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Who is worth being called a 'worker'? Domestic workers' struggle for recognition in Brazil



*The rights of domestic workers have recently been at the centre of public debate in Brazil, with issues such as prejudice, the remnants of an ideology of slavery and mistreatment of workers being discussed openly in the media. In this post, **Louisa Acciari** argues that the intersection of gender, race and class in the Brazilian context works to devalue domestic workers, positioning them as unskilled cheap labour.*

Brazilian domestic workers have a long history of organising and fighting for their rights. The first association of domestic workers was created in 1936 by Laudelina Campos de Melo and, 60 years later, in 1997, the National Federation of Domestic Workers (FENATRAD) was founded. But domestic work was only recognised as a professional occupation in 1972 with the **Law 5859**, and the category had to wait until the election of the Workers' Party to gain labour rights.

In 2013, a constitutional reform known as '**PEC das domesticas**' established for the first time equality of rights between domestic workers and other professional categories. While it was celebrated as a great victory by the FENATRAD, the reaction of the employers – usually middle-class urban families – was much less enthusiastic. This reform opened-up a debate on the status of domestic workers within Brazilian society and ultimately about the value of their labour.

Focusing on this particular event, I argue that the intersection of gender, race and class in the Brazilian context works to devalue domestic workers, positioning them as unskilled cheap labour.

New rights in a precarious sector

Brazil is the **largest employer of domestic workers** in the region with more than 7 million workers in this category. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 90% of domestic workers are women, which represents 17% of all active women in the country. It is also a very precarious sector as only 25% of workers were formally registered in 2005, and the vast majority of them earns less than the minimum wage. Black women are over-represented in this sector, which employs 22% of all active black women in Brazil.

Domestic workers have developed strong alliances with black and workers' movements since the 1960s, which enabled them to secure some rights in the 1988 Constitution. In 2011, the ILO launched an employment convention (**Convention 189**) to address domestic workers' terms and conditions worldwide, which gives significant weight to local movements. They are now recognised as workers, as opposed to servants or slaves, and as legitimate political actors in full capacity to negotiate with the Government and other organisations.

In Brazil, the 2013 **constitutional amendment** gives them the following rights:

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- Unemployment benefits
- Minimum wage
- Maximum of 8 hours of work daily and 44 hours weekly
- Compensation of 50% for extra hours and night shifts

Not a real job?

However, this new law was received with scepticism by middle-class families who employ domestic workers. Many were worried that it would **cost too much** to hire a maid and, in a context of inflation, that this would add a burden on their budget. Some also insisted on the fact that most households would be *forced* to trade their cleaner for **electronic devices** such as dishwashers. The magazine *Veja* even published testimonies of middle-class women complaining that it is not possible to check working hours. **An employer said:**

I don't know how to count costs related to the working day of my nanny, who sleeps at home. What is additional time? What's a night shift? Unlike companies, at home there isn't a clock to check on the worker.

One could question how difficult it really is to check a clock, or to understand what a 'night shift' means. However, what this employer's comment reveals is much deeper than that: some types of work (and people) are worth more than others, and what happens within the privacy of the household is not work.

Feminist scholars such as **Acker** or **Perrons** have argued that the gender division of labour confines women to care and domestic work, naturalising and devaluing 'feminine' work. These tasks are seen as relying more on the personal qualities of the worker than on her skills or qualifications, thus justifying a low pay.

In Brazil, about a third of domestic workers still live in their employer's house, usually in a small room behind the kitchen or across the garden, in exchange for their labour. Gabriel Mascaro directed a very moving **documentary** on maids' working conditions and the complex affective relationships with their employers.

But if nannies and cleaners play such an important role in the economy and wellbeing of the household, why don't they deserve the same terms and conditions as every other worker?

Racism and elitism

This middle-class resistance against labour rights for their employees is inscribed in a broader anti-poor and anti-Nordestinos context in Brazil. Low paid jobs are usually performed by black or mixed race women, who left the region of the North East (the poorest of the country) to work for white families in the South. A few weeks ago, during the presidential election campaign, former President Cardoso **declared** that:

The Workers' Party (PT) relies on the less informed people, who by coincidence are the poorest. It's not because they are poor that they vote PT, it's because they are less informed.



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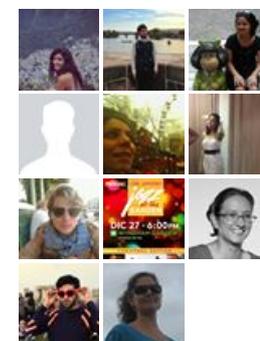
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I could write a whole paper just on this declaration, but what it shows, fundamentally, is a quite common perception among white urban elite of poor people as being ignorant and uneducated. After the PT won the election, [twitter](#) was saturated of comments blaming the Nordestinos for the victory of Dilma Rousseff and warning them not to come down to Sao Paulo to find a job.

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In this context, the 'PEC das domesticas' poses the question of whose work is valued and recognised as such; and whose job is worth receiving a decent pay. Although domestic workers have been recognised by law as a professional category, part of the middle-class is still to be convinced of their employees' value.

About the Author

Louisa Acciari is a PhD student at the Gender Institute working on the mobilisations of domestic workers in Brazil. Her research interests include social movements; feminist and post-colonial theories; the intersections between gender, race and class; and Brazilian politics. She studied Political Science in Paris before coming to the UK to do Gender Studies. She has also been involved in the student and feminist movements for years and believes in the importance of linking academia to activism and practices of contestation.

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