

# “This Should be My Responsibility”: Gender, Guilt, Privilege and Paid Domestic Work

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**Abstract** Although women’s presence in the labor force has shown a marked increase, much of the existing research on housework suggests that for heterosexual families men’s and women’s housework contributions remain unequal. Scholars of domestic labor suggest that this influx of privileged women into the labor force, coupled with growing income inequality has caused an increase in the demand for paid domestic labor. This re-delegation of domestic labor may in some ways represent a threat to privileged women’s self image as caring for family has been inextricably part of the ideological construction of what constitutes a good wife and mother. Research demonstrates that even as families hire someone for domestic/cleaning labor women feel “obligated” to retain control of its’ supervision. This is not necessarily challenging the existing gendered division of labor but rather displacing housework along raced and classed lines. Utilizing data from 30 qualitative interviews with white class privileged women who hire domestic workers; this paper explores the motivations for hiring domestic workers, the ways in which participants conceptualized this labor as gendered, and finally how they navigated the guilt that often times accompanied hiring domestic workers.

**Keywords** Gender · Family · Labor · Domestic work

## Introduction

Since 1975 the number of women working with children under the age of eighteen has increased from 47 to 70 % [39]. Although women’s presence in the labor force has shown this marked increase, much of the existing research on housework

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suggests that for heterosexual families men's and women's housework contributions remain unequal. Caring for homes and children has very much remained "women's work" and has largely translated into a "second shift". Scholars of domestic labor suggest that this influx of privileged women into the labor force, coupled with growing income inequality has caused an increase in the demand for paid domestic labor [1, 2, 16, 19].

This re-delegation of domestic labor may in some ways represent a threat to privileged women's self image as caring for family has been inextricably part of the ideological construction of what constitutes a good wife and mother. Research demonstrates that even as families hire someone for domestic/cleaning labor women feel "obligated" to retain control of its' supervision [34, p. 99], in the vast majority of cases the decision to employ a domestic worker and the "supervision" of the labor is handled by women [19]. This is not necessarily challenging the existing gendered division of labor but rather displacing housework along raced and classed lines. Utilizing data from 30 qualitative interviews with white middle class women who hire domestic workers; this paper explores the motivations for hiring domestic workers, the ways in which participants conceptualized this labor as gendered, and finally how they navigated the guilt that often times accompanied hiring domestic workers.

## Background

Paid domestic work encompasses wide array of tasks, usually referred to as reproductive labor. Such work is often not considered "real work" as it takes place in private homes and "outside" of the market economy. Even when labor is transformed into paid work it remains undervalued and underpaid performed disproportionately by low wage-workers, particularly women of color reflected a gendered and racialized hierarchy [29]. Women have of course long been a part of the paid labor force, however in recent decades we have witnessed a rapid increase of middle class women entering the work force. Many of these professions, however, have been structured on the assumption that that one "has a wife at home," as Hochschild [15] suggests, "Most careers are still based on the well-known (male) pattern: doing professional work, competing with fellow professionals, getting credit for work, building a reputation, doing it while you are young, hoarding scarce time, and minimizing family work by finding someone else to do it" (p. 20). As women have entered these professions at higher rates, little has been done to change the structure of occupations in order to be more inclusive as evidenced for instance by the continued lack of paid maternity leave.

While there is some disagreement over how to measure time spent on housework, generally research suggests that women do less housework today than they did before the second wave feminist movement (down from 30 hours in 1965 to 17.5 in 1995), and studies consistently document men and women's unequal division of household labor, with women continuing to perform about 70 % of family housework [4, 21, 22, 42]. This distribution is even more inequitable for cleaning chores, between 1965 and 1995 men increased their time spent cleaning by 240 %,

up to 1.7 h per week, and women only decreased their time spent cleaning by 7 %, to 6.7 h per week [6]. Scholars have advanced theories regarding the partner's gender ideologies, time, and resources to explain these unequal contributions; however, even when controlling for these variables, gender still remains a powerful determinant of who performs household labor [21, 41]. More over, even as some research suggests that women do as much as 70 % of housework, most women report the division of labor as fair [30]. Also, women in families who hire domestic workers do 30 min less of housework per day than women in families who do not hire domestic workers but in relation to their partners the proportion stays the same [11]. The decision to “outsource” domestic work is for some in response to unsuccessful attempts to change the gendered division of labor in their homes, however, for others the work that domestic workers perform is unproblematically considered “women’s work” [24, p. 375].

## Feminist Intersectionality and the Domestic Labor

In the past three decades feminist scholars within the social sciences have begun to articulate complex theories of how race, class, gender, sexuality and national oppressions intersect.<sup>1</sup> Intersectional theories refer to the “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations-as itself a central category of analysis” [25, p. 1771]. Through this lens, experiences are understood in the context of multiple intersections, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationhood and citizenship [13]. Leslie McCall argues that “feminists are perhaps alone in the academy to the extent which they have embraced intersectionality” and argues that intersectionality might be the “most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far.” Recognizing interlocking systems of oppressions works to decentralize “dichotomous oppositional constructs” and allows for more complex analysis of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationhood, not in separate spheres but in entwined holistic and humanist perspectives [14].

Many assumptions about women’s labor have been based on the limited experiences of middle class white women, one example is of course Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. The opening sentence of this widely disseminated feminist text reads, “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone” [9, p. 11]. The “problem that had no name” was the inescapable boredom and stifling domestic life that plagued women. In reality, Friedan was not describing the plight of a majority of women in this country; instead she was speaking for white, educated, heterosexual, middle to upper class women. As bell hooks [18] points out:

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that while I am tracing the academic development of intersectional theories, much of this theorizing was done outside of academic spaces within the context of grassroots activist movements.

She did not discuss who would be called into take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell the readers is it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure class housewife [18, pp. 1–2].

At the time that Friedan wrote the *Feminine Mystique*, more than one third of all women were working [18]. The questions that hooks levels towards Friedan's work are being answered on a daily basis in the homes of middle class America. "Domestic service reveals the contradiction in a feminism that pushed for women's involvement outside the home, yet failed to make men take responsibility for household labor" [34, p. 128]. The hiring of other women to do household labor does not significantly challenge the gendered organization of labor that continues to construct housework and childcare as women's work. Even as employers, women are still doing the supervision of household tasks, reinforcing the gendered division of labor. Furthermore, as research on paid domestic work suggests, middle class women may have the means to opt out of actual housework [14, 19, 34].

As Hochschild and Ehrenreich articulate below, joining women together across racial and class lines is not necessarily a radical step towards liberation:

...the globalization of childcare and housework brings together the ambitious and independent women of the world together: the career driven upper-middle-class woman of an affluent nation and the starving woman from a crumbling Third World or postcommunist economy. Only it does not bring them together in the way that second-wave feminists in affluent countries once liked to imagine- as sisters and allies struggling to achieve common goals. Instead, they come together as mistress and maid, employer and employee, across a great divide of privilege and opportunity [7, p. 11].

As these scholars work suggest, any feminist ideology that unproblematically conceptualizes wage work as liberating is fundamentally flawed in addressing women's labor issues. The negative effects and subordination of capitalism and patriarchy are by no means equal for all women. Dependent upon one's social location and privilege, they can engage in and even perhaps benefit from such arrangements. However, patriarchy and the expectations and effects of capitalism inform all such relationships. For instance, if "women's work" was not devalued by a patriarchal society, paid domestic labor would not be such an exploitive occupation and if reproductive labor was not considered "women's work" many of the exploitive conditions discussed would not be so primarily grounded in exchanges between women [38]. This project is an empirical formulation of this, while the narrative suggests the ways in which participants' labor is marginalized.

Zillah Eisenstein coined the term capitalist patriarchy to "emphasize the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchal sexual structuring" [8, p. 5]. She points out that to understand the

devaluation of women's work and low wages paid to women one must simultaneously articulate the oppression of capitalism and patriarchy within specific historical contexts. In the late nineteenth century white male labor unions advocated, often successfully, "protective legislation" that excluded women from all jobs considered dangerous or unhealthy. This in effect marginalized women from higher paying factory jobs. Many women were forced to work in apparel and textile manufacturing, which were also hazardous with far lower pay. Furthermore, the gendered division of labor in homes, particularly women's responsibility for unpaid care work, contributed to women's confinement to low-paid, caretaking and servile paid work [1].

The skewed participation of men and women in wage labor, and the overrepresentation of women within unpaid reproductive labor had serious repercussions. Men were given a significant amount of economic power over women, and unpaid reproductive labor was clearly typed as "women's work." Women's unpaid work came to be seen as less valuable than wage work [1]. The tendency to devalue reproductive labor continues and even when it is waged labor, paid domestic work is always underpaid and often considered low status. Furthermore, the work histories of all women are inextricably complicated by each other. Amott and Matthaie [1] write of this interconnectedness:

It seems the work experiences of women in the United States are so varied and multi-dimensional that a common history is beyond our grasp. Yet, the work lives of women in the United States have always been interconnected: in a very real sense, the lives of any one group of women have been dependent upon the lives of others, just as they have been dependent upon those of men (and vice versa). Unfortunately the ties that have joined us have rarely been mutual, equal, or cooperative; instead, our interdependence has been characterized by domination and exploitation [1, p. 3].

As they point out, the work of women has always been informed and shaped by the work of other women. Gender, race, and class have been extremely important in differentiating these experiences. Furthermore, gender, race and class are inseparable from each other, for instance, the historical raced-sex typing of jobs makes these two dimensions inextricable from class [1].

The narratives presented here reflect these intersections. As stated, this research purposely sampled white, heterosexual, middle class women to explore this intersection; while the women interviewed here represent an advantaged status in relation to most other women, the data suggests that they still are very much subject to patriarchal norms regarding gender, family and labor. That said, they are able to use their class privilege to "outsource" some of this responsibility. Perhaps surprising however, is the amount of household work they continue to do, suggesting as Ehrenreich and Hochschild point out that the "presence of immigrant nannies does not enable affluent women to enter the workforce; it enables affluent men to avoid doing the second shift" [7, p. 9].

## Methods

This work utilized qualitative active interviews for data collection. Thirty interviews were conducted with participants for the purpose of exploring perceptions of paid and unpaid domestic work, how one negotiates decision making and hiring domestic workers, the gendered roles of housework in this context, the relationships between employer and employee, and the class and racial politics that are involved in hiring domestic workers. The researcher also asked specific questions such as actual payment, how they make contacts with possible employees, and specific stories of relating to domestic workers in this context. Interview data were collected until saturation was complete, i.e. the researcher was able to start detecting consistent themes and no new themes were emerging from additional data collection. For the purpose of this research, the researcher targeted women who employed housecleaners. While the research targeted this particular employee/employer relationship, past research has shown that often the lines between such labors become blurred. For instance it is not uncommon for one to be hired as a nanny yet then be asked to take on certain cleaning tasks [33, 34]. The interview is an especially useful method in feminist research for several reasons. It offers access to women's ideas and experiences in their own words, which is particularly relevant given the extended ignorance of women's ideas and experiences. Some scholars argue that the open-ended interview is more suited to women researchers, utilizing communication patterns that are consistent with traditionally feminine ways of relating.<sup>2</sup> Finally, others argue that interviewing is consistent with feminists' interest in abdicating control over the research process and facilitating cooperation [31] although the interview does not necessarily remove the researcher from a privileged or authoritative position.

Each interview lasted around 1 h. Most interviews took place in the home of the participant and several interviews were done over the phone. The sampling was done primarily in Brookfield (fictitious name). Over two thirds of the participants live in Brookfield or a surrounding town. This area is 97.7 % white, 2.7 % Latino, and only .4 % Black and/or African American. The median family income in 1999 was \$83, 531 compared to the US family median income of \$50,046. The median value of a single-family home in this tract is \$277,300 compared to the national median of \$119,600 ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The purpose of grounding the study in a specific physical place was to contextualize the narratives of these women within the larger economic, structural, racial and immigration histories of that place. In some cases snowballing took me outside of Brookfield and in others I actively recruited in outside areas because of a difficulty in getting participants.

## The Sample

All participants were upper or middle class heterosexual white women who employ domestic workers. Defining upper-middle class is somewhat tricky, mostly because many people self identify as middle class, even if their income greatly exceeds

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note however, that "traditionally feminine ways of relating" are constructed within a larger system of patriarchy and therefore I am also critical of this possibly essentialist justification.

national median incomes. For instance, one participant Molly, a 25 year-old accountant identified herself as middle class during the interview, however placed her household income between \$101,000 and \$120,000, about twice the national median family income. Twenty-two participants reported their household income and Table 1 reflects this breakdown.

There was however a significant disconnect between women's household income and their personal income; Table 2 reflects the breakdown of the twenty three participants who reported personal income.

Clearly, the majority of women are reliant on male partner's earnings to maintain their lifestyles. Twenty-seven of the participants were married, one was single, one in a committed relationship and one currently separated going through a divorce. Four participants were childfree and twenty-six had children. The median number of children was two.

A snowball sampling approach was used to solicit participation, in which participants were recruited through their associations with other participants [3]. While there are significant drawbacks to snowball sampling, such as biases based on the tendency of people of similar values, race, and SES to socialize, these drawbacks did not hinder the goal of this research. Being an in depth qualitative study, these findings are not meant to be generalizable to the population at large, and the likelihood of recruiting a similar demographic was intentional. As previous research has suggested, given the ways in which women's relationship to household labor is structured also by race and class, focusing on this specific demographic gives some insight into how these social locations intersect in navigating paid household labor. Moreover, a significant focus of this research was the ways in which the participants discussed race, whiteness and immigration in relation to these work relationships and the ways in which said relationships reflected traditional maternalistic structures [27, 28].

Furthermore, in doing feminist research, the concern of validity should not be addressed by the ability of the selected population to reflect larger populations, but instead in the ability of the selected population to reflect their experiences that are then related to larger social processes [36]. Snowball sampling has been a much utilized sampling method when attempting to solicit "elite" populations. Elite

**Table 1** Breakdown of household income

Below \$10,000	0
\$11,000–\$20,000	0
\$21,000–\$40,000	0
\$41,000–\$60,000	0
\$61,000–\$80,000	1
\$81,000–\$100,000	1
\$101,000–\$120,000	4
\$121,000–\$150,000	4
\$151,000–\$200,000	1
\$201,000–\$250,000	2
Above \$250,000	9

**Table 2** Breakdown of personal income

Below \$10,000	8
\$11,000–\$20,000	4
\$21,000–\$40,000	3
\$41,000–\$60,000	4
\$61,000–\$80,000	0
\$81,000–\$100,000	0
\$101,000–\$120,000	1
\$121,000–\$150,000	0
\$151,000–\$200,000	0
\$201,000–\$250,000	1
Above \$250,000	1

populations are often easy to identify but difficult to gain access to. By obtaining contact through other members of these groups, it is easier to forge initial introduction [3].

Recruitment was difficult at times and finding women to interview was often challenging. Snowballing did not work in every case even when referred to them by a “friend.” Furthermore, the researcher would frequently exhaust a social network. For instance, one woman referred the researcher to four different women, all of whom had either referred her to domestic workers or who she had referred to domestic workers to, however, once those interviews were completed that “group” ran out of contacts, their close relationships were with each other. There also seems to be considerable fear for some employers in terms of talking about hiring domestic workers.

## Analysis

All but two of the interviews were transcribed verbatim.<sup>3</sup> Each participant was identified only by pseudonyms that they were asked to choose at the start of each interview. The pseudonyms were then used during the course of the interview to protect the anonymity of the participant. Immediately after each interview, interview notes were transcribed based on the setting, appearance, physical language and location of the participant, information that was not captured on the audiotape.

After transcription, each interview was read multiple times to identify common themes throughout. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the process began by coding incidents within the data into categories. Integral to the process of inductive qualitative research, analysis did not begin with a predetermined coding scheme. The coding and themes were allowed to emerge from the data rather than be transposed onto it [10]. The coding process consisted of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Once open coding identified categories, axial coding

<sup>3</sup> One was not transcribed because of a mechanical error in recording and the other tape was destroyed because of the participant’s discomfort with what she had shared.



was used to find connections between categories. When the links between categories were established creating concepts, selective coding was used to contextualize the data [37]. Saturation occurred only after each transcription was read multiple times and it seemed that all possible categories and themes had been extracted from the data [10].

## Findings

It is difficult to characterize the type of working relationships between participants and domestic workers as there was considerable diversity among participants in length, type, and frequency of employing practices and also pay. This research focused specifically on white, class privileged women who hired someone for cleaning labor, and most common was a contractual “for the house” situation. As other scholars have also pointed out in their work, the structure of paid domestic labor has largely shifted from a wage by the hour situation to a cost per house. There was still some variation here; for example, Brianne employed two women to come 5 days a week and Daryl hired one woman to come in 2 days a week, however at the other extreme Ashley hired someone to only come in once a month and do heavy cleaning while Sue hired someone to come in once every 2 weeks to do only her bathrooms. Most common was a once a week cleaning, usually ranging between 2 and 5 h depending upon how many workers were employed. The relationships were often not continuous and spanned in time from 3 months to over 20 years but most were characterized by considerable turnover. Almost all of the participants hired women. In fact when I asked Jane, a 50 year-old married homemaker, if the person she hired was a woman, she laughed and asked me “they make men?” Clearly domestic work is considered a female pursuit, even when one is getting paid to do it.

While the types of working relationships were diverse, often the reasons for hiring were considerably similar. The responses that women offered could be broadly categorized within two major themes, the first, a need to hire because of lack of time or health issues, and the second, a desire to hire in order to free one’s time. These two themes are not mutually exclusive by any means. The conceptualization of each reflects how participants perceived their time, what constituted “keeping up” on housework and how they organized priorities. For instance, while most women expressed having a hard time keeping up on things, there was considerable variation in terms of what these things were or what changes in their lives now made it difficult to keep up.

## Deciding to Become an Employer

How did these women first become employers? Most of the participants did not grow up in homes that employed domestic workers. Rather, for most women it was friends, neighbors and family members later in life that suggested or modeled the hiring of someone to help with housework. One of the most common precipitators of the decision to hire someone was returning to/performing paid work. Various

women expressed difficulty balancing work and family responsibilities and felt overwhelmed. Simone, a 43 year-old banker, explained,

Um, I just didn't have time you know. I just didn't have time to clean my house, and, you know, I worked, even back then I was working twelve to fourteen hours a day, and unless you want to come home at seven o'clock at night and start to clean. And I was spending all of my Saturdays and Sundays cleaning, you know, cleaning and laundry and ironing. And I just said, you know, it wasn't, it was worth the, for my townhouse I think I paid, you know, fifty dollars every other week to have somebody come in and, like, wash my floors and all that stuff.

Her comments speak to the concerns of many women, reflecting the commonly referred to double day or second shift. Various feminist scholars have elaborated on how work and family overlap for women. Women face significant stress when attempting to manage both responsibilities at "home" and at "work." The exponential increase of married women and women with children in the workforce has not been accompanied by an equal increase in the amount of unpaid work possible male partners assume. "As masses of women have moved into the economy, families have been hit by a speed-up in work and family life. There is no more time in the day than there was when wives stayed home, but there is twice as much to get done. It is mainly women who absorb this speed-up" [15, p. 8]. The demands of careers, housework and child care place women in precarious positions.

Of the twenty-four participants with children, only seven worked full time when their children were younger. However, even women who did not work full time discussed the difficulties of negotiating caring for children and cleaning. Christina, a 47 year-old homemaker who has recently gone back to work as a part time museum curator, has been hiring someone to help with housework for almost 20 years, since she had her oldest child,

Once, once, I came home and had Lola, when she was born, I stopped working, and I just was overwhelmed by just all the housework and just being at home, that I wanted kind of a break. So I hired a cleaning lady then, and that was in 1987.

Daryl, a 53 year-old married painter, also explained having children as being the impetus for beginning to hire again,

Whenever I first got married I didn't (hire anyone). We went to Florida, and I was home; I did it myself. And then after all the kids, that's when I started with somebody twice a week. It started out that the girls would come and she would watch— um, one of the kids would be at school and the other one was a baby— so she would watch the baby, and clean the house, and get the other one off the bus. And then I'd be home. It was usually nine to twelve... Well, no, I wasn't working then. That was, that was my only, that was my time... Well, then the kids didn't need to be watched anymore 'cause they'd go in school all day. So, she still continued to come two days a week, um, and, uh, she just cleaned. She didn't have to watch the kids anymore.

## Guilt, Responsibility and Domestic Work

A number of participants did not work or worked only part time yet hired someone to help with cleaning, or in Daryl's case, take care of children. This is obviously related to the particular class background of the women interviewed. There however seemed to be some stigma attached to this. For instance, Chloe, a 25 year-old married catering manager, asserted that if she didn't work she wouldn't hire someone to help with cleaning. Anna, a 47 year-old married business owner, who recently returned to work managing a restaurant that she and her husband own, actually expressed guilt in being a stay at home mom who hired someone,

... I'm home and I wasn't working, so that was always like a guilt thing for me. I don't know if any other women felt that way, that if you're home well then I can do it. Why would I be home, I wasn't out working full time, and still have a cleaning girl... I just felt that cause I was home and my husband was the breadwinner, if I'm home and this should be my responsibility.

She felt that because she wasn't working (paid employment) she should not hire someone to help with cleaning. Drawing on both expectations of femininity and masculinity, she seems to be saying that because her husband was keeping up his part of the bargain, being the breadwinner, she needed to keep up hers, the home. She attributes cleaning with her responsibilities and transposes her ability to keep up with these responsibilities as a reflection of herself. Lucille, a 48 year-old homemaker/office manager for her husbands' business, went so far as to say that housework was her "part of the deal."

However, many of the women who identified themselves as stay at home moms or not working often actually worked many hours a week in a family business. For instance, while both Emily, a 56 year-old married retiree, and Samantha, a 27 year-old married homemaker/bookkeeper, identified themselves as stay at home moms they both did all the bookkeeping for their family business. Another such example is Jane, who did not technically perform paid labor, yet took care of her granddaughter at her daughter's house 5 days a week while her daughter and her husband worked. Anna also now works around 30 h a week in a restaurant she and her husband own.

Both Lucille and Anna attributed this guilt to the fact that they didn't work; however Ginger, a 54 year-old married defense attorney, who actually works between fifty and seventy hours a week, communicated similar sentiments. Although she works full time in paid employment she still associated not being able to clean the house with being somehow inadequate,

I did not want to hire anybody to clean the house because I thought it made me inadequate or incomplete, like, as a housewife, which I am not. I'm a career person, but I thought that I could do everything, clean, and cook, and stepmother, and, uh, have a full time career. And it got to the point where it was all day Saturday was spent cleaning and I couldn't do that and work Saturday and do the shopping and do everything else. So, um, my husband, who was insisting that we needed cleaning, or some help, went out and decided to hire, uh, like I said, my in-laws' cleaning lady. (How did you feel

about that when he first hired her?) I, I felt terrible! I didn't, I used to make things up that they were doing wrong, so, or, that she was doing wrong, like, uh, misplacing items, or redistributing things where they didn't belong, or redecorating by moving nick knacks in places. I used to get very upset about that, and take it personally. And the real reason was is because, again, it was making me feel like do[ing] all of things I wanted to do, like keep a clean house.

She went on to explain that she has always had a difficult time asking for help and is “very bad at delegating or relegating responsibility ‘cause I feel solely responsibly for everything that I undertake.” Ginger explains this guilt in terms of her personality, however, the consistency across the interviews suggests larger implications as well. Contemporary expectations and ideals of womanhood exacerbate the stress facing working mothers. Media representations of motherhood have undermined women, by idealizing an impossible image of working mothers [5]. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels coined the term, “new momism” to refer to “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” [5, p. 4]. This romanticized and unachievable ideal of motherhood is essential to understanding how patriarchy forces and facilitates the multi-layered subordination of women.

However, while Ginger was initially resistant to accepting this help, her later comments suggest that she has become more accepting of this need for help over the years and now actually appreciates it,

I mean, I, I, think that for career women it's probably essential to have somebody to help you clean, but I also think that you have to accept the fact that you can't do everything. And that came to me a little late in life, and then, uh, you know, now I, I cherish the fact that I'm going to come home and the floors are going to be clean, and the toilets. I mean, she does, uh, she doesn't do, like, sheet changing or laundry or anything like that. The only thing that she does, uh, are the floors and the bathrooms and some dusting, and, um, the kitchen, the appliances, cleaning the appliances. So, and she only works for me four or five hours once a week. So, I still have a sense that I have an obligation to clean the rest of the house. And sometimes I wish she was there more, and I may increase her to two days a week.

Balancing paid work and/or childcare were the most common reasons given for why one would hire, however a few participants mentioned having health issues that restricted their mobility, thus prompting them to hire someone to clean. For instance Anna explains her decision in the following statements,

Ok, I was going into the hospital having surgery. I had a hysterectomy and I knew that was gonna be a long process to heal, and I just couldn't depend on asking my mother to come and help me, or even depend on the kids or my husband to take that much time from work or help me out. That I know I needed someone so actually about two months before I knew I was going into

the hospital I got some, actually there's two women that come and help me. And I got them in here just to see how they would do it, you know without my supervision.

Another participant began hiring when she was pregnant and on bed rest. These statements also suggest that the participants were not willing or able to rely on possible male partners during this time. This division of labor in homes, or lack of, is a clear facilitator of paid domestic work.

While the majority of women expressed feeling overwhelmed others were clear that they simply did not want to clean. For example, Maria, a 48 year-old married bookkeeper, very plainly stated, "I just didn't want to clean the house anymore. I was done cleaning." She had been handling the majority of cleaning in her home for many years and felt that she was done. Likewise, Emily, who has now retired along with her husband from their family business (their sons now run the company), also alluded to wanting to be able to spend more time doing things she chose,

Yeah. Some women are really opposed to cleaning, I never minded it. But I, I feel, I feel, um, I feel really, really good about, we built our business from scratch, from nothing. And it took us thirty years to really establish it...So, now at this stage of our lives, we wanted to be able to pick and choose, you know, what we do and where we go. And, and this affords me a little freedom.

While she points out that she never really minded cleaning she highlights that at this point in her life she wants to be able to choose how she spends her time. She obviously is very proud of her and her husband's hard work in building a business and now feels that they deserve a release. Contrary to most of the other women who participated, Emily does not currently feel constrained with her time and has recently taken up both playing golf and art.

The lines between feeling like you "need" help or "want" help are not definitive. For instance, Lauren, a 45 year-old married part-time tax preparer who has been hiring a domestic worker for nine years, shared the following experience,

I was overwhelmed with three small children and trying to take care of this house... (Who was doing most of the cleaning?) Me, absolutely me. (Has it always been that way?) Yes, and I'm very obsessive about my house, so it always has to look clean and I was just driving myself crazy. One of my neighbors said to me one day, she wanted me to go somewhere, and I said I can't I have to clean, and she said, you spend your whole life cleaning you have to get help. And my husband came home that night and I said I think we need to get someone to clean the house, so we got someone to clean the house.

Her comments illustrate the interconnectedness of not having time, or desiring to free up time. Cleaning was getting in the way being able to do other things. It was one of her neighbors who suggested to her that she "needed" to hire someone. As discussed earlier, women often spoke of knowing people around them who employed domestic workers, and one could argue this modeling is an impetus for initiating work relationships. In fact, most participants relied heavily on those associations to recruit workers.

Interestingly, very few participants mentioned having the economic privilege to be able to hire someone. This could be in part due to being surrounded by other families of similar class backgrounds, many of who also hire domestic workers. Therefore, hiring someone to clean does not seem to be out of the ordinary or related to economic privilege. Given the ways in which participants rely on referrals this also makes hiring more convenient. The construction of not having time to clean and the construction of not wanting to clean both also reflect some negotiation of class privilege. For instance, while many women may both not “have time” to clean and “not want” to clean, not all of them can necessarily opt out of doing so. Furthermore, the larger houses that accompanied many women’s class status meant more space to clean. In addition, the concept of free time in itself, or leisure is arguably a middle class construction.

### **Division of Household Labor and Paid Domestic Work**

The study of household labor reflects the intersections of family relations, household structure, gender expectations, sexism and formal and informal market economies. Housework by extension reflects gendered understandings of family, love and personal fulfillment while also structuring relationships of gender, race and class. Almost without exception the women interviewed did the majority of housework in their home and when employing domestic workers, almost exclusively employed women (the one exception here was a participant who actually hired a corporate cleaning service and the person who ran the service was male). Hiring a domestic worker was clearly replacing their labor rather than their male partner’s. While most participants did not explicitly refer to housework as “women’s work” their statements implicitly suggest that for most, housework is largely conceptualized as women’s responsibility. For instance, Dolores, a 49 year-old married nurse, shared that her husband “gave” her a “cleaning lady” for Christmas. This has been an ongoing gift ever since, as she puts it, “The gift that keeps giving.” Another participant Jane explained that her daughter was going to get “one” for mother’s day. Clearly the assumption that a “cleaning lady” would be a gift to these women implies that cleaning is their responsibility. Also, referring back to Ginger and Ann’s earlier statements, they would not have felt the guilt they expressed if they did not perceive housework to be their “job.”

While it was clear housework was the women’s “job,” several participants emphasized that they could ask their husband for help. For instance, when asked who does the majority of housework in her home Jane replied, “Me. I mean my husband helps, my husband helps, yes, now he would not have problem with vacuuming and there’s certain things that he didn’t do, but yeah, he would help.” However, in most cases it seemed that this help was overestimated, for instance when asked if her husband and kids help out, Nancy, a 44 year-old married securities analyst, replied, “Oh yeah, oh absolutely...Well my husband would empty the dishwasher; load the dishwasher, that sort of thing, not much more than that.” She starts out by saying that they absolutely help out, although when she actually explains her husband’s contribution it does not seem like a sizable

percentage of their housework. Other scholars have pointed out that while women's performance of housework is often considered obligatory, men's participation is often constructed as optional, thus characterizing this contribution as helping [4]. Furthermore, while women's housework is taken for granted, men's is noticed [32]. When later asked if she wished her husband would help out more, Nancy responded,

He does do a lot, I have to say. (So you're happy with his contribution?) Oh absolutely ...Absolutely, no because when I'm having a bad day, he'll tell me don't cook, don't worry about it, I'll get something, he's terrific. Yeah, he's just very easy to please, and if I need a hand I know it's there. No, and I don't feel guilty for not being able to do...I did when I was first diagnosed; you know when I was really really bad. But I made myself feel guilty, no one else made me feel guilty. It was just something I was so used to doing, everything, and then I couldn't do everything. So that was hard for me personally. But nobody around me made me feel that way.

Nancy has rheumatoid arthritis and in recent years has not been able to do various household tasks because of limited mobility and debilitating pain. She points out that while she used to feel guilty about not being able to do "everything" anymore; it was she who actually imposed this guilt, suggesting that she herself conceptualizes this labor as her obligation. While her husband's contribution is limited to filling and emptying the dishwasher she was not critical of his lack of participation. Rather, she emphasized the help he does provide and related to this, being able to "ask" for this help. Many other participants made similar comments, stressing that their male partners would help if they asked them. For instance while Maria does "ninety-nine percent" of the housework in her home she states, "Yes, if I ask my husband to do something, he would absolutely do it, but it's just easier sometimes to do it yourself." She goes on to cite everything outside the house as her husband's "problem," (lawn, deck) and everything inside the house as hers.

Past research has shown the most time consuming household tasks to be; meal preparation, housecleaning, grocery shopping, cleaning up from meals (washing dishes), and laundry. Furthermore, these tasks are the least optional and are less able to be put off than other more occasional household labor. Whereas these routine and repetitive household tasks are often considered "female" (shopping, cooking, cleaning), occasional household tasks such as mowing the lawn or taking care of cars are often considered "male" [4]. In the interviews several women mentioned this inside/outside division or stated that they expected or wished male partners would do manual and technological labor. However, it is important to note that several participants talked of actually taking on those tasks as well. This might suggest that there is some gendered re-division of labor happening, however, this re-division is actually adding more tasks to what is appropriately women's labor. For example Samantha stated,

I wish that he was more like, um, mechanically inclined, and, like, not so much housework, but repair work. You know, I find, um, that I do a lot of, like, the hooking up the electronics and, um, you know, stuff that guys usually do; I do it.

While many participants shared that of course they wished their male partners would help out more, very few participants reported continued disagreements over housework with their partners. In many cases it seemed like they were resigned to doing housework, or that they had gotten into a pattern of doing the majority of work, which was then hard to break. Millel, a 53 year-old administrative assistant, explained,

Um, I think I gave up a long while... Obviously I worked when I met my husband, and then I had the children; the children were young when we came to America (from England). When we first came to America, um, I couldn't work because I didn't have my, you know, didn't have the papers. Um, and then I got into a pattern where I didn't need to work, and, so didn't. And so I didn't work for maybe ten or eleven years. Um, which meant that I supported him as an executive, which meant that, when I went back to work, um, the role was set up, and there was no way for me going back and getting any help.

Even though she returned to work 18 months ago this division of labor persists and she sees no way out of it. Similarly, Christina seemed resigned to this responsibility,

Yeah, um, when we were first married, um, we, you know, we would, we were tight. We were kind of young and ideal, and thinking, oh, we can, everything's fifty-fifty, and, and then it never turned out way. And, um, so, I would get mad at him for not, like, pulling his weight. And, um, and then, so, but then I stopped working when Lola was born in '87, that's when I hired a cleaning lady 'cause I thought, I don't want to harbor anger.

This lack of discontent can be framed in several ways. As Christina points out, she does not have to harbor anger because she can also displace this responsibility onto someone else. Also demonstrating this displacement was Maryann, a 46 year-old stay at home mom, who has always done the majority of housework in her home. When asked if this had ever aggravated her she replied, "Yes, which is why I hired the cleaning people." In these two examples, hiring someone to help with cleaning is a way of dealing with the frustration and anger of having to do it all yourself.

Perhaps most obviously, these women are not that upset about their partners not doing housework because they are not necessarily doing the majority of it either. Their class status enables them some release from household responsibilities. However, while hiring someone obviously vastly decreases the amount of time they spend cleaning, almost all of the women seemed to do a considerable amount of upkeep cleaning, upkeep that could have still been split. Furthermore, the services they pay for do not include many of those tasks found to be the most time consuming, cooking, laundry, shopping etc. While some women felt a huge burden lifted by hiring someone to help clean, others were still "spinning their wheels" trying to get everything done. For example, when asked what she does with the extra time she has since hiring someone to clean, Maryann replied, "Cleaning the garage."

In terms of soliciting help from male partners, many participants commented that it was just easier to do it themselves. While male partners might help occasionally,



they often did not do such a good job when they did, for instance Anna shared that while her husband would help her fold laundry when she was sick she “would hate the way he did towels” and “towels are the easiest thing to fold.” Anna does all the housework in her home besides what is done by domestic workers. However, even when Lenny makes the small contribution of helping fold he seemingly does not do it right. Francesca, 25 year-old production assistant, made similar comments,

Um, well, he would attempt to clean, but he made more of a mess when he cleaned. So, I never really like... I'd cooked and I'll clean up at the same time. Like, I'll cook a huge dinner for, like, fifteen people and I'll still clean up because I can't deal with not having like clean dishes, clean silverware. Like, I like everything in the dishwasher to be cleaned and not everything hand washed. Maybe because there was such an age difference between us – he had washed everything—that just drove me crazy. I just didn't feel like it was clean after, you know, all these hands and mouths and things touched it. And then, alone, I would, um, I would like empty the dishwasher after it was done, clean the counters, clean the sink.

Emily also mentioned this issue of doing “it better,”

Yes... Well, I mean, once and a while, I'd get a hand, but not. You know, if I, if I was, really pushed. You know if something was happening, then he'd, he'd help me. (Did you ever mind that?) No because, um, first of all, I do it better than he does. But, um, he works hard at his business and it, it's a strenuous physical labor. And, um, I always felt kind of good about being able to help out with the business and then, you know, provide a good home for my guys. You know, this, it just made me feel good...Yeah. I was, I was sort of a dinosaur for the times.

Similar to other women Emily does almost all the housework, but explains this in two ways. One, that she does it better and two that it made her feel “good.” She is clearly associating her performing of housework with creating a good home for “her guys.” Here doing housework and being a wife and mother seem to be interdependent responsibilities and performances.

Related to the division of housework and whose labor was being supplemented is the question of how partners negotiated this decision. Most women had discussed their decision to hire to with male partners and overall, partners seemed supportive of these decisions. For instance Samantha stated, “We talked about it, absolutely, yeah. And he's very supportive about it because he knows, you know, how, how stressful life is with three little kids and a husband, so...” In most cases it seemed to be the women's idea to hire, however in a few situations male partners actually made the suggestion. For instance, recall Ginger's earlier explanation of her husband finding someone to hire. Similarly, Lucille's husband was the first to suggest this in her home,

My husband mentioned that maybe it would be a good idea. It was his idea. Now, I don't think it was 'cause I did a bad job, I think he was just trying to be nice and give me some free time. The kids were, um, you know, so close in

age, it was, it was crazy hectic, and I, you know, never got the whole house clean at the same time. So I think he was just trying to be nice and help me out.

However, although it was her husband's idea to hire, it was she who went about the business of finding and hiring someone. All of the women interviewed handled the vast majority (if not all) of hiring, paying and delegating labor to domestic workers. Male partners had little to do with the entire process. Christina actually referred to herself as the CFO of the domestic household, meaning the Chief Financial Officer. Rosita, a 46 year-old married security specialist who currently hires a group of women to clean once every 3 weeks, explained that in her own experience working as a domestic she almost always dealt with women,

I think just because, um, the same reason that I clean. You know what I mean? Its just kind of our...its still in the theory that it's the woman's job to take care of the domestic portion of the house and I think even when you're hiring somebody to come into the house its still the same thing.

This continued responsibility reinforces the assumption that housework is women's work. These arrangements do not challenge sexism but rather re-delegate much of the dirty work to other more subordinated women.

Most of the women interviewed grew up in homes where their fathers (when present) did little to no housework, however there was a huge difference in how much housework they did as children compared to how much housework their children do. For most participants who had children, their children offered very little help around the house. Millel commented,

Um, my children are not very good at helping. My daughter is better than my son. The trouble with children nowadays, is even if you're about to ask them for some help, they always seem to have their own agenda. Um, so therefore, it's difficult to pinpoint them. Possibly they might help a little more if they were around, but they always seem to have something to do.

Lauren also offered some explanation for her children's lack of contribution. While she and brother used to dust and vacuum the whole house, among other chores, the contributions her children make are significantly less,

It's, my kids are so involved with extra, I mean there's no excuse, they definitely should, I mean they make their beds and you know if I really get on them. But now that the other two are in college, my son comes home now he doesn't ever make his bed cause he's just so used to living like a slob....There's eight weeks he's home in the summer, or ten weeks or whatever it is, I just close the door cause I don't want to be fighting with him...No, they definitely, my daughter just left for (small private liberal arts college) and you know she had no clue how to do laundry, you know she's eighteen. I'm like, that's just like pathetic that you have no clue how to do laundry.

She blames her children's lack of contribution largely on their participation with extra curricular activities although claims that this is not an excuse. While children

were once a source of household help, increasingly middle class children are “now off at SAT prep classes or soccer practice” negating their possible contributions [6, p. 100]. Furthermore, in terms of the future of domestic work and its expansion, it is easy to imagine these children as adults also hiring someone to clean.

While children’s contributions ranged from little to none, most of the participants wished their children would help more. For instance, when asked if her children help out with housework, Sue, a 51 year-old homemaker, responded,

Um, minimally...It’s an effort to get them to just keep up with their, you know, making their beds, putting their laundry away. It’s like something you have to constantly remind them of. And if I give them an additional chore to do like, you know, say, you know, I need some help with doing anything particular task, you know, um, vacuuming whatever, they, they, they’ll do it. They might not, you know, be happy about it, but... They might delay it and put it off and hopefully it would go away or I would stop nagging them about it, but they usually would do it.

However, in some ways it seemed like having to ask or “nagging” was a task in itself. All of the women who talked about their children doing housework expressed having to ask or trying to get them to do it. For instance Dolores stated, “Well, I try, but, you know, that doesn’t work. They’ll pick up occasionally, if mommy gets on them, but other than that, no.”

## Conclusions

As this research demonstrates, participant’s decisions to hire domestic workers reflect complex negotiations of class, gendered perceptions of housework, and conceptualizations of time and priorities. While most women hired someone because they did not have enough time to clean, how they valued their time was informed by middle class conceptions of what makes a good wife and mother. Furthermore, had their partners helped out more with housework and childrearing hiring someone would not have seemed so necessary. Male partner’s lack of contribution placed the responsibilities of housework and child-care disproportionately on the shoulders of women, which they then displaced onto the shoulders of other women. This displacement further reinforces the gendered division of labor, continuously ascribing housework and childcare to women. Women contribute to the devaluation of this labor by keeping the occupation underpaid and undervalued.

The continued gendering of domestic labor (both paid and unpaid) is largely responsible for the guilt participants felt in terms of not doing/doing less domestic work. This was arguably exacerbated in those cases where participants were stay at home mothers as they were more likely to feel as though they were not holding up “their part of the bargain.” Also important to mention however are the ways in which this guilt manifested in negotiating working relationships. Many participants for instance had “strategies” for how they managed time and space when paid domestic workers were working in their homes. Some also cleaned, they would do laundry or some other type of household labor. Others left the house. While very

different strategies both resulted from the discomfort of watching someone else clean their home, sitting and watching someone clean implied that they themselves had the time to do it. This implication on the part of participants juxtaposes the decisions of homemakers to hire against women who work full time in paid employment. Several women alluded to this differentiation, they perceived working women to “need” help and homemakers to “want” help. For those women who did not work full time, some expressed guilt at not keeping up their “part of the bargain.” A couple of participants also suggested that hiring someone to clean was absolutely necessary for working women. However, this is clearly not an option for all working women. This dichotomy also misses the ways in which many of the women in this study who did not “work” actually spent close to full time hours doing labor for a family business and/or caring for children or grandchildren, both of which are not considered “real work” arguably because of their association with women.

## Implications and Limitations

To date feminist scholars have significantly challenged traditional conceptualizations of both paid and unpaid women’s labor. These challenges have been diverse and within feminist movement there has been significant controversy regarding the role of work in women’s liberation or exploitation. During the 1960s and 70s liberal feminists organized around issues of women’s workforce participation with some significant results. Liberal feminism largely focused on gender stereotyping in the workplace, sex segregation of workplaces, low wages for women’s work and restricted entry into high ranking positions [23]. These feminists articulated how women were confined to their main “jobs” as wives and mothers and how their career aspirations were largely blocked and/or ridiculed. However, there were some serious flaws in liberal feminists’ theorizing of women’s work. Equal participation is not tantamount to equality. Merely increasing the number of women in careers does not transform how exploitive work can be.

Much of this theorizing reflected bourgeois middle class bias. Many middle class women assumed that breaking out of their “housewife” positions and working outside the home was the key to women’s liberation. They largely ignored the large numbers of women of color and/or poor women that were already working outside the home [18]. The feminist focus on careerism alienated masses of women, telling them that if they worked they were somehow already liberated. Furthermore, “it also allowed feminist activists to ignore the fact that the increased entry of bourgeois women into the workforce was not a sign that women as a group were gaining economic power” [18, p. 100]. Illustrating this point, while we have seen remarkable numbers of women entering high status professions, we have simultaneously witnessed large numbers of women of all social classes entering poverty.

Furthering this critique, many feminist scholars have significantly problematized the conceptualization of public and private spheres of women’s labor as somehow separate. The public/private binary is used to define sexist, racist, and heterosexist

ideal gender roles, “real men” work and “real women” take care of families [12]. This idealization of hetero-patriarchal families has been used to marginalize all women. Multiple oppressions intersect to differentiate women’s work experiences and opportunities [1, 11, 12, 20, 26, 29]. Amott and Matthaei’s comprehensive analysis of race, gender, and work provides a conceptual framework by which to understand how economic differences among women have been organized along various social categories. They write,

Women throughout the United States have not experienced a common oppression as women. The processes of gender, race-ethnicity, and class-intrinsically interconnected- have been central forces determining and differentiating women’s work lives in U.S. history. Thus, while the explanatory power of each concept- gender, race-ethnicity, and class- is, in itself, limited, together they form the basis of our analysis of women’s works [1, p. 27).

The theorizing of how intersections manifest in women’s lives must be continuously inscribed into studies of women’s paid and unpaid labor. The literature on paid domestic work has made significant movements towards this agenda. Existing studies of domestic work are perhaps some of the most complete empirical pieces we have to date exploring the manifestation of multiple oppressions in women’s lives and how these manifestations differentiate labor structures, access to resources, and women’s relation to patriarchy. These various studies on paid domestic work have posited the connection between race, class, gender, nation, and citizenship in women’s employment. This current work builds on this elaborating the ways in which those women advantaged by such systems, and who can displace some of this labor on to less class privileged women, navigate the guilt associated with the gendered dimensions of such labor. Focusing however on such a specific group of women does miss the ways in which these negotiations might differ in an intra-racial context as most of the white women in the study hired women of color or women they perceived to be racially different from themselves.

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