned stereotypes; Latina maids and nannies were shadow figures, walk-on props in films and TV programs celebrating family life among Texas oil barons or Wall Street executives. However, as Latina and Latino writers crossed over to the literary mainstream, they introduced multidimensional Mexican, Dominican, Cuban, and Salvadoran characters who were housekeepers and nannies. For example, Oscar Hijuelos's protagonist in *Empress of the Splendid* finds employment cleaning the apartments of New Yorkers. John Richy's Amalia Gomez does day work cleaning houses in Los Angeles. In *America's Dream*, Esmeralda Santiago writes about work as a live-in housekeeper and nanny for a family in Westchester County, New York. Julia Alvarez chronicles Yolanda Garcia's family and draws a unique description of the Latina immigrant experience from the perspective of a maid's daughter.

While shadowy figures of Latina maids and nannies serving in homes being groomed by Latino gardeners are still common media images and fixtures in urban and suburban landscapes across the country, real life has intruded into the American consciousness as well. The importance of the role Latina domestics play in the lives of the well-to-do has become unmistakable. After the Zoe Baird fiasco and Linda Chavez's shipwrecked attempt to join the Bush cabinet (which I will discuss below), inquires about the employment of undocumented Latina maids and nannies have become a litmus test for eligibility of presidential appointments. Everyone is aware of the pitfall of failing to withhold social security, although this may have had little effect on actual behavior. Even the televised trial of O. J. Simpson included crucial testimony from Rosa Lopez, his Salvadoran housekeeper. In the same way that race played a major role in positioning women in the domestic service labor market a generation ago, citizenship status has become a crucial factor in characterizing workers' experiences today.

Citizenship, race, ethnicity, class, and gender continue to mark the boundaries of domestic service—an occupation that extends from the rare household staff that includes butler, driver, cook, maid, and nanny to the day worker who cleans four to nine hours for a different employer each day and hopes that no one cancels their appointment or she will fall short of making her rent. Within the occupation, one finds a wide range of salary, job expectations, employee-employer relationships, and living arrangements for live-in employees. Levels of job satisfaction and the degree of exploitation also vary. Interviews with employees and employers have shed light on domestic positions occupied by Latinas, including lucrative live-in nanny positions in Manhattan, Los Angeles, or Chicago's Gold Coast; minimum-wage jobs in one of the growing number of franchises or local cleaning agencies; local independent contractors who clean two or three houses a day; and the undocumented live-in nanny/maid-of-all-work who gets Sunday off. With the exception of cleaning agencies, most domestic workers negotiate salary and working conditions in the privacy of the employers' home and the informal contract is all too frequently dependent on the "good will" of the employer. The employee-employer relationship dictates number of hours worked, specific tasks assigned, raises, and social security or any other benefits. There is little recourse against disgruntled employers refusing to pay on time or threatening to report undocumented employees to the INS.

My analyses of race and of the nature of the employee-employer relationship are two areas in *Maid in the U.S.A.* that have drawn a great deal of attention—both criticism and praise. I stand by my analyses and I believe that research and events over the past decade reinforce my argument. Workers are sorted by their vulnerability and privilege along the continuum of work activity that falls under the occupation of domestic service. Recent research on immigration and domestic service emphasizes and helps to untangle the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. In this new introduction, I will revisit these two areas of controversy in light of recent studies on immigration, and I will reflect on new directions of inquiry. Like many students of domestic service, I have redirected my research away from the employer to bring the employee and their family into

sharper focus. My goal is to broaden the understanding of work and family, and to highlight the role of paid workers in the social reproduction of family, community, and nation. RACE MATTERS IN DOMESTIC HARMONY

When I have given scholarly talks about this work over the past decade, question-and-answer sessions produce peculiar but predictable responses. One of the critiques I receive, that I overemphasize the racialized nature of domestic work, is typically prefaced by descriptions of white men and women with advanced degrees choosing to clean houses because the pay and hours are so much better than part-time teaching positions. Of course, white women and men engage in paid domestic labor. But the question forces us to examine how the experiences of African American, Chicana, and Latina and Caribbean immigrant women are different. A few years ago I came across a collection of essays by Louise Rafkin, a white woman who had worked as a domestic, entitled *Other People's Dirt: A Housecleaner's Curious Adventures*. From the subject position of one of the educated white domestic workers, she provides the thick description of differences in experience that *Maid in the U.S.A.* did not. Rafkin, a journalist and writer, did not set out to write academic prose about intersectionality, but her investigation into the various shapes and forms that the activity of cleaning "other people's dirt" takes in various labor markets, captures manifestations of race, class, and gender, as well as citizenship and sexuality.

Rafkin began cleaning houses as a well-paid and college-educated independent worker. With a master's degree but unable to obtain a teaching position in American literature, she found herself posting employment wanted signs at the local grocery store. While none of the women I interviewed ever cleaned a French villa, heard Barbra Streisand's voice as she left a message on an employer's answering machine, were exotic housecleaners in San Francisco who clean in the nude, or were employed as a lady's maid to the Fricks, Hearsts, or Rockefellers, Rafkin makes it clear that they were all engaged in the same activity—cleaning other people's dirt. Many of the experiences that Rafkin describes are identical to the accounts of the Chicanas that I interviewed, such as tensions between employee and employer including requests for additional work without additional pay, detailed instructions of how to clean, excessive supervision, and difficulties cleaning around family members and pets. Rafkin vividly describes common practices like gift-giving, about which she writes: "People collect stuff and shuffle it around their lives ... when heaps of worthless items are disseminated around the house. A purple-and-gold 'Cleo-Cat-ra' salt-and-pepper shaker is passed on to me, which I, in turn, unload on my niece."<sup>8</sup>

Two chapters of *Other People's Dirt* in particular highlight specific differences that underlie life chances—that is, the monetary value of a specific person's labor, their ability to obtain employment, and their limited job options. Rafkin reveals the roles that race, class, gender, sexuality and citizenship play in the social fields surrounding paid domestic labor. In her chapter titled "McCleaning," she describes her short tenure as a Happy Maid employed at a corporate cleaning service, which she quits because of the low wages. After completing three jobs that the company billed at \$85, \$130, and \$95, she received \$16.50 as an employee in training. After the second day Rafkin quit and told Lena, her African American coworker, to do the same, explaining that "with only three or four jobs a week, you'd earn more than you do as a Happy Maid." This interchange with Lena follows:

"Who's going to hire me? Who's going to let me in their house?" She asked. And though I immediately responded, "Someone will, you're a great cleaner," I knew it was a lie.

John and his Happy Maids office staff make it okay for rich people to allow people they are normally afraid of into their homes. People will trust nameless faces as long as they are in uniform, and as long as they know their place. A Happy Maid would always know her place; the amount of her paycheck would make her value perfectly clear.<sup>9</sup>

In a second realization, Rafkin reconsiders her childhood memories of Lupita, the Mexican immigrant woman who cleaned her family's house every Tuesday morning. She contrasts her childhood memories with her own employment experiences of cleaning other people's dirt in the chapter entitled "Can We Clean the Heavens":

My head in a toilet, I'd suddenly retrieve a memory of her, the way she actually washed our hairbrushes as part of her regular routine. Quoting an extra \$15 for a fridge cleaning, I would recall Lupita on her knees facing our brimming icebox. Do I remember correctly—did she really take everything out every week, wiping the rim of the ketchup bottle before replacing the salad dressing with the labels all facing the same direction? At the end of my cleaning day, four or five hours long, taking my aching lower back off to the chiropractor, I flashed on Lupita. How did she do it? She worked nine-hour days.[10](#)

Rafkin reflects on women's specific locations in domestic service and identified the gulf between privilege and vulnerability:

We come from different branches of the housecleaning family, branches that rarely intertwine. Cleaning, I am given carte blanche to observe lives I would otherwise never touch. Aside from this, my cleaning life gives me free afternoons and a healthy and often embarrassingly high hourly wage. For Lupita, cleaning was one of only a few options open to an illegal single mother. What else could she have done? Child care? Dishwashing?

My clients overpay me so they don't have to face the contradictions and guilt of hiring someone like Lupita. It is easier to pay a nice, educated white girl than to engage someone who may be problematic, someone who reminds them of how messy the world really is.[11](#)

Louise Rafkin's essays illustrate my argument that there is nothing intrinsically demeaning about domestic labor. The work is oppressive, or not, because of structural relationships of race, class, gender, and citizenship that are pervasive and predate the employer/employee exchange. Maid and madam do not come to the relationship as equals. There is a hierarchy of class; the women entering into the exchange are racialized and gendered subjects, one of which may have the privileges of citizenship while the other lives in fear of discovery and deportation. In most cases, these exchanges are part of the underground economy and thus are not rule governed; one employer may value the work by paying a living wage and offering vacations and social security, but market forces push in the opposite direction. There are more workers than jobs and someone is always willing to work for less. Thus, it is more likely that the employee-employer relationships of domestic service will reproduce the existing racial, class, gender, and citizenship privileges than that they will challenge them. My analyses ten years ago focused on the specific structural positions in domestic service and the self-interests of both employee and employer. By uncovering the racial, ethnic, class, and gender divisions of reproductive labor, it is possible to examine the details of the inequalities reproduced in the economic exchange between the poor and working class and more affluent groups in the U.S.

In *Maid in the U.S.A.* I describe the situation of Juanita, the live-in maid I encountered in my colleague's home in El Paso. She was not atypical of poor and working-class (and sometimes middle-class) immigrant Latina women who find an open market for their services as maids and nannies in U.S. homes. However, marked by their class, race, ethnic, gender, and immigrant status, these women are stuck in a segment of the market that is almost always part of the underground economy, typified by low wages and long hours, where they have little control over working conditions that include both housework and childcare. Frequently, employers of live-in workers exert too much influence and consider room and board a disproportionate share of

wages. The intersection of statuses constitute Latina immigrant women as ideal candidates to fulfill the needs of American families. Not only are they less expensive than employees hired by agencies who pay benefits, but they are easily exploited for additional work. Moreover, race still provides an important social marker that distinguishes the worker from other household members.

One reason that I focused on the intersection of statuses was because many social scientists and politicians have argued, and the general public believes, that the poor working conditions of domestic workers are attributable to the workers' lack of skills and disciplined work habits. Throughout the history of domestic service this perspective has dominated and has resulted in attempts to professionalize the occupation through such cosmetic measures as training and uniforms, rather than attempts to improve the working conditions of domestics. Domestic work has been viewed as a "bridging" occupation suitable as a kind of socialization experience for newcomers. Workers were thought to benefit from the opportunity to be modernized (remember the "funny" scene in the film *El Norte* when an Anglo housewife explains the complex digital programming of her washing machine to a terrified immigrant woman from Guatemala?). This perspective led to systematic exclusion of domestic (and farm) labor from employment legislation, as well as to attempts to gain special immigration provisions for bringing a specific class of immigrants to work as domestics and nannies. BONDS OF SISTERHOOD REVISITED

A second critique raised in question-and-answer sessions concerns my analysis of the degree of personalism, intimacy, agency, power, and level of employee resistance governing the employee-employer relationship. Previous research on U.S. women of color in domestic service found that characterizing them as "one of the family" did not reflect actual employee-employer relationships in domestic service. Instead, the occupation was more likely to consist of everyday rituals of verbal and spacial deference rather than reciprocal and egalitarian social relationships. Nevertheless, students and colleagues frequently argue that the nanny they grew up with, or the maid they hire, *really* is treated as a member of the family. Film and literature characterizations are similarly dominated by images of devoted maids, nannies, and caregivers and benevolent employers who embrace sisterhood across racial and class boundaries.<sup>12</sup> I wrote against this dominant narrative in *Maid in the U.S.A.*<sup>13</sup> The book and my presentations revealed deep fissures in feminism and elicited from colleagues and students remarkable levels of cognitive dissonance, discomfort, guilt, and resentment. Structural contradictions that I described in the typology of views in the chapter "The Household Dilemma," continue to dominate discussions and writings about the role of feminist scholars who are employers of domestic help.<sup>14</sup> Elsa Chaney's 1994 column "Women and Labor" in the *Latin American Labor News* captured the unresolved dialectic:

There is little interaction yet with feminist groups that, for the most part, keep their distance from the household worker movement. Some observers believe that the double identity of feminist/professional and *patrona*, as well as class and racial differences between the women, make it difficult for domestics and feminists to work together. As one leader said to me, "feminists can work with poor women in the barrios, because *pobladoras* never come to their house, while they must confront us everyday."<sup>15</sup>

Past analysis of domestics' struggles concentrated almost exclusively on interpersonal relationships between women of color domestic workers and their white women employers. Analysis was dominated by a social psychological framework that limited the discussion to coping strategies or other muted forms of rebellion. The structure of household labor was ignored or treated as an extension of the hierarchical relationship between women from different racial backgrounds. However, I argued that the relationship is best conceptualized as an employee-employer relationship and resistance as an instance of class struggle. Women and men employing private household workers and childcare workers share the same self-interest as other

employers: increasing productivity by demanding more labor for lower wages. This accounts for wealthy women like Linda Chavez and Zoe Baird who hire undocumented workers and do not pay social security. Employers find it in their best interest to resist employer/employee definitions of the relationship, refusing to acknowledge that when a private household worker or caretaker is hired, their home becomes the employee's workplace; and as such, the worker is an employee, not an extension of the housewife or mother.

Employers actively resist the hard-won benefits of modern work culture. Within the privacy of their own homes, informal negotiations between employers and employees provide ample opportunities for abuses to occur, particularly when women are working in the underground economy or are undocumented. Willingness to do the most amount of work and to accept the least pay are frequently cited as the most significant criteria used to select workers.<sup>16</sup> Past work experience or skills are less likely to be the basis for hiring private household workers than personality. Other researchers have found that employers exhibit different racial and ethnic preferences for housework and childcare; different populations of workers frequently become stereotyped by employers as the ideal employee for housework, childcare, or for live-in positions. Consequently, paid domestic labor is not only structured around gender but also is stratified by race and citizenship status, relegating the most vulnerable workers to the least favorable working conditions and placing the most privileged workers in the best positions.

Like other employee-employer relationships under capitalism, control over the work process is not cooperative. Worker and employer define their interests in opposition and compete for control. My research on Chicana household workers describes the active struggle over the work process. Only by gaining a measure of control can their employees restructure their work to eliminate demeaning and degrading practices. I identified several strategies that private household workers used in their effort to establish control over the work: (1) increasing the opportunities for job flexibility; (2) increasing pay and benefits; (3) establishing and enforcing an implicit contract specifying tasks; (4) minimizing contact with employers; (5) defining themselves as professional housekeepers; and (6) creating a small-business-like environment. The critical locus of the conflict is to define the work on the basis of a contract—by the house or apartment—rather than as hourly work.

The women who I studied were not employed by a cleaning agency or as live-ins. Nor were they part of a community cooperative. These women represented large numbers of day workers who use their family and friendship networks to find employment. Their work histories revealed that, particularly for younger workers, the introduction to domestic service involved an informal apprenticeship program. The new recruit accompanied a relative or friend to work for several days or weeks until the new recruit decided she was ready to work alone. Although the women identified these training sessions as providing experience in cleaning, learning about new products or appliances, and discovering the pros and cons of structuring the work in particular ways, a more important function may have been the socialization of new recruits to fight for certain working conditions and to learn ways to negotiate with employers. I found that employers were similarly tied to the network: employers ask domestics for the names of interested persons to work for neighbors, even as domestics ask employers for the names of friends interested in hiring housekeepers. Using personal relationships with employers, workers frequently solicited their assistance in pressuring existing employers to upgrade working conditions and pay, as well as to inform potential employers of existing conditions, thereby socializing them to appropriate expectations. Clearly these strategies have limitations. However, they did point to the way that the struggle for better working conditions occurs on an individual basis in the absence of unionization. The lack of state regulation and unionization create dual markets that are maintained by employers who take advantage of the vulnerable status of women of color, particularly undocumented immigrants, in the labor force.

In summary, legal and social science research findings suggest that (1) while domestic labor may be priceless, employers are unwilling to pay very much for it; and (2) employers are reluctant to accept their home as a site of employment in compliance with federal law or the norms of modern work culture.<sup>17</sup> Both of these points became painfully obvious in the last ten years of “Nannygate” scandals. The public debate surrounding these scandals not only revealed a great deal about American social norms and values relating to gender and work, but also the disregard for these same issues when race, ethnicity, and citizenship is submerged under the topic of immigration. The public debates on immigration and domestic service that “Nannygate” has elicited are closely related to its predecessor, the “servant problem.” Placing the controversy within the historical context of the “servant problem” highlights the continued practices of structuring immigration and labor law to benefit employers rather than employees. “Nannygate” also sheds light on how feminist issues are constructed by women in professional positions to either include or exclude the needs of the working women who clean their homes and care for their children. “NANNYGATE”: A CONTINUATION

## OF THE “SERVANT PROBLEM” DEBATES

In January 1993, the employment of private household workers and childcare workers became a central issue in President Clinton’s nomination for Attorney General. Rather than becoming known as the first woman Attorney General, Zoe Baird, a \$500,000-a-year corporate lawyer with the Aetna Life and Casualty Company, became known for the first national scandal over childcare arrangements. Baird and her Yale law professor husband, with a reported combined net worth of \$2.3 million dollars, had hired an undocumented Peruvian couple for \$500 a week and failed to pay social security or unemployment insurance taxes. By January 19, 1993 she and her husband paid back taxes and fines amounting to \$11,000. Nevertheless, opposition to her confirmation continued to grow and on January 22 she withdrew her name. The next nominee was Kimba Wood. When asked if she had a “Zoe Baird Problem,” she said no. Unlike Zoe Baird, Wood had hired an undocumented Trinidadian woman for seven years but it was prior to the time that it was illegal for an employer to do so and she had paid taxes. However, Clinton and his advisors felt the distinction between Wood’s childcare arrangements and Baird’s arrangements were lost on the public, and she too withdrew her name. The public debate that ensued revealed a great deal about social norms and values relating to gender and work. But the debate also demonstrates the intersectionality of gender and work with race, ethnicity, and class.

“Nannygate” involved two issues: (1) the hiring of an undocumented worker during a period when it was illegal for an employer to do so; and (2) the failure to pay taxes. However, as Kimba Wood and other potential nominees discovered, the “Zoe Baird Problem” became the hiring of undocumented household workers period, not merely failing to pay income taxes and social security. Public opinion clustered around two sentiments, one emphasizing gender and the other class. Gender politics were pursued by Baird supporters who cited a double standard.<sup>18</sup> Advocates for President Clinton’s first two women nominees for Attorney General argued from a feminist position, explaining that male nominees were never questioned about their childcare arrangements. Outrage against the nominees’ hiring of undocumented women crystallized around the class distinction of law-breaking and the leniency of the government towards white collar crime. Class politics characterized “Nannygate” as a “yuppie” white collar crime and resisted attempts to sweep it under the rug. Gender politics constructed the response to the issue of white collar crime by arguing that the law was frequently violated and rarely enforced. Enforcement in this case had the effect of discriminating against women, namely working mothers. Furthermore, they argued that the law is out of step with the needs of the nation.

This debate over class and gender—focusing on the privilege of upper middle-class professional women to use live-in undocumented women in order to resolve their personal childcare dilemmas—obscured the absence of national childcare for all working parents. As in past debates

over the "servant problem," the discourse was dominated by employers who advocated solutions like changing immigration legislation and increasing professionalism in the occupation in order to raise salaries and attract native-born workers. Proposed solutions offered little in the way of improving actual working conditions for women employed in domestic service, but focused on increasing the number of eligible workers. Professionalizing domestic service by upgrading training and requiring certification was promoted as the means to improve status, pay, and working conditions, thus making childcare and domestic service more attractive and competitive with other occupations and attracting U.S. workers. For instance, Theresa Monsour's article in the *St Paul Pioneer Press* entitled "Minnesota the Land of 10,000 Nannies, where women sought for work ethic," described students attending Red Wing/Winona Technical College being trained as nannies and acquiring positions with ideal working conditions, including traveling around the country and the world and using gym equipment in their apartment-sized private living areas. \*

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