

**“Home is a site where the body is border,  
where one nationality polices another in  
overlapping home/workspace”**

*(Alison Mountz and Jennifer Hyndman, 2006)*

**‘Maid in the USA’:  
Immigrant Women,  
Domestic Labor and  
Double Alienation**

Is the emancipation of women guaranteed in out-of-home paid labor? Are women alienated from reproductive labors? What if the reproductive work is paid? Are all women equally occupied in the waged domestic labor? Why are the domestic workers paid less? Can the domestic workers expect upward mobility in the work? What is it like to be a waged domestic laborer?

## What's domestic work?

*Domestic* is literally defined in relation to *home, family, and country* (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Domestic work is a set of reproductive activities done within the space of home. Indeed, three features of *home, privacy and nation* are interwoven in the nature and notion of domestic work, which make it different from other types of work.

## Domestic work vs. Domestic Labor

*Work and labor* are often used interchangeably. However, economists define these terms differently. Simply, *work* is any action that results in any sort of production, either monetarily valued or only with use value. Whereas, according to Karl Marx (Untermann, et. al., 1906:46) in capitalism, it is through the commodification that work gains value; the socially necessitated labor is the productive work commodified and thus (re)possessed monetarily. Therefore, domestic labor is paid while domestic work is unpaid.

In the past three decades, as the economy of the industrialized countries has moved towards the growing Tech industry, middle-class women have found more opportunities to fill in white-collared job positions (McDowell, 2009). The increase in the rate of women's participation in the labor market has made them less willing to do (or capable of doing) the housework and child/elderly care – the tasks which are historically stereotyped as feminine (ibid). Therefore, a considerably growing trend in paid domestic labor is being introduced to formerly blue-collared and dominantly immigrant women (England, P.: 2005). The tasks which are regarded as “labor of love” and home as defined the place of “affection” are now commodified (McDowell, 2009; England, K.: 2010). The transformation of unpaid reproductive labor to paid reproductive labor as well as the transformation of home as a place of no-work to the place of production of surplus value, not only affect women economically and socially, but also intervenes in their identity formation.

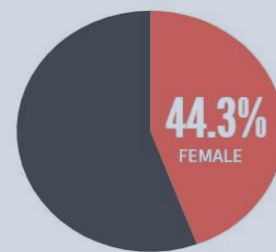
This project takes a quick look at the situation immigrant women domestic workers experience, and how their embodiment of labor is affected through the transformation of unpaid reproductive work in their own home to the waged out-of-home reproductive labor. This study applies the lenses of feminist studies, sociology, geography and economics in the intersection of gender, race, and nationality to argue that to immigrant domestic working women such an economically transformative process generates *double alienation* due to the stereotypically genderized notion of the reproductive labor, as well as the racial/ethnic/transnational cultural conflicts.

## Who does the domestic labor?

Domestic labor is a highly gendered and typically feminized labor, as the domestic work has historically been. Once done by enslaved Black women (Graff, 2005), today domestic labor is dominantly undertaken by immigrant women from Latin America, Africa, South East Asia, and the Middle East. According to the report published in 2015 by International Labor Organization, there are about 67.1 million domestic workers globally. These statistics are, however, roughly estimations as domestic laborers are the invisible work forces (Strauss & Xu, 2018). ILO estimates that the total number of domestic laborers might exceed 100 million. The report also states that “83% of domestic workers are women and many are migrant workers”.

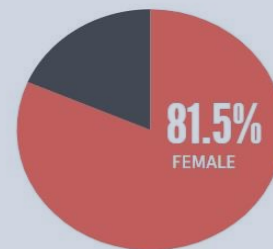


Migrant workers



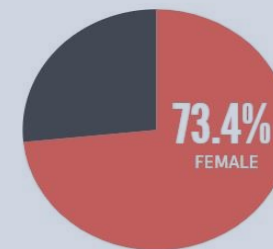
Female (44.30%) Male (55.70%)

Domestic workers

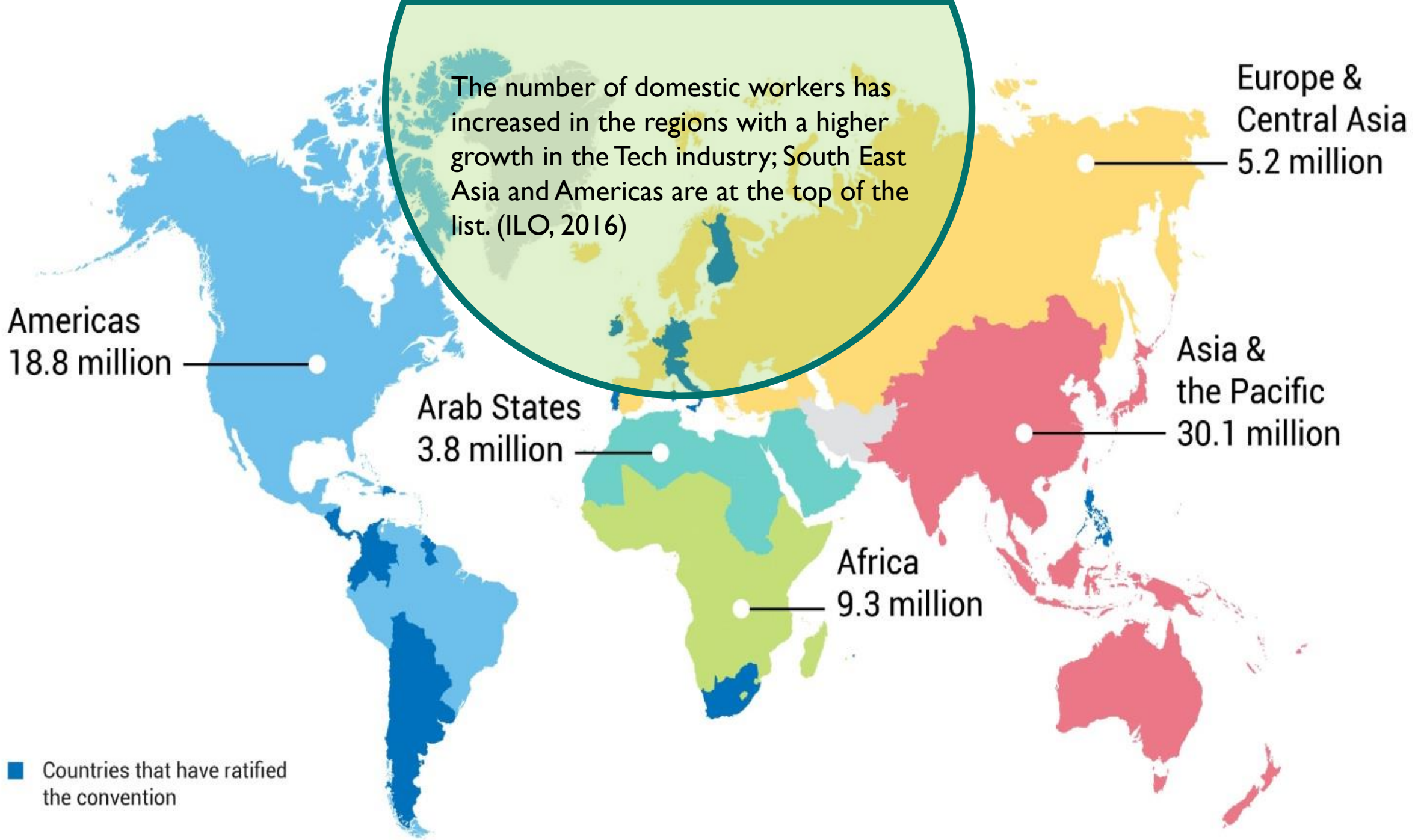


Female (81.50%) Male (18.50%)

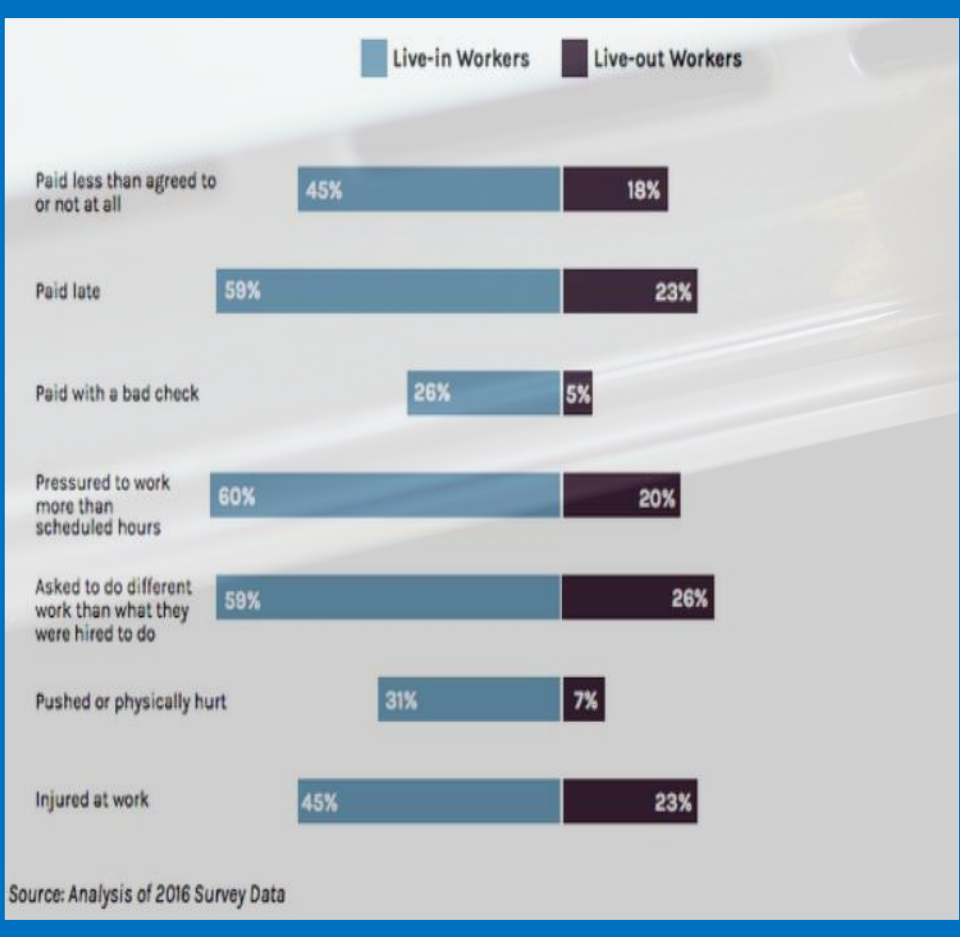
Migrant domestic workers



Female (73.40%) Male (26.60%)



THIS IS  
WHAT  
REPRODUCTIVE  
LABOR  
LOOKS LIKE



“A new report based on interviews with 516 housecleaners, nannies, and care workers on the border, reveals high incidences of wage theft, abuse, and exploitation among these already vulnerable laborers. Their stories were collected in 2016 by volunteers from three community-based organizations—Adult and Youth United Development Association Inc (AYUDA) in San Elizario; Fuerza del Valle Workers’ Center in Alamo; and Comité de Justicia Laboral in El Paso—many of whom are former or current domestic workers themselves” (Holder, 2018).

Reproductive labor is devalued;  
either waged or unwaged

Domestic labor as a reproductive labor is devalued. The place of *home* where the production of domestic labor occurs characterizes it as “labor of love” (England, 2010: 133). It is due to the stereotypical characterization of home as a “non-work” space and the naturalization of the work done in this space to be feminine-thus-devalued that domestic labor, whether paid or unpaid is devalued (ibid). As Linda McDowell (2009: 6) describes, the domestic work which has been traditionally embodied by women, when unpaid, is regarded as work “for love” which takes place “in private”; however, as it is “commodified” by being waged and taken place in a home (private place) of someone else’s, i.e. public place to the worker, its value is not increased. It remains devalued, whether it is waged or unwaged.



Mop the wage floor,  
Don't touch the Glass Ceiling

US policies classify the non-White working-class migrant women as the best workforce for these “feminized” labors (England & Lawson, 2007:79). The already genderized, naturalized, feminized and devalued assumption of the space (home) and the work within this space (domestic work) remain determining factors to making domestic laborers who are most likely immigrant women low-paid (ibid). According to the report published by Human Rights Watch in 2012, domestic laborers often work “14 to 18 hours a day, seven days a week, for wages far below the minimum wage, locked within their workplace and subject to physical and sexual violence” (Castro-Mendivil, 2012). The unregulated workplace and the nature of the work make upward mobility undefinable for domestic workers.




Maids are always in skirt

The growth in the domestic labor market has encouraged new corporations to appropriate this means of the production of surplus value, and as a result regulate it to fit more gender-neutral policies. While some scholars, such as Maria Bartolomei (2010) argue that domestic labor is moving towards “remasculatation”, to bring more men into this market, women still occupy an enormously large section in this market. The reasons may vary, from the need for cheap labor of women to US immigration policies that encourage unauthorized women immigrants to work in less public spaces. However, the feminization of domestic work is deeply rooted in the historically patriarchal societies, from where the women come to where they work as domestic laborers. Huma Ahmad-Ghosh (2015) studying Afghan immigrant women asserts that their class, ethnicity and their patriarchal culture that feminizes domestic work play as determinants in perpetuating the already naturalized and feminized domestic work in America.



Domestic work is so feminized that International Domestic Workers Federation’s logo is simply an image of a woman (see the pictures).



A wooden American flag is shown on a white surface. The flag is made of light-colored wood strips, with a dark wood canton containing small white stars. The stripes are made of alternating light and dark wood strips.

My home,  
*'their'* home;  
my nation  
serves *'their'*  
nation

Anzaldúa (1987) defines border as an edge where something ends and something else begins. To immigrants in service sectors, most of whom are from the countries with a history of coercion, American invasion, coups, colonialism and/or slave-trade, this dualism is not limited to resistance against the new “oppressive site”, as Anzaldúa expects for the migrants in general, but a synthesis of the dichotomous values, the birth of a new identity which is both embodied and alienating. The immigrant women’s home is a place of values which define her body, her bodily actions, work, duty and identity in the process of transnational coercion and national resistance (Kofman, 2012: 144). Their presence in an American home as a laborer is an act of surrendering their nation, serving the *other*. The workplace becomes the place of value invasion, not only due to the process of alienation of their labor by which their womanhood has always been identified, but also as it provides the values her nation is resisting. When her body is in performance of the domestic labor and care giving which identify her naturalized *being*, if it is done in the space of an *other’s* possession, (an American’s home), her body (so her being) is regarded as a betrayal to her nation and/or race.

# Domestic labor for immigrants and 'double alienation'

## Domestic Work, 1937

All week she's cleaned  
someone else's house,  
stared down her own face  
in the shine of copper-  
bottomed pots, polished  
wood, toilets she'd pull  
the lid to--that look saying

Let's make a change, girl.

But Sunday mornings are hers--  
church clothes starched  
and hanging, a record spinning  
on the console, the whole house  
dancing. She raises the shades,  
washes the rooms in light,  
buckets of water, Octagon soap.

Cleanliness is next to godliness ...

Windows and doors flung wide,  
curtains two-stepping  
forward and back, neck bones  
bumping in the pot, a choir  
of clothes clapping on the line.

Nearer my God to Thee ...

She beats time on the rugs,  
blows dust from the broom  
like dandelion spores, each one  
a wish for something better.  
—Natasha Trethewey

Alienation, according to Karl Marx (1844) is generated through the process in which a worker's labor is embedded in a product and then is commodified in the possession of others. Through such a process the worker's body, self, and identity becomes external, alien to the producer.

What Marxists did not take into account is that the alienation does not only happen during the process of production but also in the process of embodiment. That is why commodified reproductive labor, although not valued based on productive accumulation, generates double alienation: alienation from the laborer's produced service which is devalued, and alienation from the possession of their racial/ethnic body-thus-identity which is in a dialectical coercion with the space and the possessor of the surplus value, i.e. the American home and the American client.

Immigrant women as domestic workers experience 'double alienation'. Once they are alienated from their commodified feminized work of love which defines their identity, the cultural values that consider their body as a shared property of the nation alienate them from their identity. In other words, they are 'double alienated'.





Some feminists, such as Leacock (1986), argue that “women marginalized within a family unit were not productive of value, but rather served as the perfect ‘reserve army’ of labor, effective in depressing working-class wages and also in mystifying—for both sexes—the structure of capitalist Exploitation” (Mitchell & Katz, 2003)

We shall investigate “the relation between women’s domestic labor and the production of surplus value and the corollary relation between patriarchal family structure and the capitalist system” (ibid).

As Mitchell and Katz (2003) assert, we need to “reconceptualize the Marxian understanding of value by locating it as something created through the work needed to produce and reproduce labor-power, not simply through the production of commodities” (ibid).

However, reproductive labor is not only oppressive when it is unpaid, and the domestic workers do not only serve capitalism as servers to other work forces. In fact, when paid, reproductive labor does not become any less alienating or more emancipatory.

The process of alienation is not mechanical and does not only happen in productive labor. Domestic laborers, these invisible commodified bodies, experience it everyday, in every way.

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- The American poet, Natasha Trethewey, in this poem portrays the hardship of being a house maid. I used it as a literal sample for body mapping of domestic laborers.
- ❖ The pictures that are not cited are from [Google Images](https://www.google.com/search?q=Google+Images).