

Race, Gender, and Class: Everyday Life and Subjective Mobilization among Diaristas

Raça, Gênero, Classe: Cotidiano e Mobilização Subjetiva de Mulheres Diaristas

Raza, Género, Clase: Cotidianidad y Movilización Subjetiva de Mujeres Trabajadoras por Día

Race, Genre, Classe : Quotidien et Mobilisation Subjective des Femmes Travailleuses à la Journée

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how gender, race, and class shape the everyday work and the subjective mobilization of women who work as day-rate domestic workers (diaristas). Ten workers aged 31–64 years participated, most of whom identified as Black. Data were collected via a sociodemographic questionnaire and individual unstructured interviews. Analysis followed a hermeneutic-dialectic approach. The theoretical frameworks were the sociology of the sexual division of labor, the Afrocentric paradigm in gender debates, and the psychodynamics of work. The analyses (re)affirm the relevance of an intersectional perspective for making sense of these workers' experiences. Work overload, self-definition, alienation, harassment, discrimination, and unionism emerged as salient aspects from the diaristas' accounts. We hope this study can serve as a resource for their empowerment and underscore the responsibility of other sectors of society in this endeavor.

Keywords: work, subjectivity, women, race, diarist.

Resumo

O presente estudo objetiva compreender as repercussões de gênero, raça e classe no cotidiano laboral e na mobilização subjetiva das mulheres diaristas. Participaram do estudo 10 trabalhadoras com idades entre 31 e 64 anos, sendo a maioria negras. Os instrumentos utilizados foram questionário sociodemográfico e entrevista não estruturada. O método de análise foi o hermenêutico-dialético. Os referenciais teóricos foram a sociologia da divisão sexual do trabalho, o paradigma afrocêntrico das discussões de gênero e a psicodinâmica do trabalho. As análises (re)afirmam a pertinência da perspectiva interseccional para a inteligibilidade das vivências das trabalhadoras. Sobrecarga laboral, autodefinição, alienação, assédio, discriminação e sindicalismo são alguns dos aspectos evidenciados a partir da escuta das diaristas. Esperamos que este estudo sirva de recurso de fortalecimento para elas e pontuamos a responsabilidade de outros setores da sociedade nessa empreitada.

Palavras-chave: trabalho, subjetividade, mulheres, raça, diaristas.

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo comprender las repercusiones del género, la raza y la clase en la vida laboral cotidiana y en la movilización subjetiva de las mujeres trabajadoras por día. Participaron en el estudio diez trabajadoras con edades entre 31 y 64 años, siendo la mayoría mujeres negras. Se utilizaron como instrumentos un cuestionario sociodemográfico y una entrevista no estructurada. El método de análisis fue el hermenéutico-dialéctico. Los marcos teóricos empleados fueron la sociología de la división sexual del trabajo, el paradigma afrocentrista en los debates de género y la psicodinámica del trabajo. Los análisis (re)afirman la pertinencia del enfoque interseccional para la inteligibilidad de las experiencias vividas por las trabajadoras. Sobrecarga laboral, autodefinición, alienación, acoso, discriminación y sindicalismo son algunos de los aspectos evidenciados a partir de la escucha de las trabajadoras por día. Se espera que este estudio sirva como recurso de fortalecimiento para ellas, y se subraya la responsabilidad de otros sectores de la sociedad en esta tarea.

Palabras clave: trabajo, subjetividad, mujeres, raza, trabajadoras por día.

Résumé

La présente étude vise à comprendre les répercussions du genre, de la race et de la classe dans le quotidien professionnel et dans la mobilisation subjective des femmes de ménage journalières. Un total de 10 travailleuses âgées de 31 à 64 ans ont participé à l'étude, dont la plupart étaient noires. Les instruments utilisés étaient un questionnaire sociodémographique et un entretien non structuré. La méthode d'analyse était herméneutique-dialectique. Les références théoriques étaient la sociologie de la division sexuelle du travail, le paradigme afrocentrique des discussions sur le genre et la psychodynamique du travail. Les analyses (ré)affirment la pertinence de la perspective intersectionnelle pour l'intelligibilité des expériences des travailleuses. Surcharge de travail, autodéfinition, aliénation, harcèlement, discrimination et syndicalisme sont quelques-uns des aspects mis en évidence lors de l'écoute des femmes de ménage journalières. Nous espérons que cette étude servira de ressource de renforcement pour elles et nous soulignons la responsabilité des autres secteurs de la société dans cette démarche.

Mots-clés : travail, subjectivité, femmes, race, travailleuses à la journée.

In Brazil, 92% of those employed in paid domestic work (PDW) are women, and 65% of them are Black women (Vilela, 2022; Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos [DIEESE], 2022, p. 1) — one of the starkest reflections of racism in Brazilian society (Gonzalez, 2020a). Informality also persists in PDW, for example when the work is performed on a day-rate basis (“diárias”) (Monticelli & Tamanini, 2013).

Daily working life involves many layers and many actors. It includes a visible or more easily identifiable part — such as physical infrastructures, task definitions, formal command structures, and schedules — and an invisible or less easily identifiable part, often even to the worker. This latter dimension encompasses intersubjective and social relationships in formation, the interplay with family circumstances, unexpected or underlying events, and the worker’s own physical-psyche condition (Dejours, 2004a, 2012).

Hirata (2002) and Brito et al. (2014) emphasize that the everyday work of men and women across classes and racial/ethnic groups differs markedly. Beyond their distinct positions in the labor market, they perform different kinds of work, occupy different social roles, and move through daily life with divergent temporalities and situations—even under seemingly similar circumstances.

This point becomes even more salient when considering the relationship between subjectivity and work (Dejours, 2012). If work situations are not the same for men and women — and if they (re)produce or experience the material and symbolic constructions imposed by the sexual and racial division of labor (Hirata, 2002) — how could those situations not be incorporated into the analysis? Accordingly, this study aims to understand the gender, race, and class repercussions through a lens focused on the daily work experience and subjective mobilization of women who work by the day (“diaristas”).

Method

Participants

Ten women working as day-rate domestic workers participated, most with more than 15 years of experience. Ages ranged from 31 to 64. By self-identified skin color, six identified as Black, two as Brown (parda), one as Asian (amarela),

and one as White. Regarding education, four had completed high school, while six had not completed high school or elementary school. All were mothers; three had three to four children under 18. Most ($n = 6$) were married or in a stable union and lived with a partner and children. On average, they earned about R\$ 120.00 per day.

Instruments

Individual, unstructured interviews¹ were conducted, and a sociodemographic questionnaire was administered. Unstructured interviews allow respondents to formulate answers freely, guided by themes and a prompting question for each theme (Laville & Dionne, 1999). The questionnaire captured personal, family, and occupational information such as education level, time in the occupation, and remuneration.

Due to the pandemic context, it was not possible to convene them to form ad hoc collectives, as recommended by the PDT methodology. In addition, the diversity and incompatibility of days and times they had available to participate posed an obstacle to bringing them together in a virtual setting.

The interview covered the following themes: work trajectory; work processes and conditions; workplace relationships; the work–family interface; and perceptions and behaviors. Each theme included a prompting question, for example: “Could you tell me about your work as a day-rate domestic worker (‘diarista’)?” In line with the study objective, the chosen interview format, and the understanding that the dialogue with the researcher is also a space for constructing meaning, intelligibility, and awareness of the apparent and non-apparent dimensions of work (Dejours, 2004a), the terms sex/gender, race, and class were not explicitly mentioned in the formulation of themes and prompts, even though they were present.

Procedures for Generating Study Materials

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Committee, we contacted a domestic workers’ union that facilitated access to women working as day-rate domestic workers (diaristas). Although diaristas are not formally employed, many in this context benefited from the services and initiatives offered by the union. Once workers expressed interest and signed the informed consent form, individual interviews were conducted between November and December 2021 — generally in the late afternoon or evening — and lasted an average of 90 minutes.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social-distancing measures in place during the fieldwork period, interviews were conducted virtually (Google Meet), and the remaining steps were completed by phone (WhatsApp).

Procedures for Analyzing the Research Material

Responses to the sociodemographic questionnaire were summarized and described using frequency- and mean-based analyses. Each interview was transcribed in full, and pseudonyms were drawn from Conceição Evaristo’s *Olhos D’Água* (2016) to reference the accounts. The methodological strategy was a hermeneutic-dialectic approach (Minayo, 2008).

The interview content was foregrounded, and the researcher sought to make sense of the material on its own terms, while integrating a critical and interdisciplinary perspective. In the hermeneutic-dialectic method, discourse is understood to reveal more than speakers intend to express. No one encompasses the totality of everyday life, nor is anyone fully independent of historical reality, inequalities, domination, resistance, or conformity; rather, all are permeated by these forces. Accordingly, interpretation is grounded in praxis, yielding meaning configurations or meaning units (Minayo, 2008).

The researcher’s skills are therefore central throughout the analytical process, continually triangulating theoretical references, research objectives, observations, and historical consciousness (Minayo, 2008). For this study, the core theoretical frames were: the sociology of the sexual division of labor (Federici, 2019; Hirata, 2002); the Afrocentric paradigm in gender discussions (Davis, 2016; Gonzalez, 2020c; Teixeira, 2021); and the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2004a, 2004b, 2012).

Results and Discussion

Operational Mode, Working Under Suspicion, and the Memory of Marginalization

The ways diaristas plan, act, and execute their work are highly diverse, reflecting a defining feature of their labor: unpredictability or variability. With each household, they encounter different demands, situations, and spatial arrangements. Salinda remarked, jokingly, “I’m brave,” reflecting on leaving home without knowing what she would find.

¹ Despite the fact that Psychodynamics of Work — one of this study’s theoretical frameworks — privileges group interviews, individual interviews are permitted and may serve as an alternative in specific situations (Dejours & Bègue, 2010).

Even so, certain elements recur across the strategies workers adopt. One is the practice of probing, through conversation with employers, the needs, requirements, and recommendations of the families who receive their services. While this is part of seeking a positive evaluation of their work — as Maria, 45, explained: “I arrive at a house and ask: how is this room of yours? ... because you’re doing it for others” — it is also tied to another issue we call working under suspicion.

A consistent aspect of the operational mode—or operational modes (Dejours, 2004a) — of diaristas is concern about the placement and handling of families’ objects and belongings, especially valuables. Thus, many accounts described memorizing the initial or existing arrangement of rooms or furniture, as well as keeping items in view to ease their location. The initial conversation with employers also serves to gather information about the presence of valuables and any restrictions or expectations regarding them. Luamanda, 31, told us:

I always try to leave things organized, the way I found them... you have to leave them in a way they can see. They have to be in everyone’s line of sight... once, she had left everything scattered, I gathered it up — it was her rings and her husband’s — and they couldn’t find them... it was a house where many people came and went... but then, they suspected the diarista... whether you like it or not, it becomes an embarrassment. Sometimes people don’t have the courage to call; they just don’t schedule you again or bad-mouth you instead of recommending you.

Workers raised this issue specifically when describing what a diarista does or the unpleasant aspects of the job, showing that persistent suspicion about them leads to embarrassments in their work activity — or in their working, that is, the gestures, intelligence, interpretation, reaction, and inventiveness — whether necessary or improvised — called for by the material and social circumstances that intersect in carrying out a task (Dejours, 2004b).

The care taken to “avoid” (the quotation marks underscore the partial reach of this aim) suspicion or direct/indirect accusations can be seen as an adjustment—an informal rule established in their know-how (Dejours, 2004a) — and it is also anchored in the memory of the social marginalization of their occupation. Zaita, 43, explained: “Sometimes people judge you by your appearance. Because I live in a high-risk area... they think I’m mixed up with crime...” Or, as Duzu-Querença, 46, reflected: “When I left carrying a purse, they would stare at it a lot... because, you see, I’m a diarista, I’m morena, but my mother taught me never to take anything from anyone.”

As we can see, suspicion — although part of diaristas’ work reality — is not something they discuss among themselves, at least not among the interviewees. It is more underlying than explicit or shared. It is something lived.

For that reason, we chose the memory rather than the consciousness of marginalization. We understand memory as a “not knowing that one knows,” a site of inscriptions that restore a submerged history, where truth emerges even as conscious discourse tries to exclude it (Gonzalez, 2020c, p. 70). In this context, it is the history of incrimination of paid domestic workers — especially Black women — marked by the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism.

Teixeira (2021) argues that the myth of the domestic worker as a thief, criminal, and dirty is bound up with a broader, structural process of constructing and disseminating essentialist narratives about the history of the Black population — narratives that (re)produce an idea of Black degeneracy. In the case of Black women from peripheral neighborhoods, the patriarchal bourgeois whiteness² projected — or still projects — onto them — especially when they are in PDW, deemed the “natural” place of Black women — malice, idleness, opportunism, scheming, and ingratitude (Gonzalez, 2020c; Teixeira, 2021).

Peçanha (2019), for example, highlights the role of the 19th-century Brazilian press in implanting and spreading these stigmas. The Black woman domestic worker was alternately represented through sexualized appeals to her body and behavior, or through a supposed dangerousness stemming from her proximity to private property and family belongings.

Building on Davis (2016) and Gonzalez (2020c), we can conclude that, for whiteness, the Black woman is the *mulata* and the *mãe preta*, but also the “bandit’s woman” and the “delinquent’s mother.”

These racist and sexist essentializations — lived by paid domestic workers, Black women — underwrite the insinuations or accusations employers aim at diaristas’ moral integrity. They also help explain why employers do not feel discomfort in the face of injustice and, more than that, expect diaristas to be understanding and even to offer reassurance. Duzu-Querença said: “My employer’s card was cloned. They made purchases and took out a loan... when she arrived... she said, ‘can you believe I left here praying it wouldn’t be your handwriting there?’... up to that point, she thought she had a thief.”

Beyond the psycho-affective toll of such situations — living with injustice and employers’ lack of remorse — these essentializations compound the many difficulties paid domestic workers face in the struggle for recognition and rights.

Davis (2016) and Teixeira (2021) stress that how society views domestic workers, within the frame of PDW, bolsters our collective reluctance to validate or support them when they demand rights, more autonomous labor relations, and respect. This reveals the functionality of marginalization for the capitalist exploitation of Black women’s labor (Gonzalez, 2020a).

² It concerns white power: a social location of comfort and oppression that naturalizes the existence of an oppressed pole, shaping how the oppressor sees themselves and others. It refers to the historical assumption of structural, objective, subjective, economic, and symbolic privileges organized around a difference — race (Teixeira, 2021).

Making do Under Pressure: Work Overload, Pressures, and the Normalization of Certain Abuses

Among the interviewees, we identified a call for clearer definitions, firmer boundaries, and better organization of the work they perform, always considering concrete situations and how their activity actually unfolds. The tasks they are expected to complete in a single day are highly varied — cleaning rooms, furniture, appliances, and windows; preparing meals; washing clothes; caring for pets and plants; among others.

According to the diaristas, there is a marked mismatch between the quantity and volume of work and the time available to complete it — one of the major differences they point out between day-rate domestic work and regularly employed domestic work — which makes the workday extremely tiring. As Esmeraldina, 44, said: “As diaristas, you work one day taking on what would be about a week or even a month of tasks... when you’re the worker who is there throughout the week, you can divide the tasks.”

They understand this reality as the improper bundling of many demands into a single day—some of which they view as excesses or even abuses by employers. For instance, the interviewees opposed requiring a diarista to clean, cook, and wash or iron clothes all in one day or for the price of a single day’s work. As Zaíta put it: “They said they were paying me, but I told them they were paying for the cleaning; the clothes are something else.”

They also consider certain requests excessive — cleaning the inside of furniture or appliances (wardrobes, refrigerators), waiting on employers (serving meals or water), caring for plants, and picking up pet waste or sanitizing animal areas — because these lengthen the time they must remain on site. As the following account makes clear:

There are things you’re not supposed to do — things they could do, but they don’t want to. They push them onto you... sometimes they have you take care of dog poop (laughs). I had a day job where the woman had two big dogs, and she wanted me to leave the dogs’ area clean. I’d leave it for late afternoon because I was terrified. (Maria, 45 anos)

This effort by diaristas to set and enforce boundaries around what fits into a single paid day is grounded in self-recognition — and a quest for recognition — given the meager amounts paid for large volumes of work and the humiliating, grueling, or risky nature of some tasks. Maria also spoke about employers’ demands and how stacking multiple tasks affects work pace.

In general, the pace is intense and frenetic. This shows up in how they eat and in the wear on their bodies. Cida, 64, said: “You end up eating on the run, standing up, gulping it down, because the work is right there in front of you — so much to do... by five or six in the afternoon, you realize you’ve finished. Then it’s total exhaustion. Fatigue!” Joint pain is common among the interviewees; some take analgesics during or after work.

We also noted gastrointestinal problems, though the workers did not emphasize them — only Ana Davenga: “I also have a stomach problem; I feel a lot of pain.” Such issues may appear or worsen because of poor eating conditions imposed by the frenetic pace or by long periods without food. Many make very few meals — on average, breakfast and/or lunch — and on some days only what they bring from home.

Although diaristas advocate (re)defining or reframing their work — tasks, work arrangements, and alignment between tasks and pay — they must negotiate this view with families in a profoundly unequal power dynamic. Even the most assertive acknowledged that, in practice, they have limited success. As Maria said: “People say they want you to cook, they want you to do this and that... some diaristas don’t want to and won’t, but sometimes you need the job, and then you have to do it.”

Teixeira (2021) notes that the day-rate arrangement has offered little or no safeguard against certain situations and has not resulted in more autonomous or less subordinate labor relations for workers. When diaristas manage to reject the logic of servitude imposed on them, employers already find it strange and react — unsurprising given the lack of significant social change in how this work, and PDW itself, is perceived.

Regardless of the arrangement, families — mostly middle or upper class — tend to see the paid domestic worker as a “does-it-all” (Natalina, 53). There is an expectation — especially toward Black women domestic workers — that someone will always be available to meet varied needs and, at times, whims, as if she were an extension of the family (Teixeira, 2021). As Davis (2016) suggests, this is not inclusion as “part of the family,” but belonging as property — a tool. At the same time, the magnitude of the labor performed is minimized (Teixeira, 2021).

As a paid domestic worker, the Black woman is treated like a “beast of burden” (Gonzalez, 2020c, p. 73) — a strong, productive body presumed able to withstand a mathematically high workload (Gonzalez, 2020a).

This dynamic is embedded in the Brazilian configuration of domestic employment, historically carried out by Black women. According to the Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações (CBO), “domestic employment” encompasses a range of roles (live-in maid – diarista – housekeeper – cleaner) treated as synonyms and grouped under a single summary description. That description aggregates a variety of household tasks, including caring for clothing, plants, and pets, performed full-time, part-time, or by the day (Ministério do Trabalho, 2002).

From the perspective of the sexual and racial division of labor, Davis (2016), Gonzalez (2020b), and Teixeira (2021) point out that Black women’s lives contain a vast allocation to labor — through precarious, arduous, unhealthy, and invisible occupations. These are roles prone to dehumanizing labor relations and marked by the historical place of Black women in society.

Another facet of work overload—and its link to debates about what “belongs” to this occupation—appears in everyday

events that often fall to the diarista: arranging meals for employers' children, keeping older adults company, or supporting and caring for an intoxicated adult. As Maria recounted: "We play dominoes... the older woman only wants me to leave at 5:00 p.m.... when it's just after five, I say I'm going... then they say: 'Don't go, stay here.'"

Although these tasks increase workload and extend time in the home, the interviewees generally did not classify them as excesses or abuses.

We understand these situations as further consequences of how society sees and treats domestic workers, merging service and servitude within gendered, racialized, and classed hierarchies (Teixeira, 2021). It is also pertinent to consider how diaristas may assimilate or internalize these distinctions, reproducing inequalities themselves.

With that in mind, we reflect on the marks and implications of two ideological figures or social frames — the "housewife" (Davis, 2016, p. 230) and the "mãe preta" (Gonzalez, 2020c, p. 78) — in how workers reacted to the situations above. As Federici (2019) notes, although it was never the reality for most women, Black women, for instance, have life trajectories shaped by hard, precarious work both outside and inside the home. This frame nevertheless falls upon all women as a dominant model of femininity and family organization. Women are conditioned — even unconsciously — to domestic tasks: caring, empathy, self-denial, unconditional love, service, and even taking pleasure in it. Through this socialization, they tend to think and act according to an imposed social identity in many spaces—especially the private sphere, where such attributes are assumed to be natural.

The convergence of racism and sexism imposes on Black women the ideal of the *mãe preta*, a figure rooted in the Black wet nurse³ of slavery times, to whom docility, dedication, and kindness toward employers' families are attributed and expected. She is granted a small indulgence (Gonzalez, 2020c). As Teixeira (2021) notes, this ideal often shapes Black domestic workers' experiences, whether through its reinforcement or through efforts to break with it.

Both the housewife and the *mãe preta* are social frames that disguise labor and produce rewards when expectations are met (Federici, 2019; Gonzalez, 2020c). It is therefore understandable — and revealing — that interviewees sometimes naturalize the circumstances described and even find in them a way to feel appreciated by families. Speaking about time spent with older adults, Maria said: "One of the daughters arrived and found me playing dominoes with them, and she thanked me... it felt like appreciation."

Guimarães (2019) highlights how forms of domestic labor that have not been recognized as work (such as the housewife role or maternal labor) function socially, and how a portion of domestic activities — unrecognized as a profession/occupation — remains hidden and, consequently, unpaid.

Diaristas' Experience of Violence and Sexual Harassment at Work

In Latin America and the Caribbean, PDW is among the forms of work most vulnerable to violence and sexual harassment (Themis: Gênero, Justiça e Direitos Humanos, 2022). This situation — no longer possible to conceal — was forged by the colonial slave-based violence inflicted on Black and Indigenous women's bodies. For enslaved Black women, sexual violence was part of what counted as their work, of the punishments imposed, and of their nights — especially for those who served inside the *casa-grande* (Davis, 2016; Gonzalez, 2020c).

In so-called free labor societies, that past remains vivid, now disguised by a dialectic that combines the hypersexualization of domestic workers' bodies with the ambiguity of service provision constructed by colonial rationality. According to Gonzalez (2020c), behind the "service entrance" lies an implicit expectation of sexual service, buttressed by machista norms about male behavior and by the precarious material conditions of these workers (Teixeira, 2021).

Some of the diaristas interviewed reported experiencing sexual harassment or identified it as a constant threat in daily work. Zaíta, 43, recounted:

I left mostly because the owner, the boss, was harassing me... there was even a video from the elevator showing him trying to grab me. The building manager came to talk to me—she advised me to file a police report and offered the footage... I didn't want to report him... out of respect for his wife... I can't understand it, because I never gave him a reason. I never walked around naked, I never showed anything, so why? I cried. I spent a week sleeping badly... I felt as if a piece of me was being torn away.

Her account shows that, beyond the violence she suffered, Zaíta also carried doubts about her own conduct. This produced a spiral of suffering so intense that she could not sleep. Moreover, both she and other diaristas who raised the issue framed it through the lens of being women performing paid work. As Duzu-Querença stressed: "There are many men who think that because you're working there, we have to submit... we women go through a lot of humiliation with these men."

³ Enslaved Black woman who worked primarily inside the *casa-grande*, especially caring for the babies and children of slaveholding families — breastfeeding, cleaning them, putting them to sleep, teaching them to speak, and waking at night to feed the infants (Gonzalez, 2020c; Teixeira, 2021).

However, this association did not come with critical reflection on the episodes or the threat itself — a commonplace violence for them. Workers cited as causes of harassment — actual or imminent — a supposed male sexual nature⁴ or employers' bad character, as well as how these aspects related to their own behavior. According to the interviewees, clothing and comportment are factors in the occurrence of harassment, which leads them to feel guilty or responsible — as the account above suggests.

It is hard for them to recognize themselves as victims when they were born, raised, and live in a society that naturalizes violence against women's bodies — especially Black women's bodies (Carneiro, 2003).

Teixeira (2021) notes that the sexual objectification of domestic workers is closely tied to notions of promiscuity, lechery, infidelity, or an alleged seductiveness of their anatomical features — in short, the idea that they are sexually available. These are symbolic forms of violence forged at the intersection of gender, race, and class. Such ideological constructions foster self-blame among paid domestic workers who have been sexually harassed and, simultaneously, relativize the aggressor's responsibility.

Teixeira (2021) also underscores how the failure to understand the violence experienced as an expression of power asymmetries and inequalities contributes to individualized strategies for coping with these experiences.

This individualization—when facing the threat or occurrence of workplace sexual harassment—is part of the interviewees' reality, alongside leaving the job (the most frequent path; Teixeira, 2021) or relying on *jogo de cintura* — improvisational tact — to dodge advances, as Zaita described: “Sometimes I had to put buckets... so he couldn't pass.” Diaristas adopt what they see as precautions: speaking as little as possible with employers, avoiding being alone with them, and dressing “appropriately” — i.e., avoiding short, tight, or low-cut clothing. In Maria's words: “to put myself in my place.”

This panorama illustrates what Lerner (2019) and Gonzalez (2020a) describe regarding the persistence of supremacist systems. Racism and patriarchy rely on the cooperation of the subordinated — i.e., on internalizing the dominant ideology and the imposed inferiority and precarity — through indoctrination, deprivation of education, coercion or rewards for conformity, and discrimination in access to economic resources and social protection.

We also emphasize the implications of informal status. Job instability, very low pay, and the absence of labor rights are additional hurdles to more forceful action against sexual harassment.

Furthermore, pursuing a formal complaint often requires these workers to overcome additional obstacles: demands for proof, racist and sexist procedures, institutional clientelism, and lack of social or community support. According to Themis (2022), employers' social influence, the isolation inherent to the work setting, and the aggressor's family's lack of empathy are among the factors that disempower paid domestic workers in harassment cases.

This context shows that sexual harassment in PDW is a component of the emotional and psychological precarity of the job and of the sense of labor insecurity to which diaristas and other paid domestic workers are exposed. It is profoundly traumatic — both because of the inherent violation and because of victim-blaming processes that provoke shame and guilt.

We also question the absence—or insufficiency—of considerations about power relations and the racial and sexual division of labor in defining occupational risk, which predominantly assumes a technicist, mechanical, and biochemical character. This hinders the development of regulations and public policies that address the specific risks of women's work and offer prevention and redress (Brito, 2000; Hirata, 2002). This raises the question: Is sexual harassment not a workplace accident? Should it not be recognized as such for legal and social-security purposes?

Collective Mobilization and Unionism: Manifestations and Challenges in Diaristas' Trajectories

Although diaristas do not have formal union representation, all interviewees maintained contact with the union and benefited from many of its initiatives. Most were the target audience for workshops, talks, leafleting, donation drives, or on-site information and support. Some also helped organize and carry out activities alongside union leaders.

In short, the union space was identified as a place of welcome, learning, provision, and protection in the face of diverse work situations: loss of day jobs, conflicts with employers, doubts about their status and the PDW legal framework, among others. The union was also cited as a link connecting them to public policies and social programs and projects that share information and guidance. As Luamanda noted:

It's not just a union; it's a family that supports you... I might be going through a rough patch and say what I'm facing. Then she says she'll tell the others and support me however she can. She lets us know about donations and how to sign up to receive them. I think that's very important; when you need something — a friendly word — they're there to help.

This experience of mutual support — and of valuing their work and themselves as people — goes beyond meeting urgent material or informational needs. It suggests the union functions as a kind of shield against the negative effects on subjectivity

4 In patriarchal, sexist societies like ours, men's desire and sexual behavior are taken as instincts — something uncontrollable — so sexual arousal and, consequently, the ways of satisfying it are justified and deemed understandable on the basis of this supposed nature (Lerner, 2019).

and self-esteem that stem from abandonment, the loneliness of being an informal worker — usually a Black woman — the invisibility or exclusion from state policies and actions, the treatment received from employing families, and a society that discriminates by color, sex/gender, or type of work. As Cida put it: “It’s a kind of social life that wears you down.”

Bernardino-Costa (2015), Davis (2016), and Teixeira (2021) argue that union contact is a watershed in domestic workers’ trajectories, breaking the intramural isolation these workers experience and providing a space for thinking and fighting for improvements in the occupation. Depending on union dynamics, it also allows them to approach their historicity as domestic workers, members of a racial/ethnic minority — i.e., their intersectional social identity — crucial for mobilizing around agendas and projects aimed at reaching or overcoming imposed inequalities.

As with any collective action, however, unionism depends on the active support and participation of the workers who make up the occupational group. As noted in the literature (Bernardino-Costa, 2015; Teixeira, 2021) and echoed by the interviewees — especially the most engaged — participation and retention of paid domestic workers in associations/unions remains a challenge. As Zaíta said: “Out of ten workers we invite to explain their rights... to discuss what they need to do to strengthen the category... only two show up.”

Drawing on this and on Dejours’ (2012) notion of collective work — where cooperation to improve working conditions or physical-psyche economy cannot be imposed, only fostered and preserved in everyday interactions and spaces of trust — we highlight factors in diaristas’ personal experience that warrant attention when seeking coexistence at work, which is essential for collective and union struggle.

Very low pay and double or triple shifts — including on nonworking days — create limits such as transportation barriers and lack of time to attend and participate in union activities. As Ana Davenga said: “I earn 100 reais, but it’s 100 reais for so many things,” and as Luamanda put it: “I couldn’t go because my daughter had broken her arm.”

Regarding women’s participation in spaces of union organization or political struggle, Hirata (2002) emphasizes that pay gaps and double or triple shifts are mechanisms that send or keep working women in the private sphere and the individual realm, thus inhibiting collective practices and claims — claims that, as Federici (2019) notes, have enormous potential, especially when they come from the Black female working class (Davis, 2016). From this perspective come the imposition of lower pay, greater capture of time, and atomization (Davis, 2016; Gonzalez, 2020c) — hallmarks of diaristas’ daily lives.

Alongside this, we noted certain misleading ideas shaping the interviewees’ views of work and the world. One is the notion of a level playing field for negotiation between diarista and employer — as if the worker could impose conditions and make demands in an equal relationship. As Cida said: “Work on your self-valuation as a professional and don’t let wealthy people take command... I’m happy when I see some who don’t allow it.”

Indeed, as Hooks (2010) stresses, affirming one’s value, tending to emotional needs, and seeing oneself as deserving of respect or of joy and pleasure are fundamental to resisting the oppressions imposed on Black women. Yet, she explains, affirmation and self-recognition go hand in hand with collective will and action to secure societal change and make full lives possible. Hooks’ idea of protagonism, affirmation, or “inner love” (2010, p. 9) stands apart from any solipsistic view that ignores power relations or the conditions needed to spark or sustain such intentions and practices.

This caveat is especially pertinent given how neoliberal-patriarchal-racist narratives strip empowerment and protagonism of their sociohistorical and collective character. As Arruzza et al. (2019) note, in such a scenario rebellious energies are often appropriated to shore up the status quo.

Another idea voiced by interviewees is that remaining informal is a matter of choice. In assessing the spread of day-rate PDW, Esmeraldina said: “These days, most diaristas don’t want a formal contract... she can pay social security on her own... the one who does that is smart, and the one who doesn’t is out of luck.” It bears noting that if their daily rates are already very low, paying their own social security is often impossible. Among the interviewees, very few contributed to social security; their families’ very low purchasing power was the main factor.

We also found many nuances in diaristas’ trajectories regarding this supposed “choice” to remain informal. Working by the day sometimes allows diaristas to fit in flexible or part-time hours so they can perform unpaid domestic labor—an aspect directly tied to their condition as working women. In other cases, there is fear of job loss if formally hired, given that some reported a common practice of signing the work card and then dismissing the worker shortly thereafter. As Maíta recounted: “She signed it and two months later fired me.”

The individualism and depoliticization surrounding negotiation, empowerment, and informality observed among diaristas are worrisome. They encourage individual blame for vulnerability — both self-directed and directed at other domestic workers. They also hinder recognition of common threats or impasses and impede active participation in collective and/or union practices, sometimes breeding animosity.

When interviewees reflect on the relevance of their work, they tend to limit it to the personal sphere: providing for the household, gaining independence from partners and relatives, and their relationships with employing families. As Salinda said: “For them to have an organized environment — because they can’t do it, they can’t keep up.”

These points form part of how the diarista's work matters to her and to others. Still, domestic labor — paid or unpaid — is essential to establishing and maintaining the modes of work and life in capitalist societies (Hirata, 2002). Broadening awareness of this work's importance — in terms of social reproduction — has particular potential for mobilization (Davis, 2016; Hirata, 2002). The delegation of domestic labor — here, through day jobs — enables employers from various strata of the working class to pursue formal qualifications, remote work, corporate events, political spaces, cultural practices, and more.

Living-together through work also occurs outside formal spaces of collective or union struggle and can yield many lessons and pathways toward formal political organization. The diaristas also reported collegiality and solidarity among themselves stemming from proximity in neighborhoods or shared commutes. They help one another find work, provide emotional support in difficult times, and create moments of relaxation and recognition. As Ana Davenga said: "I told a diarista friend... she said: you have to hang on... if I find another day job, I'll pass it on to you." Such small-group experiences — shaped by territorial proximity or shared public transport — are factors to consider.

Final Considerations

Women who work as diaristas live their daily labor under worries, tasks, pacing, and threats/risks embedded in social markers, relationships, and material conditions. This situation stems from an interlocking matrix of gender, race, and class oppression, as well as from individual and collective movements that inscribe resistance and reframe this reality.

The imprint of marginalization — forged by hierarchies and inequalities — leaves a common trace across their varied operational modes: carefulness aimed at avoiding suspicion. This, in turn, becomes part of diaristas' working activity and the embarrassments it entails. Shame, exhaustion, and loss of employment are among the psycho-affective and material consequences these workers face when their integrity is continually put on trial at work.

Work overload and the frenetic pace of diaristas' labor open a necessary debate about what properly falls within their remit — what is humanly appropriate, safe, and fair to accomplish in a single day. This long-desired discussion also requires confronting the racist and sexist rationality that shapes how paid domestic workers are seen and treated, a logic reflected even in national documents that classify and describe paid domestic work.

Under-eating and musculoskeletal problems, which feature in diaristas' work lives, must be considered in this debate as reflections of — or aggravating factors for — the health effects arising from this form of PDW, especially given the workers' age range.

Sexual harassment at work emerged as a lived reality and a persistent concern among participants. Faced with an inadmissible problem that causes profound harm to physical, psychological, and sexual integrity, it is especially troubling to see how diaristas' responses tend to be individual, reductionist, and palliative. This tendency must be problematized in light of the narrow room for maneuver these women have, given the labor and social precarity imposed by the intersections of gender, race, and class. We also underscore the weight of introjecting and reproducing these differentiations and hierarchies in shaping workers' perspectives and actions when confronted with harassment and other day-to-day situations.

We further highlight the interviewees' contact with collective struggle and union activity, both as evidence of their potential for action and as a material and intersubjective resource for strengthening them. We believe such contact can also yield practical lessons in political action for diaristas, who currently make up a significant share of paid domestic workers. Drawing on participants' experiences, we reflect critically and identify difficulties and challenges that hinder closer ties between diaristas and union movements.

In addition, we emphasize the bonds of companionship and solidarity identified among diaristas outside union spaces, which may offer pathways toward organized political action.

We hope the analyses and concerns presented here also serve diaristas by fostering critical reflection on their condition as working women. This study recognizes the potential of the research process — and of the dialogic space it creates — to facilitate adjustments, reconceptions, and elaborations about work and about participants' relationship to it. Beyond this, the study becomes a record/document that can support building an agenda of their own — shared and collective. Scientific discourse has particular power to inscribe and legitimize demands and movements in the social sphere.

We also issue a call to academia to devise and operationalize responses and interventions to the issues, problems, and needs reported or identified in diaristas' work trajectories. In particular, we stress how sex, gender, race, and class traverse workers' processes of subjectivation.

As for this study's limitations, our analyses are bounded by a local reality and a small number of diaristas. We also note that it was not possible to conduct this investigation through a diarista collective.

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