UNCATEGORIZED

# On rights, demands and affection policies in relation to domestic and care work

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"They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work"
Silvia Federici, 2013, p. 32.

For decades, debates on domestic and care work (DCW) have sought to give value, visibility and recognition to a job which, although done behind closed doors, lays the foundation for our ability to earn a living. These debates, as Lourdes Benería (1999/2005) postulates, are still inconclusive, but different scopes —the voluntary sector and the domestic and care workers trade union movement— are taking specific action to shed light on the social inequalities of this sector.

DCW has been socially considered to be one of the functions that correspond to women and therefore, in accordance with the new international division of labour, it is 'natural' for the feminised labour of 'third world' countries to meet the needs of countries in the north in this scope. This has had two major consequences. First, the fact that much of DCW is done in the family and domestic scopes makes it socially invisible. This means that the social reproduction space, which forms part of the life process, does not enjoy the same recognition as the productive space; rather, there is a hierarchy between them, a value component, resulting from a long patriarchal tradition. And this chain of signifiers is what

leads it to being considered work that does not require effort and therefore not a generator of social rights.

Second, the form of the neoliberal market has transformed labour relations, making the workforce more flexible, precarious and subject to offshoring. The 'crises' being experienced by the countries of the south, due to the spoliation of natural resources, the exploitation of the workforce and the dismantling of communal spaces caused by the implementation of economic adjustment policies, have generated migratory movements in a large sector of these populations. In this sense, DCW has not only become feminised, but racialised, generating an industry based on affection (*Precarias a la deriva*, 2004). The transnational market of domestic and care work no longer functions as it did in the past following flight from the countryside to the city, but involves migrant women on a transnational level.

Accordingly, new complexities are being manifested in the transformation and integration of markets, geography, work, territoriality, legal forms and the sexualised and racialised workforce, where other analyses are necessary to tackle these debates based on globalisation policies, intersecting inequalities not only in terms of gender and class, but also race and 'regular' or 'irregular' administrative situations, among others.

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To this end, we have generated this brief discussion as activists of Sindihogar, the first independent and plural trade union of domestic and care workers, which has been carrying out political action since 2011 within the territorial scope of Catalonia. Sindihogar is a result of the transformation of multiple experiences in the voluntary sector, of which the workers formed and continue to form part, into a trade union organisation. Our demands and claims in this sense are: the fight for rights as workers, denouncing the precarious conditions in this sector. On the economic level, being in a submerged economy, with low salaries, lack of unemployment benefits; on the political plane, having little chance of organisation due to the characteristics of this work and negotiation difficulties; and socially speaking, being in a job that is strongly devalued, undervalued and discriminated in terms of race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Additionally, emphasis is placed on not being affiliated to any other trade union, given that its members manifest their desire to be independent and not be an organisation guided by external political trade union orientations, but by the defence of the rights of the people they represent.

Based on this brief introduction to the subject matter and Sindihogar's position, we would

like to present three levels of discussion. First, determination of the current situation of domestic and care workers based on our experience and knowledge as activists. Second, what these fights contribute to the various types of feminism. And finally, what the main demands are in relation to public authorities and policies and what would be desirable and necessary for this work to be fully dignified and recognised.

## The current situation of domestic and care workers

The situation of domestic and care workers in Spain and in Catalonia is one of absolute precariousness, given that it is replete with various types of inequalities, as stated above. The sector has been completely abandoned, not just in terms of recognition and value, but also with respect to emotional support for the group, given that the majority of us are migrant women and some of us are in an irregular situation, making us very vulnerable.

In turn, we consider that this precariousness has various aspects. On the employment level, we run afoul of Spanish legislation, like in the Fortress Europe, which favours exploitation in our workplaces, generating all the conditions to be 21st-century slaves. We bear the social stigma brought about by society's opinion that domestic and care work does not require any intellectual capacity or knowledge, that it is purely mechanical, and that it is only done by people who are incapable of doing anything else. It is a job that is socially extremely undervalued and this is reinforced by the sexist idea that women have an innate capacity to care and clean.

Additionally, we understand that it is no coincidence that our way of accessing the job market is impacted by immigration legislation, considering this country's need for care workers. This means that a double handicap is generated: on the one hand, we who come form other places, generally alone and in need of a place to live and work, and on the other, local people who need care. Therefore, the homes of the people we care for end up being both our workplaces and our homes. We become live-in domestic workers without defined work hours or overtime pay and in general subject to a great deal of abuse. This situation is maintained by legislation since there is no office of labour inspection with the capacity to cover this work, meaning that no inspections are made in cases of abuse, or to effectively regulate its labour relations. This is because it is work done in private rather than public spaces, so the countless situations and irregularities, including different types of psychological, physical and sexual abuse, that arise are impossible or extremely difficult to report.

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Many of us are realising, above all because we belong to organisations like Sindihogar, that we cannot be asked to work all hours and that we should only do the work we are paid to do, because our employers do not appreciate it and we should value both our work and our care. We think that this is not a given, but a process. Our experience in these matters is first hand, such as the case one of us is experiencing in her own job, in which after having fallen twice in different jobs she had seen a complete lack of interest and concern on the part of the people for whom she was working at the time and on the part of the health services, which could not even treat the accident as a workplace accident, given that she was working in private residences as a cleaner paid by the hour. Generally, this type of situation is the norm, with the exception of cases that are organised by recruitment agencies, and only then when the employee is in a regular administrative situation, so situations like this are outside the law, given that we are excluded from the scope of application of the Law on Occupational Health and Safety (Law 31/1995).

In relation to economic precariousness, our various experiences have led us to reflect on how our conditions have worsened over the years, especially on the economic level, in that our wages are very low, and our hours are very long. However, our experience and that of our colleagues tell us that Catalonia offers better conditions than everywhere else in Spain. Even so, based on our experience and that of other Sindihogar members, we calculate that our wages have dropped by some 30% over the last ten years.

Following the entry into force of Regulation 1620/2011, we were waiting for 2019 to arrive so we could enter the general social security system, which would allow us, should we lose our jobs, access to contributory unemployment benefit. But the definitive approval of the General State Budget proposed by the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) has resulted in the delaying of the adoption of rights equivalence in the general social security system until 2024. Amendment 6777 means that we are still in a precarious situation, still discriminated against and still prevented from accessing decent working conditions. The amendment shows that the authorities have no interest in our status as workers and they clearly intend to perpetuate this state of affairs, given the effort they have made to pass it. This lack of interest extends to women, migration, and the rights of domestic and care workers. In this sense, we can clearly see that it is also a patriarchal way of treating this work, to which we as a group will respond by fighting and organising ourselves, with the ultimate aim of making ourselves visible and ensuring our work rights.

However, this is not our sole focus, given the wide array of problems we face, such as our colleagues who are live-in domestic workers, as we have mentioned above, and the importance of being documented. The situation for the majority of us is that our employers do not want to us to be officially registered, which means that essentially we do not exist; in other words, if we are not registered as residents, we can never improve our lives or change our administrative situation (in accordance with the aforementioned immigration legislation) and we can probably not opt for other jobs.

Finally, there is another aspect of precariousness, one that is quite often ignored: our emotional well-being. We mention this aspect because it is the one least taken into account, that is, our emotional health, as a key aspect of our lives, is constantly invisibilised by

capitalism and the patriarchy. The idea that we are eager to go to work every day, on our pay, without complaint and just accepting our lot is impossible, because we generally migrate because we have been forced to leave our territories due to difficult situations that often involve economic, sexual, social and/or political violence.

> When we decide to emigrate, we have to face the harsh reality that if we are undocumented, we are not people; that without a European passport, we will not have free movement; that without a foreigners' identity number (NIE), we cannot work; and that without work, we cannot apply for residency

In summary, the conditions of our struggle make it a process that requires help and support, which we have found in Sindihogar. It is a situation that takes away our energy, our lust for life and our desire to learn and grow. When we decide to emigrate, we have to face the harsh reality that if we are undocumented, we are not people; that without a European passport, we will not have free movement; that without a foreigners' identity number (NIE), we cannot work; and that without work, we cannot apply for residency. In addition to this, thanks to racist legislation, like the Law on Immigration, we will have to wait three years and stay under the radar before we can start the process of getting a work permit and therefore registering as a resident. And finally, we know that during that period, which for many people is much longer than three years, if the authorities ask for our identification and find us to be in an irregular situation, they can send us to an immigrant detention centre.

## Our contributions to feminism

It is a social paradox that while full confidence is placed in us when we enter people's homes, where they live their private lives, to care for them or clean for them, the fact that any ability is required to do this work is in doubt. It is feminised work, in which we have to make a long journey to empower ourselves and understand that the work we do is a fundamental pillar of our societies, societies in which we too live. The social stigma of being a domestic or care worker has a great impact on our self-esteem and self-respect.

We are fighters with a variety of skills and capacities, who are doing care work because that is where Spain has placed us, and although we know it is a job that should be valued and made visible, we are capable of contributing and generating other types of knowledge and life experience.

Our contribution to feminism is especially important in these territories, as it must be understood that we are a diverse group of women. We do not want to highlight our diversity because we want to mark this difference as something negative, we want it to be understood that we will not achieve a feminist world while the inequality between some

women and others remains so very deep.

This is why our work is also based on highlighting the privileges that some have over others, so we can all fight together to achieve these privileges, which are actually rights that have been denied. The experiences of women from former colonies form an essential part of feminist fights waged in these territories. Seeing these processes from both perspectives would make it easier to understand the situation and help us think more clearly and manifest our intention to change. It is also necessary to understand that we all migrate to improve our living conditions and that this forms part of our resistance, part of our fight against both the colonialism produced in our places of origin and the colonialism we have internalised after more than two hundred years of domination.

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We believe as feminists that the political agenda should include the fight to abolish the Law on Immigration because it perpetuates the infringement of the rights of many people, mainly women who have migrated for various reasons.

Finally, our contribution to feminism is related to the experience of many of our colleagues in the construction of a grass-roots movement, which is aided by the fact that we have always organised ourselves from the bottom up to transform and generate other possibilities for our families and peoples. This means that Sindihogar has a great capacity for self-management that clearly impacts its policy-making, which we have constructed by trial and error with the conviction that we can all form part of it. This has led to the creation of different spaces for activism, represented both by the weekly assemblies and the frequent art and ‘mime-politics’ (the theatre of the oppressed) workshops, and by more traditional forms of militancy such as demonstrations, strikes and taking to the streets.

## Debates and demands submitted to the public authorities

We believe that on the community level the women in this sector are achieving a lot together, but everything cannot be entirely our responsibility. The reproduction of life and the social organisation of care must be beyond the productive and capitalist system and this requires the specification of public policies for the social organisation of care.

This is why we need the public authorities to be responsible and take charge of these problems. Accordingly, it is necessary to urgently implement deep changes in policies, such as repealing the Law on Immigration, in order to allow people to live a decent life. It is also

necessary to be fully recognised as workers by including us in the general social security system.

Given all the conditions of these jobs, as we have expressed on other occasions and to the public authorities, another urgent demand of this sector is a hotline. This would allow the workers to receive specialist attention to report abuse and psychological mistreatment without feeling exposed to possible expulsion due to their irregular administrative condition.

In many of the reflections both within the trade union and in other women's DCW organisations we are analysing the need for shelters. We consider that it would be a useful policy given that more and more cases of abuse in homes are coming to light. It would be a response for domestic and care workers in gender violence situations or who have lost their home, given that the regulations expose us to termination due to absence without having to justify a reason of any type. We consider that this may be a step towards comprehensive support, providing somewhere to sleep, eat, relax and receive psychological support, training, care. If this were to be done, it could be an act of reparation and justice for all of us who have migrated and undergone all the anguish of not being able to move freely, of being prone to being exploited, of being stigmatised and being useful only for one specific job, to which we have been assigned regardless of our capacities, professions and desires.

Finally, in accordance with the demands that we have worked on through our participation on the Board for the Defence of the Rights of Domestic, Cleaning and Care Workers, we have proposed countless times the need to create awareness campaigns for employers and for the general public and to train workers about their rights with a view to ensuring that these jobs are recognised and made visible.

## Some final reflections

> "Don't think you have any rights. That is, don't obscure or deform justice, but don't think that one can legitimately expect that things happen in a way that conforms with justice; especially since we ourselves are far from being just"
>
> Simone Weil [1]

In accordance with the level of debates proposed on this journey, there is a preponderant dimension with respect to the plane of rights that urges transformation and vindication, from different positions of society in relation to domestic and care work, as stated above.

If we want fairer societies, we will have to work hard to give visibility, value and recognition to a work sector that is one of the fundamental pillars sustaining life. And in this sense, a fair project must take into account care for those who care.

This means major challenges not just on the personal level but also collectively. Perceiving that society as a whole is co-responsible for care work means transforming deeply

capitalist, racist and patriarchal societies to construct other models that allow us to place life at the centre.

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However, in reference to the quote above, it is not just a question of remaining on the material plane, but of imagining other forms of legitimising our existences. And this is in part what is shared by the members of Sindihogar, where compassionate policies generate the subversion of restrictive laws and regulations and moves us towards the possibility and opportunity of finding other ways to relate to one another. This is not only based on the construction of a rational and logical policy, but on our creativity and intuition, in full knowledge of our differences and how difficult it is for a group to reach an agreement, but committing to come together to achieve the common goal of shedding light on, defending and dignifying our jobs.

For this reason, it is essential to support domestic and care worker groups. They are the ones asking questions about the social, class, gender and race inequalities faced by many women on a daily basis and placing them at the centre of public debate. But above all, it is also generated in different scopes of relations (assemblies, meetings, excursions, workshops), other ways of being together, in which we validate our existence beyond the law, gestating a dignified justice for ourselves.

This compassionate policy is not far from the material level of our lives and bodies, but is built on this set of relations, where women use their sense of solidarity and mutual support. These compassionate policies could be perfectly absorbed by the public authorities without the mistrust of the groups, because there is a deep desire for these fights to be heard and their needs to be specified. Accordingly, it is important to highlight that if we really want to care for those who care, it will be necessary to commit to reaching places associations and trade unions cannot reach, as stated above, both in relation to repealing restrictive laws, constructing shelters, enabling registration throughout the entire territory of Catalonia, and in relation to committing to the granting of resources for groups and raising public awareness surrounding these matters.

*This article has been written by a polyphony of voices, reflecting each one's knowledge of and approach to the subject of domestic and care work. It has been prepared in a collective manner under the coordination of the lead author, Karina Fulladosa-Leal.*

NOTICE SECTION

1 — Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (1987). *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice (Theories of Representation and Difference)*. Indiana University Press. 1990.

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**Karina Fulladosa-Leal**

Karina Fulladosa-Leal has been an activist for Sindillar/Sindihogar (the union for domestic and care workers) since 2011. She is also a Doctor in Social Psychology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and contributes to project management at La Bonne, the Francesca Bonnemaison Women's Cultural Centre. She is a member of the research group Fractalities in Critical Research (FIC) at the UAB.



**Isabel Escobar**

Isabel Escobar is one of the founders of Sindillar/Sindihogar, an independent care and domestic workers union which was created in 2011. She has been the Chair of the union and now she works for its management team. She is a professional of domestic and care work and cares for people with terminal illnesses. She previously worked as a sales professional in Chile.



**Rocío Echeverría**

Rocío Echevarría is Peruvian. She is a mother, a domestic and care worker and a social communicator, graduated at the National University of San Marcos in Lima, Peru. She is an activist for Sindillar/Sindihogar, the first union for domestic and care workers. She has lived in Barcelona for three years.



**Lissette Fernández**

"Ramona" Lissette Fernández is an activist, communicator and photographer who is currently working on care work. She began to develop her work as a photographer focused on documenting life in the streets of Barcelona when she moved to the city two years ago. She promotes communication with a feminist perspective at Sindillar/Sindihogar, the union for migrant domestic and care workers. At the moment, she works independently and she is a member and organiser at Sindillar, where she has learned the basics of feminist, supportive and responsible economics.