

Domestic Work in The United States of America: Past Perspectives and Future Directions

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In 1974 Lewis Coser, one of the foremost proponents of modernization theory predicted that domestic service would become extinct because this type of work was no longer needed in a modern, developing and industrialized economy. However, some two decades, later domestics continue to be a significant and integral part of the secondary labor market in the United States of America (Romero, 1992). This paper reviews the history of domestics in the United States, and English-speaking Caribbean women as immigrants and domestic workers. Additionally, we identify present research initiatives of English-speaking domestic workers in New York City.

Domestic Workers in the United States

Domestic service in the U.S. accounted for more than two-thirds of all non-agricultural female wage earners in the second half of the nineteenth century (Glenn, 1986). Between 1870 and 1910, there was a decline in the proportion of women employed in domestic work relative to other areas (e.g. factories and education) of employment. Actually, the number of women employed in these area has doubled. Moreover, in the early stage of its development, both males and females were employed as domestics. For example, in 1870, 15 percent of domestic workers were male (Glenn, 1986). Nevertheless, by the mid 20th century, domestic work was almost exclusively done by women, specifically immigrants from Europe and native born blacks. Native born white women were turning to other endeavors, including factory work and teaching. Thus, the demand for domestic workers was filled by “recent immigrants and migrants from rural society and members of subordinate racial-ethnic groups” (Glenn, 1986).

German, Scandinavian, and Irish domestic workers were concentrated in the Eastern and Midwestern cities. Irish female immigrants, in particular, were almost exclusively domestics. Diner (1983) posits that in New York virtually every Irish girl during their adolescence spent several years as live-in domestics. In the Southwest, Mexican-American women filled the ranks of domestic service, while in the post-civil war south, blacks were the traditional servant caste (Anderson & Bowman, 1953).

At the turn of the century, recent black migrants from the South were also heavily concentrated in domestic work in the North. In fact, domestic service and other related employment, such as laundry work and cooking were virtually the only occupations that were open to black women before World War I. It was after the war that black women were recruited from the South to the North, as immigration policies resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of foreign immigrants. The dominance of native born blacks in domestic service persisted into the 1970's, but by the early 1980's there was a ten percent decline in the number of African American domestic workers (Glenn, 1986). The influx

of immigrant women in the U. S. during this period, coupled with their immediate access to the secondary labor market, in part, resulted in this decline.

While researchers agree that the overwhelming majority of domestics in the United States are immigrants and African American women (Wool, 1976; Coser, 1974; Levenstein, 1962), there is dispute about the “changing-character” hypothesis (Romero, 1992). For example, Wool (1976) postulated that the historical account reveals that domestic work became low-status, menial and demeaning as a result of the dominating presence of immigrants and nonwhites. On the contrary, Martin and Segrave (1985) argued that domestic work was always viewed as low-status and undesirable. White domestic workers were able to use domestic work as a “bridging occupation,” while immigrants and native born blacks remained in this “occupational ghetto” because of a lack of other alternatives. Albeit native born blacks were more likely than immigrant women of color to be confined to work in the homes of other women as domestic workers. It is within this framework that Marta Tienda and her colleagues (1984) posit a process of occupational succession, in which immigrant women of color were channeled into the undesirable jobs vacated by native born black women. Accordingly, during the post 1965 period, Latinos and Caribbean born immigrant women have virtually dominated this occupational category.

Women Immigrants in the United States

Despite the increasing number of immigrant women in the U.S., their role in migration and their relative contributions to the underground economy and that of the wider society has been largely ignored (Houstoun, Kramer and Barrett, 1984). This tendency is more pronounced for immigrant women of color (Chow, 1996). However, the present decade has produced a shift of emphasis as reflected in the work of Mary Romero (1992) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), who studied women of Mexican descent, Chow (1994), who focused on the distinctiveness of Chinese and Asian Americans, Evelyn Glenn’s (1986) analysis of three generations of Japanese women as domestic workers, and Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia Pessar (1991), who explored gender differences among Dominican immigrants. Nonetheless, Pedraza (1991:304) underscores that while much is known about the “impact of women’s position on other social outcomes, we have yet to develop a truly gendered understanding of the causes, processes, and consequences of migration.” This is especially true of English-speaking Caribbean women in general and, in particular, those of their ranks who work as domestic workers. An analysis of both the 1970 and 1980 census data reveals that English-speaking Caribbean women were more likely than Hispanic immigrants from Latin America and Puerto Rico to be employed in private household service work. For example, in 1970, about five percent of immigrant women from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean were employed as household workers as compared to over fourteen percent of English-speaking West Indian women. Forner (1987) observes that private household work accounted for the second largest share of West Indian immigrant women in the work force. Given that the census often undercounts minorities (Williams, 1996a), and particularly illegal immigrants, it is plausible to expect that women who are illegal domestic workers would be similarly underrepresented. Additionally, English-speaking Caribbean white-collar women are

more likely than white-collar Latin American female immigrants to take up employment in private households in New York City (Forner, 1983; Urrea, 1982).

English-speaking Caribbean Immigrants

Philip Kasinitz (1992) identifies three distinct waves of English-speaking Caribbean (also referred to as Anglophone Caribbean and West Indians) immigrants to the United States. The first wave which began about 1900, reached its peak in the 1920's and ended in the early 1930's and was the result of a severe depression in the Caribbean sugar industry that was triggered by the introduction of European beet sugar on the international market. While some of the immigrants were from the middle class, the large majority were from the working class. The second wave, which was the smallest, ensued in the late 1930's and ended in 1965. This group was primarily young professionals who entered the country on student visas (and remained after completing their degrees) and family members of the first wave of immigrants (Kasinitz, 1992). The largest and final wave (1966 to the present) came as a direct result of the passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act of 1965. This act eliminated the quota system with its racial and geographic biases, making it possible for increasing numbers of West Indians to enter the United States (Kasinitz, 1992). Unlike the previous waves, this new group represents virtually every sector of Caribbean society. According to Kasinitz (1992:27), this group of immigrants "include well-educated members of the urban elite seeking to protect their wealth in volatile economies, children of the middle class searching for broader opportunities, and large numbers of poor people looking for a standard of living above mere subsistence."

English-speaking Caribbean Immigrant Women

An analysis of Caribbean migration to the U.S. reveals that, unlike the first and second waves, the third wave of immigrants from the region was dominated by women (Marshall, 1982). Farley and Allen's (1989) analysis of the 1980 census data reveal that the sex ratio was 915 men to 1,000 women for foreign-born blacks, most of whom were West Indians. Consistent with census data is the finding that women significantly outnumbered men as principal aliens in sponsoring other family members to permanently enter the U.S. Clearly, women have outnumbered their male counterparts as immigrants to the U. S. It has been suggested that the demand for labor in areas such as nursing, nursing aides, and domestic work in the U.S. may have influenced the tendency for immigration officials to be more willing to grant visitor's visas to women (Stafford, 1987). This permits the immigrant legal entrance into the United States of America and is often used as a means of remaining in the country beyond the period stipulated in the visa.

Caribbean women have received some attention in the literature, but the focus has been more on the comparative economic success of female and male immigrants relative to native-born blacks (Gordon, 1989; Model, 1995). While the literature recognizes the presence of domestic workers among this immigrant group, little attention has been given

to a description and understanding of their experiences as immigrants and workers in the secondary labor market.

English-speaking Caribbean Women as Domestic

Shellee Colen's (1986) qualitative study of ten English-speaking domestic workers in New York City is one exception to the general absence of studies focusing on the experience of immigrant workers. Colen (1986:64) focused on the adaptive personal characteristics of domestic workers that enabled them to "cope with and resist the exploitation they confront on the job." This study also described some of the differences that live-in domestics experienced as compared to individuals who were day workers and concluded that the former group is more likely than the latter to ascribe demeaning characteristics to their work.

While domestic work was historically almost exclusively live-in residential, the literature has documented that there has been a shift from live-in to day work (Palmer, 1989). Romero (1992) extended this modernization theme by suggesting that there is now a gradual shift from day work to "job work." This arrangement moves beyond the hourly pay of day workers to payment for a specified number of tasks agreed upon by worker and employee. The paucity of baseline data about the experiences of English-speaking domestics in the U.S. leaves us unaware of whether this transition from live-in to job work for this population. We contend

that the movement from live-in work to job work is much less likely to be descriptive of the progression of domestic work among English-speaking domestics than for Spanish-speaking Caribbean immigrants. Further, Puerto Rican and Latin American women are more likely to migrate with their husbands than non-Hispanic Caribbean women, and are therefore less likely than English-speaking domestics to accept live-in work. Marshall (1983) observes that among new immigrant groups in New York City in the 1970's and 1980's, English-speaking Caribbean women had the lowest proportion of spouses present in the U.S. and the highest proportion of single women in domestic service. Clearly, live-in domestic work for many Anglophone women is a convenient occupational arrangement that significantly contributes to their economic survival in the U.S. and their family still residing in their home country. However, while these issues have received little attention in the literature, their potential for enriching our understanding of immigrant women in the underground economy in the U.S. in general and of English-speaking domestic workers in particular is promising.

Present Research Initiatives

In response to the need for research in the aforementioned area, we have embarked on a study of English-speaking domestics in New York City. The first phase of this project was conducted during the months of August 1995 to July 1996. A team of seven interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with one hundred domestics from eight major English-speaking Caribbean countries (Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, St. Vincent, Grenada, St. Lucia, Antigua, and Guyana). Most of the interviews were

conducted in the women's homes, while others were completed at churches and community centers.

The structured questionnaire used in this study included questions in the following areas: demographic characteristics; country of birth, social support, job stress; previous and current socioeconomic status; spouse's occupation; relationship with employers and children residing in the home; financial stress; remittances to family in home country; self esteem; mental and physical health; work status; length of stay in the U.S., immigration status and personal aspiration. Respondents were also asked four open-ended questions as part of the face-to-face interview. The average length of the interview was 90 minutes.

We began this project by soliciting the cooperation of current and former domestic workers who were known to us and others who were recommended by Caribbean community agencies and churches. This provided us with entree into the women's social network. Colen (1986) posits that obtaining individuals to interview is a formidable task because domestic work is very much a part of the underground economy. Recognizing this limitation, we employed the snowball sampling technique by asking each interviewee to recommend and introduce to us other domestic workers as potential respondents. This method is appropriate when studying special populations, the parameters of which are unknown (Cornelius, 1982).

Sample Characteristics

Initial analyses of the quantitative data indicate that 56 percent of the domestics are single, 33 percent married, and 11 percent formerly married. Most of the women are in their 30's and with a little less than high school education completed. While these women have been in the United States for a little more than 6.5 years, most of them (73 percent) are still illegal. The average time spent working as domestics is a little more than 5 years and they are more likely to be live-in workers (57 percent as compared to 43 percent). On average domestic workers work for 10 hours a day, 5 days a week for about 50 weeks a year. They report a weekly average income of \$276 and, therefore, average annual income of \$13,850. The average family size is 3.

We are presently in the second phase of this study that incorporates non-structured, free-flowing, open-ended, in-depth interviews and focus groups with domestics who were interviewed in the first phase of the study. At this juncture we have conducted three focus groups and have conducted in-depth interviews with ten domestic workers. This information will further enhance our understanding of the results of our quantitative analysis. In this regard, this study is unique in that it uses multiple methodologies to explore and analyze the experiences of domestics in the United States.

Conclusion

Domestic work continues to be a significant part of the American secondary labor market. The race/ethnicity and geographic origins of the workers have changed over time. Nonetheless, while much attention has been given to the historical aspects of domestic work in the U.S., current trends have received scant attention. Future researchers can seek to fill these gaps in the literature by examining the experiences of English-speaking Caribbean domestics in the U.S. Our study is one step in this direction but more work is needed to buttress our understanding of the role of gender, race/ethnicity, immigration status and country of origin in the immigration phenomenon.

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