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Women Workers Make All Other Work Possible

LATINA IMMIGRANT ORGANIZING AT
THE OAKLAND DOMESTIC WORKERS'
CENTER

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When Gloria, a long-time domestic worker from El Salvador living in the San Francisco Bay Area, complained about the depression and night sweats she had been experiencing since quitting her job, it was for a peculiar reason.¹ She had worked as a personal attendant for an elderly couple in their private home for several years until the elderly wife became so sick she had to be taken to a nursing home for intensive care, and Gloria was left only to care for the husband. She was contracted by one of the couple’s children, a daughter. Gloria loved her job because she had grown to authentically love her clients and, on most days, she



joyfully spent most of her waking hours in this family's home attending to their needs. One day, she left her job and never went back after her longtime client, the husband, tried to force himself on her sexually in exchange for her weekly pay. She shuddered as she recounted the way he placed the envelope on his lap. She felt as though this man had changed from one day to the next. She jetted out of the house without picking up the check she had rightfully earned. Still, it was not the particular instance of sexual harassment that had shaken her nerves, she confessed, but a kind of grief over losing someone she cared for, which had left her feeling bereft and confused.

While the entertainment industry has been the main locus of the #MeToo movement, Gloria's story illustrates that sexual harassment in the workplace is

unfortunately not a remarkable feature of Hollywood. Voices from the anti-violence movement have long called attention to how sexual assault and rape are weaponized for social domination, and that these incidents are exacerbated by unequal power relations rather than simply motivated by some unrestrained sexual desire. The relations of domination inherent in wage labor thus often map too well onto relations of sexual domination across industries.

Still, some have charged that the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, assault and rape in the workplace has been relatively insular, confined primarily to relatively elite women workers such as actresses, media professionals, and other white collar proletarians. To be sure, the differences are notable. For instance, in the industries just listed, white workers are overrepresented



(83.9%), while building, grounds cleaning, and maintenance operations reflect an overrepresentation of Latina/o workers (38%)—workers like Gloria.² According to a survey by the Southern Poverty Law Center, this demographic tilt has real effects on exposure to harassment and assault: 77% of Latina women say that sexual harassment in the workplace was a major concern.³ So does an absence of citizenship: Diana Vellos in 1997 found also that “immigrant Latina domestic workers [were] especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation because they depend on their employers for their livelihood, live in constant fear of being deported, suffer social isolation, and are vulnerable to their employer’s demands.”⁴

Of equal importance is the crucial difference in *where* their work takes place. Entertainment workers are more likely to

work in public firms, whereas domestic workers often work in private homes. Gloria’s story shows that working in the intimacy of a private residence creates barriers for reporting harassment; the working conditions of domestic workers reveal unique vulnerabilities that exacerbate their exploitation.

Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate these differences between domestic workers and the more visible figures associated with #MeToo, so that the ubiquity and generalized exposure to harassment is not lost. After all, #MeToo has shown how even the most glamorous industries are undergirded by gender-based violence and exploitation. And more hopefully, both offer examples of what a collective refusal of these conditions might look like.

While Gloria’s story paints a picture of an



especially vulnerable sector of women workers, she might push back against being labeled a victim. In the same way that the horrific stories of sexual harassment and assault that have given rise to the #MeToo movement have revealed more or less formal networks of women workers banding together against their exploitation, so too has the “super-exploitation” of this sector of women has given rise to a parallel network of Latina immigrant women domestic workers. My time with a Domestic Workers’ Center in Oakland, California brought home not only the scale and success of these women’s efforts, but also their sophisticated understanding of the relationship between violence and economic exploitation.

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I met Gloria during one of my first days, in

one of the daily workshops that take place every morning and afternoon in the common area of the domestic workers’ center. The workshop scheduled for that day was about reporting sexual harassment in the workplace. Two white women lawyers spoke to the *miebras* (or members) in Spanish about two types of sexual harassment in the workplace: *quid pro quo* and hostile work environments. As they spoke and most of the dozen women in the room began to ask questions about their situation, it became clear to me—and to them—that an overwhelming majority had experienced a form of sexual harassment in the workplace. For some, this was clearly their first time speaking about those incidents. They stumbled over their words trying to narrate their experiences, and some were even adventurous enough to adopt the lawyers’



new legal lexicon. Gloria was the most outspoken of the bunch and she seemed to adapt quickly to the language of the law. She asked a lot of questions and boldly shared her story. Others listened and were emboldened to speak as well. The lawyers left their contact information and were gone.

Gloria knew I was volunteer staff, and she eagerly came up to me afterwards to divulge more details than were possible to share during the structured workshop. Even though we hadn't met before, Gloria said felt safe telling me about her experience being sexually harassed by her former employer and client, as well as her subsequent depression, precisely because I was a staff member of this organization, a *miembra* of this network who could connect her with resources and listen without judgment.

A significant amount of energy in these

centers is put toward supporting women in manipulative or violent situations with current and former partners. Many women whose husbands were the sole breadwinners reported experiencing various kinds of financial manipulation. Physical and sexual violence, too, were ongoing, and when they sought divorces or custody battles, they faced institutional as well as interpersonal violence. In several extreme instances, the domestic worker center had to be put on alert to protect members from stalking by violent former lovers. If the stigma surrounding gender violence has the effect of individuating its experience and isolating the survivor, the collective practices of the worker center worked precisely against this dynamic, looking for empowering solutions by socializing action.

But as the *miembras* will explain, this



harassment and assault cannot be treated in isolation, but must be taken up in conjunction with other organizing against their super-exploitation. Assault and harassment aren't aberrations: they are another instance of how exploitation works. So while workshops about wage theft and abuse are a major recruiting tool and often primary organizing strategy, the *miembras* of this network all participate in a rather diverse set of activities aimed at building power in the grassroots base, which they call *la base*. They conduct outreach to other domestic workers in playgrounds or grocery stores, they coordinate workshops for skills trainings and political education, they march in solidarity with social movements or labor unions, or they build national campaigns for protective legislation.

Domestic workers' centers today continue

in the tradition of domestic workers' unions, as they were described by Communist organizer Esther Cooper Jackson in the 1940s.⁵ Like their unionist antecedents, workers' centers provide education and skills training, professional development and job placement; they also seek to standardize the parameters of and protections for domestic work; they lobby around wages, conditions, and hours. Today's struggle for the National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights finds striking parallels with the experience of domestic workers' unionization some 70 years ago:

Today only one state, Washington, has a law which regulates hours of work in a household employment. This law was passed in 1937 and establishes a 60 hour work week for all employees in private households but permits longer working hours in emergencies. The original draft of the bill included a six-day week, double pay for overtime, and provisions



of \$50 fine for violation. In order to get the bill through legislature, its proponents were forced to drop these provisions. The results of the passage of the bill have not been what its proponents had hoped for: employers have been non-cooperative in many instances and employees are hesitant to report violations of the act for fear of losing their jobs.⁶

While women in these trades have succeeded in winning more protections and shorter working days, the *enforcement* of these provisions remains a problem. At the domestic worker centers in the Bay Area, organizers have held gatherings to educate employers of domestic workers—affluent women who are in the position to hire nannies and housekeepers—about the rights of their employees. In these meetings, attendees are asked questions like “if you were sick, wouldn’t you want *your* employer to pay you sick leave?” These questions are

designed to provoke employers to think about their nannies and housekeepers as *workers*, deserving of labor protections. Organizers reported that many of the women in these workshops react with shock. They are not accustomed to thinking about the work of social reproduction as “real” work, and the super-exploitation of Latina immigrant women is normalized, even in “progressive” San Francisco.

This tension speaks to how domestic workers’ centers make the labor of social reproduction, that capital obscures, actually visible. Esther Cooper Jackson regarded this as a kind of “stigma” about domestic work:

Household employment generally is viewed as unskilled work and persons so engaged are looked down upon socially. This belief holds despite the fact that household tasks are varied and when they are done efficiently



demand intelligence and a considerable variety of skills ... the domestic worker may be given a room off the laundry, or even in the garage; she has no security of any kind, and is treated in such a way by members of the family that a social stigma is attached to her.⁷

Domestic work, even when it is waged, often appears as unskilled and socially unnecessary, even though this is not the case. Stigmatization often relies on stereotypes hinging on a worker's race, gender, and social status. Long-time domestic worker Esperanza described how in Mexico, when she had worked as a housekeeper in the homes of affluent employers, she resented being called a *chacha*, a derogatory word used to deride women workers of lower class status. The American equivalent is the servile black “mammy,” the stereotype that undergirded the real exploitation and abuse of black

women nannies.⁸

Beyond the legal obstacles to domestic worker unionization, the nature of the work itself raises challenges to traditional workplace organizing, such as the “isolation, independence of each worker, the lack of strong bargaining power since each employer contends with each employee, the overcrowded labor market which makes competition keen, mobility of the worker associated with frequent changes in employment, the lack of class feeling and unity, and hence, the inability of workers to get together for meetings.”⁹ Yet despite its reputation as an “unorganizable” sector, many international examples—in Scandinavia and the early days of the Soviet Union—illustrate that it is not only possible to organize domestic work but to elevate “the social standing of domestic workers [such



that it] is equal to other workers” and free of stigma.¹⁰

Domestic worker organizing has influenced and been influenced by new forms of collectivity, in the workplace and what Patrick Cunningham has described as “the terrain of social reproduction,” or struggles beyond the point of production.¹¹ Since the work of social reproduction often takes the form of both formal waged work and informal unwaged work, domestic workers are uniquely situated with one foot in each world. Thus, organized networks of domestic workers, when mobilized, are capable of triggering a chain of events both in the firm, as workers, and “in the community,” as mothers, wives, etc.¹² For example, when organizers in the domestic workers’ centers want to do outreach about the victories of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, they first

target already existing networks of waged and unwaged workers.

One evening, a member of the organization invited her relatives and neighbors to a know your rights workshop in her living room, called a *cafecito* because they served coffee and traditional Mexican pastries. Organizers gave an educational workshop about the labor rights of domestic workers, and roleplayed how one might go about asking their employer to respect their labor rights. Those attending included a woman who worked for the unionized In Home Health Care (IHHC) program, another woman who was interested in working for IHHC, unpaid domestic workers, and an immigrant man who had sustained an injury that had rendered him disabled and was interested in knowing more about the rights of domestic workers. The domestic workers’



centers thus incorporate the know-your-rights training *cafecitos*, professional development and skills training activities, and various other cultural programs as part of a larger strategy of eliminating the stigma and elevating the dignity of domestic work.

Alongside this struggle against stigma, the domestic workers' centers also build up the power of the class within the terrain of social reproduction. The *Apoyo* (Support) groups of the domestic workers' centers are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the center, providing case management by peer leaders, developing workshops and groups, and strengthening the social fabric of the community of *mujeres*, Latina immigrant women. Staff-members were steadfast in their reminders to be kind to one another because "you never know what a woman has been through." Here again, traditional

customs like offering coffee and *botanas*, or snacks, to guests were used as a way to create a sense of belonging for members.

Daily workshops for members took place twice a day: once in the morning for the stay-at-home women, and one in the evening for those that worked outside of their homes during the day. Workshop topics run the gamut from dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace to parental acceptance of queer children. Interspersed are support groups where the stories divulged are kept confidential. The centers liaise between emergency housing facilities and women, with and without children, who often do not speak English. And they escort women to court who would otherwise be taken advantage of or be unable to represent themselves adequately because of language barriers and the inaccessibility of legal jargon.



Some women would be advised about what to stock in their refrigerators if child protective services was coming to visit: officials would be looking for American cereal, milk, cheese, and bread, not *frijoles* and *tortillas*.

Against this backdrop of invisibility and indignity, the women I worked with shared a sense of pride about their work, captured in the National Domestic Workers Alliance slogan: “women workers make all other work possible.” The whole range of activities they organized—from counseling about wage theft and sexual assault to marches with other workers—were all aimed at enhancing their power, but also curbing the stigma and sense of disposability that surrounds their labor. If harassment and assault is borne of relationships of power, these combined and holistic approaches offer the emerging movement against gender violence an

effective way forward.

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As part of the Times Up initiative at the Golden Globes this year, actress Meryl Streep brought as her guest Ai-Jen Poo, the Executive Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, a key nonprofit player in this network of domestic workers’ organizations. In a statement about her decision, Streep said that she wanted to highlight the relationship between power imbalances and abuse which is not unique to Hollywood but also occurs in domestic work. We might also add that the struggle against those power imbalances is also true across both sectors.

If #MeToo has relied on the power of bad publicity to shame rich and powerful men, then Sarah Leonard was right to ask, “but what about the women who are sexually



harassed by men who aren't even a little famous?"¹³ It seems that Latina immigrant domestic workers have found something of an answer. For the rest of us still searching for the shape of our refusal, we may want to follow their lead.

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