# Chicanas Modernize Domestic Service

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*ABSTRACT:* The shift from live-in to day work was a step in the modernization of domestic service because it limited the length of the working day and reduced the psychological exploitation involved in the interpersonal relationship between domestics and mistresses. Even the shift to an hourly wage did not end the extraction of emotional labor, however. Interviews with Chicanas employed as private household workers reveal the next step in the evolution of domestic services. The current development is away from wage work, in which "labor time" is sold, selling a service in which a "job" is exchanged for a specified amount of money. Chicanas are defining themselves as expert cleaners hired to do general housework. Most supervision and personal services are thus eliminated from the job. Mistress-servant relations are being transformed into customer-vendor relations, reducing the personalism and asymmetry of employer-employee relationships.

## Introduction

Domestic service may once have carried "the shreds of genteel respectability," but as Lewis Coser pointed out, in 20th century America it has been an occupation "so stigmatized that it can hardly attract potential recruits among ordinary citizens and must increasingly turn to a pool of otherwise 'undesirable' foreigners" (Coser, 1974:39). Along with the stigma of servitude and low-status, David Katzman noted two other characteristics that make the occupation unattractive to workers: it "offers no opportunities for mobility and it is highly personalized in both tasks and employer-employee relationships" (Katzman, 1978:378). Both the shortage of domestic workers and the declining need for servants caused by labor saving-devices in the home are factors that, Coser argued (1974:39), make the servant role obsolete. Future household workers, he predicted, will become a new profession in which "families will no longer be able greedily to devour the personality of their servants." "Servants" may indeed be obsolete. But the

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need for household workers is expanding to keep pace with increasing numbers of women in the labor force.

Several researchers have identified one structural change that has modernized the occupation of domestic service. Historical studies by Katzman (1978) and Clark-Lewis (1983) identified the shift from live-in to live-out as contributing to major changes in working conditions. Glenn (1986:143), in her study of Japanese-American women in the Bay Area, attributed non-residential jobs to the modernization of domestic work by bringing it closer to industrialized wage work: "Work and non-work life are clearly separated, and the basis for employment is more clearly contractual–that is, the worker sells a given amount of labor time for an agreed-upon wage." Katzman (1978:378) characterized the "hourly 'cleaning lady,' " as replacing "the uniformed maid who was part of the household." Even with the change to hourly work, though, the relationship between domestics and mistresses have retained characteristics of the master-servant relationship. Recent studies on the experiences of minority women employed as domestics indicate that the extraction of emotional labor, described by Coser as obsolete, still persists.[1] My own work on Chicana domestics supports these findings by showing that the occupation still has traits of servanthood. The mistress maintains a benevolent attitude towards "her" domestic, demanding loyalty and deference. She will treat the employee with the type of kindness reserved for domestic animals or pets and children, or at times even as a "non-person." Interpersonal relationships continue to be the major factor in job satisfaction and job tenure. However, my findings also suggest a broader range of relationships co-existing in the occupation.

The focus of this paper is to identify modernizing trends in domestic service and to explore how domestics can create a meaningful work environment. Chicanas engaged in domestic service find that the occupation poses a paradox: on one hand, cleaning houses is degrading and embarrassing; on the other, domestic service can be higher paying, more autonomous, and less dehumanizing than other low-status, low-skilled occupations available to them. The challenge is to manage this paradox in everyday life and to modernize the working conditions. Analysis of 25 Chicanas' work histories show how each weighed her options and made choices based on the work situation that provided the most advantages.

The data were derived from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and collecting life histories of current and former domestic workers. I analyzed the experiences of Chicanas employed as private household workers in a major western urban area. Two current and one former domestic worker known to the researcher provided entree



into an informal network. Each interview subject was asked to recommend other potential interviewees. Churches and social service agencies were also used to identify domestics. Interviewees ranged in age from 29 to sixty-eight. All but one of the women had been married. Four of the women were single heads-of-household. The other women were currently living with husbands employed in blue collar jobs, such as construction and factory work. All of the women had children. The smallest family consisted of one child and the largest family had seven children. At the time of the interview, the women who were single heads-of-household were financially supporting no more than two children. Nine women had completed high school, but seven had no high school experience. One interviewee had never attended school at all. The remaining eight had at least a sixth grade education. All of the women were U.S. citizens. None of the women in this study belonged to a union.

In analyzing their work histories, in particular the reasons given for leaving or returning to domestic service, I was struck by the way Chicanas make the most of their options. Domestic service is only one of several low-paying, low-status jobs the women held during their lives. They had been hired as waitresses, laundresses, janitors, farmworkers, nurse aides, fast food servers and various types of line workers in poultry farms and car washes. In general, these were jobs with no benefits or where workers are subject to frequent layoffs and little chance for promotion. In comparing domestic service to other available work options all of the women identified certain advantages. Mrs. Rojas, for example, concluded that domestic service offered independence:

> When you work like in a hospital or something, you're under somebody. They're telling you what to do or this is not right. But housecleaning is different. You're free. You're not under no pressure, especially if you find a person who really trusts you all the way. You have no problems.

Unable to find employment offering job security, advancement, or benefits, these Chicanas made a calculated attempt to modernize the one occupation offering some advantages by minimizing control and personalism. Domestics use several strategies in their struggle for control: (1) increasing opportunities for job flexibility; (2) increasing pay and benefits; (3) establishing and maintaining an informal labor arrangement specifying tasks; (4) minimizing contact with employers; (5) defining themselves as expert housekeepers; and (6) creating a business-like environment. The critical locus of their struggle is to define the work on the basis of a contract–by the house or apart-

ment–not as hourly work. Examination of the strategies used by the Chicanas reveal differences from the experience of other contemporary women of color employed as domestics. Unlike many of the black domestics studied in the East, these Chicanas were not sole supporters of the family, nor union members. Unlike the Japanese-American women in Glenn's study, most of the Chicanas were second or third generation and were much younger. The Chicanas that I interviewed had more formal education, and for the most part were not being replaced by newly arrived immigrants.[2] The most important difference is that the Chicana domestics have restructured the work by transforming it from wage labor to labor services.

## The Restructuring of Domestic Service

### *Job Flexibility*

Chicanas, like other women employed in domestic service (Glenn, 1980, 1986), work for several employers. Having a different employer every day allows domestics more independence than having only one employer.[3] This alternative provides domestics with the leeway to quit, replacing employers without affecting the rest of the work week.

The women experience great latitude in negotiating both a flexible schedule and the length of the working day. Personal arrangements and verbal contracts between employer and employee make it easy to negotiate a half day's work or to skip a day. As Mrs. Garcia, a 54 year-old domestic, explained:

> You can change the dates if you can't go a certain day and if you have an appointment, you can go later, and work later, just as long as you get the work done . . . I try to be there at the same time, but if I don't get there for some reason or another, I don't have to think I'm going to lose my job or something.

The flexibility of day work is important to women with small children who need to attend to illnesses and school schedules. The cost of day care can be a burden for middle class women; it is especially onerous for low-paid workers. In many cases, the issue of child care for preschool children can be resolved by taking them to work, as in the case of Mrs. Rivera, a 33 year-old mother of two:



> I could take my kids with me. There were never any restrictions to taking the children. Most of the people I've worked for like kids, so I just take the kids with me. It's silly to have to work and pay a sitter. It won't work.

Flexibility was not limited to rearranging a particular day or week; domestic workers could easily rearrange the work week to fit their needs during a particular period in their life. For instance, many of the older women had reduced their work week to three or four days a week, whereas the younger women who needed more income were more likely to be cleaning two apartments a day and working six days a week. A few women, like Mrs. Lovato, used the flexibility to work as a domestic part-time during times of economic crisis:

> I worked for Coors (brewery) for about three years and I would still do housecleaning, sort of part-time in the morning.

### *Payment and Benefits*

Older women recalled earning $1.25 an hour in the early '60s and $3.25 in the '70s, but most of the women are now averaging between seven and eight dollars an hour–a lot more than other jobs they have had. For many women, the higher pay earned in domestic service reduced the financial need to work six days a week.

Payment in cash was frequently cited as an important aspect of domestic work. As with so many working-class families, even when there is a working husband, many live from pay check to pay check, with little if any money left over for unplanned or extra expenses. Extra cash is particularly important to families with school-age children who need lunch money or cash for class trips, gym clothes, or school supplies. Also, extra cash is important in supplementing the families' meals, especially towards the end of the week. Without the ready cash, end-of-the-week cooking ingredients are frequently limited to flour and beans.

In all but two cases, employment in domestic service was not reported to the IRS and these women expressed relief that income tax was not filed. Underreporting income to the IRS appeared to be partially the result of their husbands' fear of raising the family into a higher tax bracket. But it is also the case that the women did not know how to file income tax and felt uncomfortable about requesting employers to do so. However, three women expressed concern about social security and urged their employers to submit the required paper work.

Two of the oldest women were receiving social security benefits as a result of their long-term employers' concern over their welfare.

One third of the women received benefits unknown to other domestics or other holders of low-status jobs. Nine Chicanas who had worked years for particular employers reported paid vacations. This benefit usually involved no more than one or two paid days per employer. Christmas bonuses were more common than annual raises. However, nine reported annual raises and three of the women increased their wages annually by requesting raises or quitting one employer and raising the cost for new employers.

*Negotiating Specific Tasks*

Chicanas established verbal contracts with employers. When starting a new employer, the domestic would work one day, and if the employer was satisfied with the work, the two would agree upon a work schedule and the specific tasks to be accomplished. Mrs. Rodriquez describes the ideal situation:

> Once the person learns that you're going to do the job they just totally leave you to your own. It's like it's your own home.

The ideal is similar to informal arrangements reported by Glenn. However, half of the women explained the ideal situation was achieved after some supervision and negotiation. Such an experience is alluded to in Mrs. Portillo's explanation of why she left an employer:

> I don't want somebody right behind me telling me what to do. I will not work like that and that's why I didn't stay any longer with this lady.

Fifteen of the Chicanas interviewed made a practice of carefully distinguishing specific tasks considered part of the agreement from other tasks which would only be undertaken for additional pay. While informal work arrangements frequently implied a set number of hours, the typical arrangement was referred to as "charging by the house" or a "flat rate." Mrs. Salazar explained the verbal contract as follows:

> When you say you're going to clean a house, after you find out how big it is, you tell them (the employer) "I'll clean it for say 60 dollars." You're not saying how long you're going to be there. To me, that was just a contract between you and the customer and after awhile when you've been there awhile, you know how fast you can work and I was doing it in less than eight hours.



Mrs. Lopez expressed her preference for "charging by the house:"

> I never liked to work by the hour because if I would work by the hour the lady would just go crazy loading me up with work, with more work and more work to do.

Similar to the dialectic between employer and employee described by Glenn, there was an ongoing negotiation as the domestic attempted to maintain the agreement while the employer attempted to lengthen the working day or add more tasks. Unlike the report on Japanese-American domestics, however, Chicana domestics developed procedures for handling "extras." One way to avoid extra tasks was to prepare a monthly or bi-monthly schedule for rotating particular tasks, such as cleaning the stove or refrigerator. Another practice was to establish an understanding with the employer that if one task was added, one would be eliminated. If the employer did not identify the tasks to be eliminated, the employee simply selected one and explained that there was not enough time for both.

> My cousin said, "do the same thing every time you come in, as far as changing the sheets, vacuum and dust, and window sills, pictures on the walls, and stuff like that unless they ask you to do something extra. Then, maybe don't clean the tile in the bathroom, or just do the windows that really need it, so you can have some time to do this other stuff that they wanted you to do extra." And she said, "never do more than what they ask you to do, because if you do then you're not really getting paid for it."

Employers feared that domestics were cheating on their time. Three women reported that past employers insisted they work until the very last second, leaving little if any paid time for putting away appliances or cleaning materials and ignoring the additional time required to complete a task. One domestic recalled employers bringing her lunch to her on the stairs or elsewhere in the house so that she would not take a lunch break. However, domestics, like Mrs. Sanchez, viewed the work as "averaging out:"

> Suppose one day they (employers) may be out of town and that day you go to work. You won't have much work to do, but you'll get paid the same. And then maybe some other time they're going to have company and you end up working a little more and you still get paid the same. So it averages about the same, you know, throughout the month.

Chicana domestics, not unlike black and Japanese-American domestics (Rollins, 1985; Coley, 1981; Dill, 1979; Katzman, 1981; Glenn,

studied by Rollins or the Japanese-Americans in Glenn's study. This strategy served to modernize the employee/employer relationship, creating an ideal situation in which employers turned over responsibility for the housework to the domestic. Establishing themselves as expert house-cleaners involved defining a routine set of tasks that did not include personal services such as babysitting, laundry, or ironing.[4] Mrs. Montoya's statement illustrates the equation of personal services with maid's work:

> I figure I'm not there to be their personal maid. I'm there to do their housecleaning—their upkeep of the house. Most of the women I work for are professionals and so they feel it's not my job to run around behind them. Just to keep their house maintenance clean and that's all they ask.

The women interviewed considered themselves experts. They were aware of the broad range of knowledge they had acquired from cleaning a variety of homes. This knowledge included the removal of stains on various surfaces, tips for reorganizing the home, and the pros and cons of certain brands of appliances. A source of pride among the women was the fact that they had introduced a labor-saving device or tactic into the employer's home. Mrs. Garcia's experience in removing stains illustrates the assistance that domestics give employers:

> They (employers) just wipe their stoves and then complain "this doesn't come off anymore." They never took a SOS pad or a scrub brush to scrub it off. They expect it just to come off because they wiped. . . . Their kitchen floors would have kool-aid stains or they would have it on the counters, so I would just pour Chlorox on it and the Chlorox would just bring it right up and they would say "but you'll ruin it!" "No it will be alright." "Are you sure?" I never ruined anything from helping them out.

Mrs. Cortez's habit of providing cleaning hints illustrates how many employers willingly accept the expertise of the domestic.

> I cut out pieces of cleaning (information) that tell you how to do this an easy way . . . I'll take them and paste them on like their pantry doors and I'll put them there and then when they go to open (the pantry door) they say "Oh, that's a good idea." So then they start doing it that way.

As expert cleaners, the women take responsibility for all decisions regarding the structure of the work process, the pace of the housework, and the selection of work materials. Ideally the domestic would enter the employer's home, decide where to begin, and arrange the appliances and cleaning products accordingly. She would pace herself to finish in a certain number of hours. If she needs to leave early she can speed up and not take a break; in other cases, a more leisurely pace would be indicated.



Half of the women recalled offering employers advice on the care of appliances and the best detergent or cleaning utensil for a particular surface. The Chicanas also attempt to routinize and rationalize the housework by reorganizing family practices and introducing new methods, perhaps cleaning neglected areas of the house to create additional space or rearranging the furniture. Mrs. Rodriquez described her approach as follows:

> I take one room and give it a full general cleaning which was walls, windows, everything, and from there I would do the rest light housework. Then the next week, I would take another room and give that a general cleaning and go to the rest lightly until I had all the house done real good and after that it was just a matter of keeping it up.

Taking responsibility frequently included finding replacements during their absence.

> I worked for my mother-in-law sometimes and if she was sick or if she was going out of town, I'd do some of the houses that she does every week and she really couldn't leave without somebody going to do something because it would be really a mess when she came back and it would be more work on her. So I would go and fill in for her.

The domestics did not view themselves as "one of the family." They also retained a separation between tasks completed for their employers and the "work of love" given to their families. The Chicanas attempted to enforce a new set of norms modernizing the domestic-mistress relationship into a customer-vendor relationship. In their struggle to transform the occupation, the Chicanas altered the employer's role from mistress to client or customer. This new definition of the relationship lessened the opportunity for psychological exploitation and the extraction of emotional labor. Chicanas identified particular tasks that would add to the problem of psychological exploitation. For instance, cooking Mexican food for employers was a request refused by all but two of the women. Their reasons for refusing the request suggest that they made a division between paid tasks and "work of love" and took precautions against selling their personhood.

> I only cook for my family. I didn't want to share my culture with them (employers).

In order to convince employers to accept the new working relationship, private household workers had to present the advantages. One

strategy used to convince the employer that she did not want to be a supervisor was to create a situation on the part of the employer that demanded more detailed supervision. This included such tactics as doing only the tasks requested and nothing else, not bothering to inform the employer that the worker had used the last vacuum bag or had used up cleaning materials, and refusing to offer the employer assistance in fixing a simple mechanical problem in an appliance. Consequently, employers who refused to shift control and responsibility were confronted with domestics who took no interest in or responsibility for completing the housework.

To redefine their work as skilled labor, Chicanas capitalized on the fact that working women are no longer interested in supervising the work of private household workers. Women hiring domestics to escape the double day syndrome can not reap the benefits of the work if they supervise the activities of a "menial laborer." Acknowledging housework as skilled labor affirms the worth of the housewives' housework. In shifting housecleaning to "expert housekeepers," the housewife fulfills her responsibility to the family by obtaining skilled services; and, in doing so, she defines the work as difficult and time consuming, requiring skilled labor.

### *Creating a Business-Like Environment*

Just as in other female-dominated occupations, such as nursing and teaching, private household workers lack authority (Spencer, 1987; Ritzer, 1977; Corley & Mauksch, 1987) and must therefore rely on the employers' cooperation in accepting them as expert housekeepers. Mrs. Rios' account of an employer's daughter expecting her to be subordinate illustrates the role some employers play in eliminating any aspects of servitude in the occupation.

> I told a young lady something about leaving her underclothes thrown around, and she asked me what was I there for? I went straight in, called her mother and told her the situation. Her mother came home from work and let the young lady have it. She (the mother) was thoroughly upset. I was not there to be her (the daughter's) personal maid and she was told that in no uncertain terms.

Analysis of the informal networks used by both employers and employees points to a key role in establishing a business-like environment. The informal network between employers and employees serves to socialize employers and employees to the value of modernizing trends in the occupation. Chicana work histories revealed that, particularly for younger workers, the introduction to domestic service involved an informal apprenticeship. The new recruit accompanied a relative to work for several days or weeks until deciding she was ready to work alone. Domestics 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.



> She would go look it over and see if I missed anything or like in the bathroom you have to polish all the chrome and I didn't know that so I cleaned it and it was clean but she's the one that gave me all these tips on polishing up the chrome and stuff.

Most important, new workers were socialized to expect certain working conditions, and wages, and they learned ways to negotiate with employers.

Employers were similarly tied to the network. Employers asked domestics for the names of interested persons to work for neighbors, while domestics asked employers for the names of their friends interested in hiring housekeepers. Domestics were often very careful in their recommendations:

> They'll (friends) call and see if I know anybody that needs help but I have to know the person, and if I don't think the person is going to do the job, I will not send them . . . I'm very careful who I send–who I recommend.

In assisting friends and neighbors in finding workers, employers informed potential employers of existing conditions and thereby helped to create certain expectations. In using the network, Chicanas could be reasonably assured that new employers were socialized to appropriate expectations.

> I right away tell them what I do and what I expect to get paid and they already know because of their friends because they have already discussed my work.

Employers' involvement in modernizing the occupation may not be limited to exposing new employers to contemporary expectations. Two domestics reported that employers actually applied pressure on other employers to upgrade working conditions. Both domestics worked for employers who set standards of fairness and urged their friends and neighbors to conform–for instance,by complying with federal regulations by filing income tax and social security forms. Mrs. Salazar had such an employer:

> I don't ask for raises anymore. I have one woman who kind of sets the pace and she's given me a raise almost every year and then she hints

around to some of the other ones that she knows what I work for and then they all bring it up to her standards.

The controlled environment created by the use of the informal network provides the avenue for Chicanas to establish their self-definition as experts and their informal work arrangement as a business-like relationship.

## Conclusion

Faced with limited job opportunities, Chicanas turned to domestic service and restructured the occupation to resemble a business-like arrangement. The Chicana domestics defined themselves as expert cleaners hired to do general housework. They urged their employers to turn over the planning along with the execution of the work. They considered themselves skilled laborers who were well-able to schedule tasks, determine cleaning techniques, select appropriate work materials, and set the work pace. Verbal agreements specifying tasks served to minimize supervision and increase the degree of autonomy. Eliminating the employer from a supervisory role removed the worker from a subordinate position. Domestics' ability to select and change employers became a critical source of autonomy and control in what would otherwise be a powerless, subservient position.

Chicanas employed as day workers in private households are moving away from "wage work" and selling their "labor time," toward a "flat rate" in which a "job" is exchanged for a specific amount of money. In this situation, any efficiency realized by the worker saves her time and can sometimes be converted to profit that will accrue to her. The Chicanas are modernizing domestic work in the direction of a petty bourgeois relation of customer-vendor rather than the preindustrial relation of mistress-servant or even the capitalistic relation of wage worker-employer. This arrangement is most successful with employed housewives who readily accept the skills of domestics. The strategy to modernize domestic service by selling labor services rather than labor power is also useful in eliminating potentially exploitative aspects of the domestic-mistress relationship.

## Reference Notes

1. Recurring themes in the mistress/maid relationship that appear in recent studies are: the extraction of emotional labor, maintenance of status and control within an informal and companionable relationship, and the struggle for control as a crucial source of conflict. Cock (1980) and Rollins (1985) identified the personal nature of the relationship between domestics and their employers as primarily one of psychological exploitation. Exploitation is most visible in the expectation of emotional labor alongside cheap manual labor, and is a common experience among black women in the East (Rollins, 1985; Coley, 1981; Dill, 1979), Japanese-American domestics in the Bay area (Glenn, 1986), West Indians in New York (Colen, 1986), and Chicanas in the Southwest (Romero, 1986; 1987).
2. Presently Mexican immigrants do not represent competition, but the Chicanas indicate they are incorporating Mexican women into their networks and urge them not to lower standards. Several women expressed concern over the willingness of Vietnamese immigrants to work for less pay, and do gardening along with household chores. For the most part, Chicanas experience a domestic's market and, therefore, have the latitude to select employers that show respect and professional behavior.
3. In recent years some of the women were working for two employers in one day, cleaning two houses. This pattern was particularly common when employers lived in condominiums or apartments.
4. Older Chicanas recalled babysitting, ironing, cooking and doing laundry, but in recent years they rarely did such tasks. Even younger Chicanas in their thirties, some with 12 years experience, only did ironing or laundry for employers they started with 10 years ago.



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