A multi-scalar continuum of domesticities

Social and spatial hierarchies

Sebastien Chauvin, Claire Cosquer and Julien Debonneville

Sebastien Chauvin is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.
ORCID: 0000-0003-1203-2563
Claire Cosquer is a Senior SNSF Researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.
ORCID: 0000-0001-6203-5792
Julien Debonneville is a Senior Researcher in the Observatory of Precariousness, School of Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HETSLlHES-SO), in Lausanne, Switzerland.
ORCID: 0000-0001-5391-3290

ABSTRACT

This article introduces this special issue. It discusses the issue's aims to approach the globalised economy of domestic work not merely from the standpoint of professions and services but by considering the varied forms of domesticity shaped by diverse social and spatial conditions. Accordingly, it examines the social and spatial hierarchies that structure this economy at the intersection of multi-scalar power dynamics. It presents the nine articles included in the special issue, which span a range of social and geographical contexts from elite enclaves to migrant households and from digital platforms to public squares. Together, these contributions describe domesticity as a dynamic field marked by the negotiation and contestation of boundaries.

KEY WORDS

domestic work; continuum of domesticities; social and spatial hierarchies; intersectionality; intimacy; transnationalism; mobility; platform labour; care economy

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Introduction

Structured by global and local hierarchies of class, gender, race and citizenship, domestic work sits at the intersection of intimate life and market-mediated labour, making it a uniquely revealing lens through which to view the multi-scalar dimensions of social and spatial inequalities. Domestic work is not only a *social* condition – overwhelmingly feminised and unequally valued – but also a *spatial* condition, taking place within the home and private sphere yet often the product of transnational flows of people from separate, unequally privileged spaces.

Paid domestic workers (nannies, cleaners, caregivers, cooks, butlers, etc.) enter the private sphere of homes, performing a wide range of tasks associated with care and household maintenance. Domestic chores are frequently ill-defined and embedded in personal expectations, forming a spectrum of informal obligations that both conceals and facilitates exploitation. Work carried out by domestic workers is integral to the reproduction of daily life, yet it has long been undervalued precisely because it takes place in the feminised space of the home and often appears as an expression of love or familial duty rather than a measurable economic contribution. Historically naturalised as 'women's work', it remains symbolically devalued even when waged. Indeed, neither paid nor unpaid domestic work can be fully understood in isolation: they exist on a continuum and are shaped by interconnected social structures. The devaluation of paid domestic work partly derives from its proximity to unpaid domestic labour and from the persistent denial that the latter is 'real' work.

This special issue examines domestic labour through the prisms of these various continuums, while addressing the hierarchies that structure them. The nine articles in this issue span diverse contexts, from elite enclaves to transnational households, from digital platforms to public squares. Together, they paint an intricate picture of domesticity as a field of contested boundaries. Until the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, domestic work was neither a legitimate subject for political nor academic attention. Feminist scholars during that period exposed unpaid reproductive work in the private sphere – housework and caregiving traditionally performed by women – as a foundational part of the overall economy. Historical scholarship also began uncovering the vital roles of servants and caregivers, previously overlooked, in social and economic life. These studies emphasised how the varied tasks of household maintenance (cooking, cleaning, caring for children and elders) had been naturalised as the duty of (certain) women, reflecting a social order shaped by gender, racial and class structures (Glenn, 1992). Domestic work shares a close conceptual affinity with care work more broadly defined, which encompasses 'birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally' (Fraser, 2016:99). As Tronto (1993) and other care theorists highlight, these activities involve physical, emotional and intellectual labour dedicated to meeting others' needs (Molinier, 2004).

Scholars have noted that the quality of domestic workers' conditions is shaped by multiple factors: individual characteristics (such as age, migration status, indebtedness or experience), the interpersonal context of the job (live-in versus live-out, one employer or several, hourly pay versus monthly salary) and broader organisational and

legal frameworks (e.g. the presence of labour regulations, recruitment agencies or active unions) (Destremau & Lautier, 2002). Today, paid domestic work is largely carried out by poor and racially marginalised women for the benefit of wealthier households. This reflects what scholars describe as a highly globalised care economy, one that reproduces a gendered, classed and racialised international division of labour (Federici, 2002; Glenn, 2010; Sassen, 2010). Middle- and upper-class families (often in the Global North or in elite enclaves of the Global South) purchase the labour power of poorer women (often from the Global South or from marginalised communities) to fulfil needs that were once met by unpaid family members. Domestic work, in other words, has become a core part of global labour stratification, linking distant regions through the paid (and often underpaid) care and service work of women.

Yet, one of the key premises of this special issue is that domestic work is not a monolithic category but exists on a differentiated continuum of 'domesticities'. The boundary between unpaid family care and paid domestic service is porous, and there is a wide range of situations in between. The globalised economy of care and domestic service today encompasses a multitude of roles – not only house cleaners, nannies and elderly care workers, but also chauffeurs, gardeners, cooks, butlers, personal tutors, sports coaches and even life coaches and other service providers who enter the domestic realm. Some of these roles are highly informal, others are professionalised; some take place in intimate home settings, others in quasi-domestic or institutional environments (such as hotels, which can be seen as 'outsourced' domestic spaces). What unites them is their location in the social world of domesticity – that is, they all involve labour and care in and around the home, and they are all shaped by unequal power relationships tied to class, gender, and often ethnicity or nationality. A dominant characteristic of 21st-century domestic work is indeed its globalisation and the mobility that underpins it: workers, practices and technologies surrounding domestic service travel across borders more than ever before.

Thus, rather than treating domestic work as a singular job or a fixed sector, we consider it as a spectrum structured by a range of social and spatial hierarchies. This perspective allows us to highlight both the commonalities and the differences across various domestic work arrangements and to explore how they are connected in a broader ecosystem of labour and care. The contributions in this volume cover a plurality of domestic situations with a range that encompasses live-in nannies and cleaners, platform-based care workers, transnational wives and high-end butlers. This pluralistic lens towards the world of domesticities – spanning different occupations, countries, and scales – is one of the original contributions of this special issue. In what follows, we first elaborate the notion of a continuum of domesticities, identifying key dimensions along which domestic work varies. We then examine the social and spatial hierarchies that structure this continuum, looking at how domestic work is organised and contested from the global scale down to the level of households and urban spaces.

A continuum of domesticities

The globalised economy of paid domestic work currently encompasses a multitude of professions situated within diverse social spatialities, from grand bourgeois households to

middle-class flats right down to the homes of poorer dependent adults receiving state-subsidised help (Avril, 2014). Inspired by the work of Paola Tabet (2005) – who identifies a continuum of sexual-economic exchange in cisgender heterosexual relationships implying no clear separation between marriage and sex work, but rather a spectrum of relations involving some kind of compensation given by a man for the sexual services of a woman – the notion of a continuum within the domestic labour economy refers here to the existence of a wide range of service-based relationships involving both shared characteristics and significant differences (see also Ehrenreich & Hoschchild, 2003).

Variations may concern the type of contractual arrangement and the organisation of labour, the social identities of the people involved, the required skills, the duration and type of services expected, the forms of employment and the power dynamics and intersectional social relations in which the employment relationship is embedded. These variations can be encountered under a single roof, as Boyle and Vandebroeck (2025) have shown in relation to elite households. By positioning the butler within a broader division of labour that encompasses not only the home itself but also the wider ecosystem of services for elite lifestyle production, they show that different types of workers contribute in distinct ways to elite distinction – and elites, depending on their purchasing power and context, incorporate various forms of service work into their strategies of social differentiation.

Building on these insights, this special issue analyses domestic work as a continuum of social and spatial relations within the global care economy, spanning varied service relationships and different degrees of legality, contractualisation and affect (Delpierre, 2023). The articles in this issue foreground three dimensions for which this lens is especially useful: first, the modes of organising domestic labour; second, the legal and social status of domestic workers; and third, the interpersonal service relations through which the work is enacted across this sector.

The first dimension explores *the diversity of organisational and institutional forms within the globalised domestic economy.* These include formal and informal mechanisms, including direct employment to outsourcing, recruitment and placement practices and platform-mediated arrangements. Examining these configurations reveals how institutional frameworks, market dynamics, organisational actors and technological infrastructures shape the fragmentation, regulation and lived experiences of domestic work. Regarding this dimension, Sofía Pérez de Guzmán, Isabel María Barrero, Anastasia Joukovsky and Meike Brodersen explore the interface between digital platforms and domestic care work in Belgium and Spain. They show how platform-mediated labour is embedded in national regulatory frameworks that shape employment conditions, reinforcing or transforming power asymmetries. These findings underline the flexibility – and instability – of labour arrangements within platform capitalism, extending the continuum of domestic labour into technologically mediated, informally regulated terrain. Yet, national institutional frameworks, as well as the structure of the labour market, also shape the contrasted social effects of these platforms even when the algorithmic management of workers is the same. Most notably, the authors observe that, paradoxically, platform intermediation has 'greater disruptive impact on the highly regulated Belgian domestic sector than on the underregulated and informalised Spanish one'.

In a related vein, Hélène Malarmey investigates the rise of private agencies that mediate between families and in-home childcare providers in France. By outsourcing domestic tasks like nannying to companies, employers seek to mitigate the intimacy and potential conflict of a direct employment relationship. Malarmey's study of these French childcare agencies reveals both the appeal and the pitfalls of intermediation. On the one hand, agencies professionalise domestic work and handle contracts, offering what seems to be a buffer that depersonalises the hiring of a nanny. On the other hand, this arrangement alters the triangle of relations: clients (parents) and workers (nannies) are not formally in a hierarchy with each other, since the nanny is employed by the agency, yet the expectations and dynamics of deference remain. This article sheds light on how such intermediation reshapes the social space of domesticity by altering hierarchical dynamics between service users and providers without completely doing away with them. Indeed, Malarmey finds that when responsibility and oversight are diffused through an agency, domestic workers must often mobilise their personal resources and informal negotiation skills to navigate ambiguous situations – for instance, when a client's requests conflict with agency rules.

The second dimension focuses on *the spectrum of social, legal, and political statuses that domestic workers can hold as well as the power dynamics associated with them*. This status is often characterised by structured tensions between visibility and marginalisation, formality and informality, recognition and exclusion. In Geneva, Loïc Pignolo studies the pivotal instrument of the *Chèque Service*, a canton-backed, NGO-run clearing house that lets households declare domestic employment to the social insurance authorities, apply the canton's standard contract and minimum wage and pay contributions – even when the worker lacks residence papers, protected by a confidentiality 'firewall' from migration authorities. This instrument manufactures a tolerated category of 'grey work': still illegal under federal law but morally upgraded and practically safer (by providing workers with social insurance, holiday pay and sickness/pregnancy cover and providing employers with reduced exposure) and it can function as documentary proof, contributing towards later regularisation. Pignolo argues that *Chèque Service* reorders responsibility through the light-touch enforcement of a moral contract: employer duties are reframed as ethical obligations while enforcement is outsourced to an intermediary insulated from policing – building a municipal moral economy of illegality that makes workers 'less illegal' without resolving deportability.

Studying how domestic workers navigate these tensions sheds light on their strategies of resistance, their fight for their rights and their positioning in terms of subjectivity and citizenship. In this issue, Myrian Carbajal, Emma Gauttier, Christina Mittmasser and Milena Chimienti analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant domestic workers in Switzerland. Often 'undocumented', illegalised and informally employed, these workers were framed by the media as passive victims. Yet, as the authors show, they navigated legal and economic precarity through acts of agency, revealing complex subjectivities shaped in alignment with or resistance to dominant narratives. This dynamic highlights both structural vulnerability and personal negotiation within a continuum of precarity. In the French context, Caroline Ibos looks at the intersection of gender, race and class among migrant nannies in order to analyse how domestic workers claim their rights and their status. Her analysis of

protest in confined public spaces reveals how domestic workers mobilise discursive and legal strategies to assert their rights. These forms of resilience and resistance illustrate how workers navigate their position along the continuum – from invisibility to political subjectivity – within the constraints of informal, gendered and racialised labour regimes.

The third dimension examines the *continuum of service relations* that structures domestic labour. Far from being purely contractual, these relationships are rooted within emotional, moral and symbolic elements that blur the lines between economic exchange and personal obligation. Analysing these dynamics reveals how hierarchies, intimacy and distance are negotiated in everyday interactions. In her contribution, Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot mobilises the scholarship of Mauss to show that the domestic labour performed by Filipina and Thai wives married to Belgian men is organised as a gift/counter-gift cycle: running the household and sustaining transnational kin is framed as the counter-gift for marriage (often experienced as the 'gift of papers'), residential security and material support, within an unequal moral contract that initially positions the wife as indebted. This moral economy naturalises asymmetry yet demands reciprocity from the husband (for example in the form of remittances, support to the wife's natal kin, protection and recognition). When reciprocity is judged insufficient, the interpretive frame shifts to one of sacrifice – frequently underpinned by religious justifications – which can temporarily absorb the breach of the moral contract; or, where even sacrifice is no longer adequate to contain disappointment, the relationship may move towards rupture. This analysis thus delineates the limits of acceptability even within an unequal order: an initial debt that creates obligation, but also thresholds beyond which a 'gift' cannot remain unreturned. For his part, Bryan Bole highlights how the performance of 'non-personship' among butlers enacts and reinforces social distance within high-status domestic settings. Through embodied practices designed to minimise presence, these workers manage proximity while sustaining hierarchical boundaries. By situating these techniques on a continuum according to the level of physical proximity between server and served, Boyle highlights how they can also be used to characterise the work of other service roles within the bourgeois household's division of labour.

Further along the continuum of service-based relationships, Marija Šarić examines the circular migration of live-in carers who move between Central and Eastern European countries and Western European households. Her analysis focuses on what she calls the indeterminacy of labour: the open-ended nature of tasks, time and responsibility that defines these care arrangements. In the triadic employment system involving the worker, the family and the agency, job descriptions and working hours remain deliberately vague. This ambiguity of effort allows employers and intermediaries to stretch the boundaries of what counts as work: the carer who 'helps out' beyond scheduled hours, stays available overnight or takes on emotional management of the household becomes indispensable precisely because her duties are undefined. Šarić shows that such indeterminacy is not accidental but structural, embedded in the way circular care programmes and placement agencies distribute accountability. It grants flexibility to families and agencies while normalising an elastic, feminised form of labour that is both materially and emotionally exhausting. In this sense, indeterminacy

itself becomes a mechanism of control and extraction, producing a continuum of precarity that sustains Europe's transnational care regimes.

These three dimensions illustrate the relevance of a continuum framework for understanding the world of domestic work. They demonstrate that domestic work is not only diverse in its occupational forms but also embedded in various shifting and ambiguous types of social organisation, multiple social, legal and political status and a diversity of service relationships. The next section will examine how the spatial dimension of domesticity plays a crucial role in reproducing the social hierarchies it sustains.

Social and spatial hierarchies

The articles in this special issue also explore the spatiality of domesticity, accounting both for the structures of exploitation and those of resistance and agency. They shed light on three different scales of this spatiality: the macro-level of the transnational global care chains, the micro-level of the household and the meso-level of the city.

Scholars have examined the *transnational processes and the international division of labour that shape the global circulation of domestic workers*. The globalisation of care work has given rise to gendered circuits of labour migration, which Hochschild (2000) refers to as 'global care chains' and which Parreñas (2001) describes as the 'international transfer of caretaking'. This phenomenon involves the transnational movement of female reproductive labour from poorer, labour-surplus regions of the Global South to wealthier households in the Global North, where women provide domestic and caregiving services to middle- and upper-class families. These 'care chains' form networks of women and their families, each depending on the labour of other women – paid or unpaid – to meet the care responsibilities they can no longer fulfil due to their own participation in the labour market. Debonneville and Yeoh thus invite us to 'view gender processes not as occurring in a bounded locality, but transnationally, interconnecting both ends of the migration trajectory' (Debonneville & Yeoh, 2024:244). These 'global care chains' also delineate a transnational space of social positions (Anthias 2008; Bidet, 2017) that complicates the assessment of social mobility associated with the migration of domestic workers. Thus, downward professional mobility (as in the case of highly qualified women in their country of origin who take up low-skilled and devalued employment in domestic work abroad) may coexist with increased status back home and access to property ownership as well as modest upward social mobility for family members remaining in the country of origin insofar as they benefit from the resources saved and remitted by the migrant worker.

On a transnational level, Yunhui Ye and Lynn Yu Ling Ng's article in this issue provides a comparative perspective that underscores how domestic workers' statuses are systematically degraded and stratified across different national regimes. The authors introduce a framework of 'mobile developmentalism' to examine how migrant domestic workers are positioned in Singapore and China. Although these two contexts differ – Singapore is a major destination for migrant domestic labour from Southeast Asia, whereas China mainly employs domestic workers recruited internally or from nearby

regions – Ye and Ng find a common thread. In both cases, domestic workers (often women from poorer regions or countries) are slotted into a hierarchy that is justified by a developmentalist ideology: they are seen as coming from 'less developed' places to more 'advanced' economies, and this difference is then used to rationalise their inferior labour and citizenship status. By comparing a highly globalised city-state with a large emerging economy, the authors show how care labour is devalued in distinct but interconnected ways. For instance, Singapore's state policies and popular discourse often cast Filipina or Indonesian maids as transient 'helpers' who must be tightly regulated and who can never be fully part of Singaporean society, a stance that reinforces their exclusion and dependency. In China, migrant domestic workers from rural areas or ethnic minority regions are often informal workers with little protection, framed as people doing menial work until they can 'catch up' or return home. Gendered and racialised class inequalities are reproduced in both cases, although at two different scales.

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot's paper provides a grounded example of how transnational dynamics and domestic hierarchies intertwine. She reveals that what might seem a personal decision (a woman moving abroad to marry and care for a household) is part of a larger pattern of global care circulation. The domestic exchanges in these mixed families span continents: the emotional and caregiving labour of the migrant wife in Europe is linked to financial flows that support her family in Asia. Thus, her analysis connects micro-level marital arrangements to macro-level migration and international inequalities. Significantly, Fresnoza-Flot shows that domestic work in these marriages can foster a form of transnational social mobility: the resources provided by the European husband may improve the status of the wife's extended family in the Philippines or Thailand, even as the wife herself sacrifices career opportunities and status by becoming a full-time homemaker abroad. In this sense, the 'global care chain' is not just an abstract pattern but is embodied in the lived experiences of families, raising new questions about the trade-offs and negotiations involved in such arrangements.

In addition to these transnational dynamics, the literature on domestic work – particularly studies focused on live-in domestic workers – has explored *the micropolitics of the household, where everyday negotiations, power relations and intimacies unfold within the domestic space*. Confined to the domestic sphere, live-in domestic workers are frequently positioned as marginal members of the household. They are especially vulnerable to the ambiguous and often blurred boundaries between 'home' and 'work', a condition further reinforced by employers' narratives that cast domestic workers as 'members of the family', while denying them the rights and authority that true familial membership entails (Huang & Yeoh, 2007). Marija Šarić's text again reminds us that domestic spatiality lies at the heart of the institutional definition of domestic work: due to the heterogeneity of tasks associated with domestic labour, the International Labour Organization defines it primarily in relation to the fact that the workplace is the *household*. This spatiality – situated at the intersection of the (labour) market and the private sphere – shapes the ambiguity of domestic work and contributes to making it difficult to regulate, even in countries where the protection of domestic workers' rights is most advanced. As Šarić's research highlights, the 'physical embeddedness of carers in the household normalises their availability and deepens emotional entanglement'. The

spatiality of the household also actively participates in the blurring of managerial roles, deepening 'the ambiguity of the employment relationship' and exemplifying 'the informal mechanisms through which labour effort is directed, managed and negotiated on a daily basis'.

The micro-spatial dynamics of domestic work take on a distinct form in the realm of high-end domestic service, as explored by Bryan Boyle in his study of butlers. Unlike other domestic service roles commonly found in upper-middle-class households – such as cleaners and nannies – butler work involves a heightened degree of physical proximity to employers. Whereas cleaners typically work in unoccupied rooms and nannies often care for children in their parents' absence, butlers perform tasks that require considerable physical and intimate proximity, such as serving meals at the table, waking their employers in the morning and remaining constantly available for service requests. Boyle demonstrates that butler work is characterised by a tension between this physical proximity and various strategies aimed at symbolically re-establishing social distance. One such strategy is architectural: butlers navigate 'architectural backstages', including the use of separate entrances and service staircases, to minimise their physical presence in shared spaces. These strategies also include more subtle modes of inhabiting the elite spaces in which they work, thereby reducing their social presence in qualitative terms.

Myrian Carbajal, Emma Gauttier, Christina Mittmasser, and Milena Chimienti's analysis of migrant domestic workers' experiences during the COVID-19 period in Switzerland also reveals a compelling intersection between forms and spatialities of employment, closely tied to variations in job security. As they observe, 'the spatiality of work environments – for instance, the difference between cleaning an office on an agency contract and cleaning a private home under the direct supervision of the family – shapes bargaining dynamics'. Their study further demonstrates that practices of agency are shaped by institutional environments, including regional specificities: the level of assistance available varies from city to city, with support infrastructures in Geneva, Zurich and Bern, for example, proving more effective than those in Fribourg. Their article also highlights how spatial boundaries within the household are subject to change, noting that their intensification during the pandemic served to reinforce social hierarchies between employers and employees. As they report,

> *some employers enforced their own sanitary measures, spraying disinfectant on workers before they entered the home, requiring them to wear an additional mask, confining them to certain rooms and so on. These unilateral measures generated new social and spatial boundaries between employers and employees, boundaries that reinforced existing hierarchies of race, gender and class.*

Finally, articles in this special issue also explore *the meso-level of urban spatialities.* Pignolo's study of domestic work in Geneva illuminates how global care chains articulate at the cantonal level and analyses how the deployment of 'municipal activism' has reshaped the moral economy of undocumented domesticity. While scholars such as Rollins (1985) have highlighted how domestic workers develop tactics of resistance to navigate the structural spatial inequalities of their employers' homes and to carve out spaces of privacy, these practices of resistance particularly extend to the meso-scale of

the city. In her study of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, Pande (2018) illustrates how workers strategically appropriate public spaces in counter-hegemonic ways, particularly for conjugal, intimate and sexual purposes. Other studies have similarly shown how live-in domestic workers reclaim public spaces on their days off as opportunities to establish social and spatial boundaries between their labour and their personal time outside the surveillance of their employers (Constable, 2007).

Caroline Ibos's article in this issue precisely sheds light on the importance of urban spatiality in understanding domesticities. On the one hand, she shows how employer surveillance extends beyond the domestic space and follows domestic workers in their urban movements, particularly in the public squares where they take children to play and where they encounter other nannies employed by households in the same neighbourhood. This surveillance is reinforced by urban interactions that remind the nannies that they do not belong to these bourgeois, white districts and that they are outsiders. On the other hand, these squares are also claimed as spaces of resistance, enabling nannies to organise against a fundamental technique of control used on domestic workers: isolation. These forms of resistance first take the shape of professional social networks, enabling the sharing of experiences and opinions about employers, their demands and their abuses. They also take the shape of domestic worker rights organisations (sometimes clandestine, sometimes public) that emerge from these urban interstices and take up the terrain of labour struggle. Caroline Ibos thus proposes the category of 'square unionism' to reveal 'struggles that are generally invisible' and thereby allow for 'a more emancipatory sociology of domesticity'.

Conclusion

By conceiving domestic work as part of a continuum of globalised domesticities, the articles gathered in this special issue collectively invite a renewed understanding of how social, spatial and moral hierarchies are produced, negotiated and resisted within the everyday organisation of domestic labour. Domestic work cannot be confined to a single occupational category, a bounded spatial context or a fixed set of employment relations. Rather, it unfolds across a spectrum of formal and informal arrangements, emotional and material exchanges and local and transnational scales that together constitute a global economy of care.

These intertwined inequalities offer a compelling illustration of the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Indeed, the social hierarchies of domestic work offer a textbook case of how class, gender and race are inseparably entangled in a labour relationship: for example, the common arrangement in which a middle-class household in one country employs a low-income migrant woman of colour to clean the home or mind the children starkly illustrates the convergence of gendered, classed and racialised inequalities in one setting. Intersectionality as a framework has been invaluable in highlighting such power dynamics (Shutes, 2021). Yet the intricacies of domestic work also remind us that intersectional analysis cannot be reduced to a checklist of variables – treating gender, class and race as separate factors added onto a person, rather than examining the lived power relations that constitute these categories in everyday

interactions. Domestic employment relationships show that class, race and gender are not just attributes of individuals but are actively performed and reproduced through the work itself. Rather than cumulative variables, they are better understood as aspects of power relations that connect domestic employees and employers, shape the multi-scalar spaces they inhabit, work in and migrate through and sustain the cultural ideologies that legitimise inequality. The continuums of domesticity also reveal that these dynamics extend beyond the confines of any single nation or context. Losing sight of the transnational structures that shape domestic work worldwide would risk reifying social categories and obscuring the colonial and transnational dimensions of contemporary domestic labour regimes. To push back against this narrowing, our special issue proposes a shift in analytical focus: instead of considering static categories of identity in domestic work, we examine a continuum of social relations and spaces in which power dynamics unfold, highlighting the multiple scales at which domestic labour relationships operate. By approaching global domestic work through the idea of a continuum, we aim to capture the spectrum of arrangements, experiences and hierarchies that characterise this sector, and thereby move beyond analyses that treat race, class, gender or national origin as mere individual traits.

Indeed, foregrounding this continuum makes visible the intersections of class, gender, race and legality not as individual traits or static determinants, but as dynamic relations continually reconfigured through the embodied practices, institutional frameworks and spatial arrangements of domestic labour. The continuum framework allows us to apprehend domestic work simultaneously as an intimate relationship, a globalised form of service labour and a site of political contestation. Beyond mapping configurations of inequality, the contributions to this issue thus illuminate the forms of agency, resistance and solidarity that emerge within and against these hierarchies – from moral economies of illegality to square unionism, from digital mediation to transnational care circuits. Taken together, they argue for a more situated and relational sociology of domesticity, one that recognises domestic work as a key vantage point from which to understand the shifting boundaries between production and reproduction, home and work, intimacy and labour in the contemporary global economy.

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