

A Maid by Any Other Name:
The Transformation of "Dirty Work" by
Central American Immigrants

Leslie Salzinger

I am teaching an English class at Choices, a cooperative of immigrant Latina domestic workers.¹ We are practicing tenses of the verb "to be." "In El Salvador I was a teacher, here I am a housekeeper." "In Nicaragua I was a businesswoman, here I am a housekeeper." Embarrassed laughter ripples through the group at the end of each sentence. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," I say, reflecting the discomfort in the room. Another co-op member comes in and a woman in the class explains what's going on, quoting my comments in summary. But then she turns back to the group. "It makes us embarrassed, but it shouldn't. We're trained, we do good work, and they pay us well. We haven't fallen." Everyone nods in agreement.

A few weeks later I am teaching a similar class at Amigos, another local domestic worker cooperative. As we go around the room the sentences falter and trail off into uncertainty. "In El Salvador I was a cashier, here I am. . . ." "In Guatemala I was a laundress, here I am. . . ." I suggest "domestic worker." They agree matter-of-factly, but there is no conviction to their responses. Whether positive or negative, they have not claimed this identity as their own.

I spent the fall of 1988 observing and sometimes participating in the meetings, gossip, English classes, and job-reception work of two immigrant Latina domestic worker cooperatives in the Bay Area. As the months passed, a few questions began to surface with increasing frequency. Many of these women had been in the United States for close to a decade. Why were they doing domestic work after so many years here? Domestic work is a paradigmatic case of immigrant "dirty" work—of work that is irredeemably demeaning.² Why did some of these women speak with such pride of their work? And even more

puzzling, what accounted for the dramatically different attitudes members of the two groups held toward their work? As my attention was drawn to these anomalies, I realized that many of the explanations were to be found not within the cooperatives that had generated them, but in the market for domestic work. In this chapter I look at the occupational strategies of these women and locate them in the structural context within which they were formed. I argue that the human capital resources they brought—or failed to bring—with them account for little of their work experience in this country. Rather, it is within the context of the constraints and opportunities they encountered here that we can understand their occupational decisions, their attitudes toward their work, and ultimately their divergent abilities to transform the work itself.

WHY DOMESTIC WORK?

Although many immigration theorists emphasize the role of culture or human capital in explaining occupation,³ such arguments provide us with little help in accounting for the occupational strategies of many of the women in *Choices and Amigos*. Teachers, cashiers, peasants, laundresses, housewives, recent immigrants, longtime residents, persecuted organizers, jobless mothers, documented recipients of political asylum, undocumented refugees, Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, Colombians, Salvadorans, single women, wives, widows, mothers . . . the most striking thing about the women I encountered was their diversity. No group seemed to lack its representatives. There are some whom we might expect to find: those who did domestic work in their countries of origin, or who come from rural areas, or who never obtained legal documents. However, we find others whose presence is harder to account for: urban, previously professional women who have been here long enough to obtain work permits. Why are they doing domestic work after so many years in this country?

The work of Saskia Sassen-Koob⁴ moves away from the characteristics of individual women, or even of individual ethnic groups, to focus directly on the structural context entered by contemporary immigrants to American cities. During the last twenty years, immigrants have entered the United States' "declining" cities in ever-increasing numbers, and contrary to all predictions they continue to find enough work to encourage others to follow them. Sassen-Koob asks how these immigrants can be absorbed by an economy that is rapidly losing its industrial base. Her explanation for this apparent anomaly is that while these cities are losing their place as manufacturing centers, they are simultaneously undergoing a rebirth as "global cities," dedicated to the co-

ordination of scattered factories and to the production of "producer services" such as banking and insurance for an international corporate market. Retaining her focus on the niche filled by immigrant workers in contemporary cities, she emphasizes the direct support services and one-of-a-kind luxury goods financed by this new, export-directed service economy. Thus her analysis points not only to the financial analysts but to the clerical workers who punch in their data, not only to the advertising executives but to the workers who stuff their futons and sew their quilts, not only to the commodity brokers but to the workers who clean their offices, buildings, and apartments. Like early analyses of household labor, her schema makes visible the denied: the work that enables the smooth operation of both the offices and the lives of those who run them.

Sassen-Koob's research points to the way in which a new international division of labor affects the opportunities and constraints directly facing job seekers. She distinguishes between the suburban middle class of 1950–1970, based in a manufacturing economy, and the urban middle class of the 1970s and 1980s, based in the new service economy, and she traces the impact of their divergent life-styles on the market for low-level service work. Her claim is that whereas suburbs were made possible by the construction of roads and cars and household "labor-saving" devices, new professional life-styles depend on the creation of labor itself. She identifies two historically specific systems: the manufacturing-based middle class with life-styles undergirded by a physical infrastructure constructed by past immigrants, and the service-based middle class with life-styles supported by a labor infrastructure made up of recent immigrants.

Such an analysis highlights not only the existence of low-level jobs, but the two-tiered nature of contemporary economies. The bulk of available jobs generated by the growing service sector either require formal training—generally certified by North American credentialing institutions—or presuppose and provide no training at all. Mobility, when it occurs, is achieved through off-the-job training. There is no way to "advance" from clerical worker to executive or from janitor to nurse without formal education. Unless one enters the country with transferable professional credentials, there is no way to cash in on previous status unless one has the resources, either in capital or in family support, to get formal training and credentials here.

Many of the women I met are aware that a lack of locally legitimated training is what is holding them back. An *Amigos* board member ran a trucking business in which she bought and sold goods throughout Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In Guatemala, her husband and children did almost all the housework, and she hired someone to come

in and do the extensive preparation required for festivals. However, since her arrival in this country ten years ago she has consistently done one form or another of domestic work. "I hope I don't keep doing cleaning," she says. "First of all, because I'm forty-eight years old, and I'm worked out. And to tell you the truth, I don't like cleaning. In two years my daughter will start working and then maybe she can support me and I can study something. Then I could do something else. We'll see."

It is not that the only jobs in this bottom tier are domestic work. Sassen-Koob remarks on the emergence of sweatshops to manufacture the "craft goods" so attractive to the new professional class. And in fact, among these women there are frequent references to the choice to do domestic work over low-paid factory jobs. A man who called Amigos in search of women to work full-time sewing sequins and beads found few takers. At \$5 (taxable) an hour, it would have meant a cut in pay. A woman who had worked as a seamstress in Nicaragua commented, "I worked sewing for a while when I first got here, but the boss yelled all the time. The only thing he missed was plugging us in." Another commented, "I've done everything, packing, inventory, stuffing pillows. . . . But I like this work. You don't have to punch in. You can negotiate your own terms." Domestic work, for at least some of these women, is a choice. But it is a choice made within limits.

We can better understand why such a heterogeneous group of Latina immigrants are doing domestic work when we shift our gaze from them to the society they face. The diversity of the human capital they bring to the labor market is matched—and made irrelevant—by the lack of diversity in the opportunities they find there. If we look at these women outside the context of the local economy, their occupational strategies are opaque. It is only when we pay attention to what they are choosing *between* that their strategies become comprehensible. The contours of the job market, rather than the limits of skill, vision, and ambition of those entering it, construct the boundaries of possibility.⁵

TWO DOMESTIC COOPERATIVES

Latina domestic workers in the Bay Area find jobs in a multitude of ways: through friends, churches, agencies, chance street contacts, radio and newspaper advertisements, recommendations, and job-distribution cooperatives. Cooperatives are a recent addition to the list. They have emerged in the 1980s in response to the incoming flood of undocumented Central American refugees unable to turn to the American state.⁶ Their presence is a reflection not only of the growing numbers of job seekers, but of the changing nature of domestic work. Today,

employers often hire someone to clean once a week or once a month rather than to work full-time. This means that workers need a large number of employers to support themselves. In addition, the rise in professional cleaning agencies has accustomed many employers to finding domestic workers through advertisements, rather than through personal networks. Cooperatives provide workers with an alternative to agencies; the co-ops give them access to a pool of jobs gathered through advertising without having to surrender a large percentage of their salaries to an intermediary.

Amigos was the first Bay Area Latina domestic worker cooperative. It was established in 1983 by a neighborhood social service organization to alleviate the most pressing needs of its clientele. The only requirement for admittance is being a Latin American refugee.⁷ There is a great deal of turnover in membership. Currently, the group has about sixty members who pay \$15 monthly for the right to take jobs. Twenty to thirty people show up at any given meeting. The group is roughly half Salvadoran, half other Central Americans, with a scattering of Mexicans and South Americans. Most, but not all, come from urban areas. Their class backgrounds are extremely varied, ranging from medical technician to country washerwoman. There is a wide range of ages, but the bulk of members are between twenty and forty. The overwhelming majority have been in the country for less than five years, more than half for under a year. Only about a fifth of the group have long-term work permits, although roughly the same number are involved in a drawn-out asylum process through which they are issued work permits as well. No one in the group speaks English fluently, and most speak too little to communicate at even the most basic level.

The current staff person, Margarita, originally came to the cooperative as a member and did domestic work for several years. She stopped housecleaning as soon as her husband found work, however, and she considers it work of last resort. In response to the application of an Argentine woman who has been in the United States for twenty-six years, she comments: "Look, Leslie, if I'd been here twenty-six years, I'd have learned something else by now. I wouldn't be turning up here looking for cleaning work. . . . I put her on the waiting list." This is the land of opportunity, she asserts frequently, people should not content themselves with cleaning, they should study, better themselves, do something else.

Like Margarita, the co-op's founders saw the group as a stopgap solution, designed to provide as many refugees as possible with a way to survive until they found other work. They assumed there was a trade-off between quality and quantity, and quantity was always their priority. Thus, from the outset their marketing strategy was for mem-

bers to undercut other workers by entering the market at the bottom. This framework was, and is, reflected in their advertising. Their listing in the local paper, two lines under "Domestic Jobs Wanted" rather than under "Domestic Agencies," reads simply, "HOUSECLEANING Garden. Latin American Refugees," with the phone number. The crookedly photocopied flyers they leave under doors convey the same mix of amateurism and desperation. Their ads proclaim not their expertise, but their need and their vulnerability. The subtext of such publicity is exploitability.

The emphasis on quantity over quality of jobs is also evident in the group's wage scale, which is relatively low for domestic work. Members are paid \$6 an hour plus transportation for cleaning jobs, \$4.50 an hour for child care, and \$4 an hour for child care that takes over twenty hours a week. The group charges a formal minimum of \$450 monthly for live-in work, but in fact sometimes accepts jobs that pay less. During one meeting Margarita raises the issue of pay, evidently in response to rumors that some members have been asking employers for higher wages: "You all deserve \$10 (an hour), but \$6 is the going rate. If we ask for more, we're going to lose jobs."

Pay is the only aspect of the work for which the co-op sets any standards at all. In fact, the few times an employer complained that a worker had attempted to negotiate other aspects of the relationship, Margarita and board members sided decisively with the employer. One woman who had been having problems with a live-in employer attempted to get her to sign a contract in November promising to keep her through January. When the employer called complaining that one of the board members had suggested this course of action, the office was in an uproar. Ana stoutly denied doing any such thing: "God forbid," she said. "If I don't like a job, I just leave. I don't stick around complaining and negotiating!" Incredulous irritation swirled through the office at the incident. "Imagine!" "Can you believe it?" "If she doesn't like it, she should just leave!"

Staff and board member expectations for workers are almost as low as are their expectations for employers. The group does no training of new cooperative members, and since most of the group cannot read the (English) instructions on cleaning products and machinery, there are constant mishaps. Virtually every week there is a new complaint from an employer: someone left the gas on and almost blew up the house; someone used the wrong cleaning product and destroyed an antique wooden table. According to Margarita, they used to have a cleaning workshop "to avoid problems," but it eventually took too much time, money, and energy. In any case its purpose was always to forestall disaster, never to transform members into "skilled" workers. Today

new members set off for their first jobs without even this minimal introduction, armed only with a bilingual list of common household tasks.

Weekly job-allocation meetings are simultaneously authoritarian and fractious. Board members, three previous members who volunteer their time, read job descriptions and then go down a list of names until the job is claimed. At any given meeting, about a quarter of those present receive jobs—usually for one four-hour stint every two weeks, although most weeks at least one live-in job is taken as well. Since many employers request some knowledge of English, and since board members often warn people not to assume that "just knowing how to say hello" is enough, jobs are often taken by the same women week after week. There is never any collective discussion during meetings; instead, there is the constant hum of private ("unauthorized") conversation between members who are or have become friends. Favoritism based on ethnicity and the unfairness of job allocation are constant topics of discussion among these cliques. There is a sense that members have gathered to compete with each other for a scarce resource, not that they have gathered either to create a collectivity or to support each other as workers.

Conversations at meetings not concerned with problems within the group generally revolve around survival issues: rent, documents, the scarcity of jobs. Strategies for handling bad employers or filthy houses—even complaints about these occupational problems—are conspicuously absent. It is as if the work they spend their days on is not worthy of comment, purely a means to survive and thus significant only in those terms. This attitude is best summed up by Nora, a young Guatemalan woman who has been in the country for little over a year. When I ask her if she thinks cleaning is good work, she is taken aback: "Any work's fine with me. The thing is to make money." She is not looking for a career, she is looking for a job.

Choices was set up in 1984, inspired by the success of Amigos during the preceding year. The group accepts any Latina woman who is over forty years old. Today, it has about fifty members who pay \$3 weekly to participate. Jobs are allocated during twice-weekly meetings. About twenty-five women attend each meeting. Although new members join almost every meeting, at least half of the group at any given time have been members intermittently over several years. They come from all over Latin America, and although there are still many more Central Americans than South Americans, Salvadorans constitute less than half of the group. The membership is overwhelmingly urban. More than half come from middle-class backgrounds, and several come from quite elite families. In their countries of origin, they worked as teachers, secretaries, cashiers, or housewives; some ran small businesses of their

own. Almost none were manual laborers or domestic workers before their arrival in this country. Many of the women have been in this country as long as ten years, and almost every member who did not already have a work permit has recently qualified for the federal amnesty that requires proof of continuous presence in the country since 1982.⁸ About half of the group's members speak enough English to get around, although very few speak with any fluency.

The group was set up by a feminist organization dedicated to helping older women establish meaningful and self-directed careers. Founders initially attempted to serve Latina women in the same program in which they served their other, primarily Anglo and middle-class constituencies. However, to their frustration, they found that gaps in language and formal credentialing were keeping them from placing anyone. Hearing of the relative success of the Amigos Cooperative, they turned reluctantly to domestic-work placement. Unlike the founders of Amigos, however, they framed this work in the context of a commitment to career development, not survival. Thus, within the constrained context of domestic work, they continued to focus on the development of secure, dignified, and relatively decently paid work for their members and on the right of members to determine the course of their own work lives.

When Choices was founded it charged \$5 hourly, taking its cue from its model. However, members soon began to push for higher wages. Unlike Amigos, where such a move was seen as subversive, Choices staff were supportive of the shift. In fact, the push by members for higher wages made it easier for Lisa, the group's first staff person, to come to terms with "just channeling women of all different abilities into domestic work," because it not only increased wages, but also meant that group members were beginning to take control of, and define, the work on their own. Today members charge \$10 hourly for the first cleaning and, if it is an ongoing job, \$8 hourly thereafter. They charge a minimum of \$6 hourly for child care, but they do very little, engaging mostly in cleaning work. They have no formal set of standards for live-in jobs, but the current staff person, Lilian, says that she would tell anyone considering paying under \$800 a month that she wouldn't be able to find anyone in the group willing to take the job.

The experience of raising prices and continuing to get work orders gave Choices staff a different view of the demand for domestic work than that held by staff at Amigos. Lisa comments that there are "different markets" and mentions advertising in particular newspapers as a way of targeting "better" employers. The group also runs a display ad in the *Yellow Pages* offering "Quality HOUSECLEANING at affordable

rates. [Choices] domestic referral service." At the bottom in fine print it says "A non-profit community service by [Choices' sponsor]." Their advertisements look essentially like those for profit-making cleaning agencies and contain no reference to the Latin background of workers. Leaflets do not figure in the marketing strategy at all.

When employers call in, the intake call continues in this professional tone. Lilian mentions that all the workers are Latina women, but makes it clear that anything the employer needs to communicate can be communicated through her. She also lets them know that all workers are "trained." There is a sense that employers will be taken care of. From the employer's point of view, apart from the fact that the worker is paid directly, the group could easily be any one of a number of for-profit cleaning agencies, run by Anglos, that hire Latina women to do the actual work. This sense of worker connection to a white agency is enhanced by the fact that every worker takes an envelope from the office to each new job. The envelope contains Lilian's card, a bilingual household task sheet, a list of appropriate cleaning products, and an evaluation form to be filled out by the employer and mailed to the office. These evaluations not only function to provide employers with a sense of worker accountability, but are also used by co-op members when employers request a worker with references. This process allows workers, as well as the group as a whole, to develop marketable personas.

The professional context within which the co-op sells itself has led it to develop its own standards for members. Soon after raising its prices, the group instituted a short training for members "in order to earn those two dollars," according to Lisa. The training is currently conducted by a member who is paid by the sponsoring organization. It involves going through cleaning tasks and products and discussing how one solves specific cleaning problems, particularly when the employer does not have the standard cleaning products. Trainings also discuss the use of nontoxic cleaning products, as this is one of the group's specialties. The tone of these sessions is casual and friendly, and training for new members takes place while everyone else sits around gossiping about other matters and occasionally kibitzing about the training. All members are tested on the material (orally or in writing, depending on whether they are literate) and they are retested on those questions they got wrong. The knowledge they are tested on is not extensive, but it is easy to see how not knowing some of these things could lead to disaster. What is most striking about the process are the contrasts: between the informality of the actual training sessions and the formality with which both staff and older members describe them; between the tremendous variation in what is actually involved for different people

going through the process and the absolute insistence that everyone go through it. It is not as much how it is done as that it is done at all that appears to be significant for the group.

The group has established clear standards for employers as well as workers. On the phone, Lilian asks for specific information about what the employer wants done. If she feels that the amount of work is unreasonable given the time paid for, she suggests that the worker may need more time or may need to leave some of the work undone. She makes clear that workers will not work extra time for free. She communicates this to workers as well. For instance, after listening to members complaining about unreasonably demanding jobs, she comments, "Don't do them. If you do them, they'll think it's possible for the next one who goes. Tell them it's not possible. You need to learn those phrases in English, to defend yourself. And if they insist, let them go. There are other jobs." Margarita at the Amigos cooperative would never have made such a comment. From Margarita's perspective, the most fundamental purpose of her work was to provide as many members with work as possible. To Lilian, on the other hand, this comment goes to the heart of what makes this work worthwhile—the development of dignified work for cooperative members.

Choices meetings are social and members clearly enjoy them. There are even several women who no longer need new jobs who continue to attend. Both the twice-weekly meetings are preceded by an English class, and one is preceded by the cleaning training. During meetings, members sit in a circle, and they have a time set aside for reports on their work, as well as for general "commentaries." Jobs are allocated according to an elaborate point system with which they are constantly tinkering. About a quarter of the group gets a job each week, generally for four hours every week or two. Members who speak little English are encouraged by the group to be brave and take jobs, using the bilingual task sheet to communicate. Responsibility for running the meetings is supposed to be rotated. Although this goal is never completely realized, about half of the group participates by taking or reading minutes or by recording dues payments. In introducing the co-op to new members, the group's collective self-sufficiency is always emphasized. Victoria comments, "We maintain the group ourselves—no one else, not the mayor, not anyone, us."

There are constant complaints that some women come "just to get work." This is seen as a serious accusation, despite the fact that distributing work is the organization's reason for existence. Since they charge dues for the right to take jobs, there is no mechanism through which they can exclude those who don't behave like "real" members. As

a result, there are repeated debates over what to do about this problem. One woman expressed a sort of tacit consensus when she called out during one of these discussions: "It's a community. It shouldn't be just an agency!"

In fact, the group does operate far more like an occupational community than it does like an agency. Members trade tips constantly, developing and sharing strategies to deal with dirty houses and impossible employers in the same breath. During the English classes they ask the teacher to write out specific dialogues for them to memorize: "The house is big, I need more time." "I can't give you more time." "OK, I'll clean as far as I get in the time I have." Someone comments that she got to a new house and found a filthy oven but no Ajax. What should she have done? Use baking soda, of course. She'd never heard that before. "It's amazing how you just keep on learning." "Yes, there's always more to learn." One member announces that she's giving up a job: "My boss keeps calling Lilian to complain. I told her that I do the work, not Lilian. If she has any problems she should talk to me. But she keeps calling Lilian. I'm not anyone's ward." Her decision to leave an otherwise unobjectionable job because she is being treated in a demeaning manner is supported without question by the group. Meetings serve as a context within which workers collectively set standards for themselves and for employers and in so doing redefine their work as dependent on training and deserving of respect.

This collective image of skilled work is carried onto the job and communicated to employers as part of an ongoing struggle for autonomy. A member comments: "It's good to have training. Sometimes an employer says, 'Don't do it that way, that way won't work,' and then I can say, 'Yes it will. I know because I have training.' 'Oh,' they say. . . . Once I worked for this very rich woman and I told her I had had training, and so she started asking me all these questions and I answered them all, and then she was very impressed and left me alone." Another member goes to the front of the room to tell this story:

I went to clean a house, but the lady wasn't there. And the man didn't have any of the right products. He gave me Clorox to wash the floor—*hardwood* floors. I told him I couldn't, because it would go against my responsibility and my knowledge of cleaning. ["That's good," someone else responds, "That's why we have training. If you'd done it you'd have ruined the floor and they'd have put you in jail." She nods and continues.] Maybe he didn't like the way I talked to him, because when I was leaving he said, "Next time I'll have a list for you of what you should do," and I said to him, "OK, that's good. Next time I come I'll bring a list of

the supplies I need to do the work." So he said "Oh" and then he drove me home.

Given our earlier discussion of why these women do domestic work, the stark contrast between Choices and Amigos is puzzling. After all, despite their varied life histories, women in both groups have ended up doing this work for essentially the same reason: because it is the best of a limited set of options. Moreover, the literature on immigrants' rising expectations suggests that those who have been here longer would be least satisfied with domestic work. Yet the women in Choices are far more positive about their work than are the women in Amigos. Clearly, the founders of the two groups began with somewhat divergent focuses, but these seem minor in comparison to their shared goals of creating domestic-worker cooperatives for Latina immigrants. How could initial differences in founders' emphases within an otherwise similar set of goals produce such sharp and enduring discrepancies in members' perceptions of their work? The answer lies in the structure of the labor market within which the co-ops are embedded and in the way in which the two sets of organizational priorities position their members in this structure.

A BIFURCATED MARKET

Sassen-Koob points to the contemporary emergence of a two-tiered service economy composed of professionals and those who serve them, both at work and at home. What this analysis overlooks is the two-tiered nature of the domestic services market itself. For not only is there an increasing demand for domestic services from single, elite professionals (the "yuppie" phenomenon), but there is also an increasing demand for such services from the rising number of elderly people living alone on fixed incomes, from two-earner working-class families, and from single mothers who need cheap child care in order to work at all. These groups can afford very different pay scales and thus have different requirements and standards for their employees. Together they constitute a dual labor market within the bottom tier of the larger service economy.

In the Bay Area today, Latin American domestic workers are routinely paid anywhere from \$5 to \$10 hourly. Live-in salaries range between \$300 and \$1,000 monthly. In her study of Japanese-American domestic workers, Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes similarly broad discrepancies in pay among her respondents.⁹ She attributes this to personalistic aspects of the negotiating process between domestic workers and their employers. However, such an explanation begs the question of how this tremendous range for negotiation came to exist in the first

place. The variation is made possible in part by the social isolation of the work and by the lack of organization among both workers and employers. This atomization is compounded by ineffective state regulation; domestic work was not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act until 1974, and even today it is often done under the table. However, hourly wages that vary routinely by factors of two or three must be produced as well as tolerated. What is the structure of demand for domestic work that has kept some wages so low, while allowing enterprising businesses to consistently raise the ceiling on prices at the other end of the spectrum?

Over the past thirty years, women have entered the paid labor force in ever-increasing numbers. This movement is a response both to the economic shifts mentioned by Sassen-Koob—the decline of (primarily men's) manufacturing jobs paying a "family wage" and the increasing availability of "feminized" service jobs—and to cultural shifts that have made paid work an acceptable choice for women even in the absence of financial need. This has led to the increasing commodification of what was once unpaid household labor, visible in the boom in restaurants and cleaning agencies and in the increasing demand for child care during the last two decades.

Like all large-scale shifts in a stratified society, these developments have had a differential impact on the lives and options of people located at different levels within it. Working-class and lower-middle-class women, having entered low-paid service occupations themselves, generally can afford to pay very little to replace their household labor if they are to gain anything at all from their own salaries. Professional women raising children alone often find themselves in a similar quandary. Women in such situations show up regularly at Amigos. A single mother who works part-time at the post office comes in to interview live-in help. She wants to pay only \$400 a month. "I can't afford any more," she says, looking desperate. "All I need is someone strong and trustworthy who can look after the kids while I'm gone." Elderly people living alone on fixed incomes, another growing sector of the population, also need domestic help and have little leeway in what they can pay for it. A manager for a seniors' apartment building calls. "My boss gave me your flyer," he says. "I'm always on the lookout to find cheap cleaning help for them. The most important thing is that people be honest." For these groups, the search for domestic help is less a negotiation process with a single worker than it is a desperate search for anyone willing to accept the inevitably exploitative salary they have to offer.

At the other end of this spectrum are single professionals of both genders, an increasingly significant segment of urban consumers in an era of delayed marriage and childbearing. This group faces very dif-

ferent constraints in their relationships with domestic workers. Regardless of the hourly cost, a weekly housecleaning will absorb only a minuscule portion of any middle-class budget. And even middle-class couples seeking full-time child care can afford to negotiate for particular skills and services. There is considerable plasticity in the amount these employers can pay for domestic work.

Not surprisingly, recent years have seen an explosion of entrepreneurs focused on convincing such people that there is something worth paying more for. Young white middle-class women hang advertising posters in trendy restaurants implying that they are just like employers and so can "make your home feel like a home." Professional advertisements for personalized cleaning agencies abound. "Maid-to-Order" promises an ad in the local *Yellow Pages*: "Your chores are our business. Bonded and Insured." "You've Got It Maid," asserts another: "We'll do the cleaning, run your errands, wash the laundry, drop off and pick up the dry cleaning." In a community accustomed to professionalized personal services of all sorts—therapy, home decorating, personal shoppers—this rhetoric finds fertile ground.

Beneath the seemingly random pattern of wage variations among Bay Area domestic workers there lies a dual labor market constituted by two distinct sets of potential employers: the elderly, working-class parents and single mothers with little money to spare; and professionals already accustomed to paying relatively high wages for work packaged as a personalized and professional service. What is remarkable is that the work done in these homes—vacuuming, dusting, scrubbing—remains similar. Insofar as there is any difference, it lies in the addition of child care to other duties in the *bottom* sector of the market.¹⁰ It is the nature of the employer, rather than of the work, that is most significant in determining wages.

CREATING MEANING

The founders of Choices and Amigos had different goals in creating the two cooperatives. Whereas Choices' founders focused on creating a collective context where women could support each other in the search for decent, long-term work, Amigos' founders focused on the creation of a clearinghouse where women with no other options could find enough work to survive. Thus, Choices emphasized job quality, whereas Amigos emphasized quantity. Ironically, due to the bifurcated market for domestic services, the strategies that emerged to accomplish these divergent priorities did not attract markedly different numbers of jobs, just different types of jobs. Whereas Amigos' marketing strategy ultimately located its workers in the bottom sector of the labor market,

Choices's strategy located its members in the top. Members' differing attitudes toward their work took shape in this context. Within both groups, members' attitudes are revealed as strategies to create viable work-lives within differing structures of opportunity—as struggles at the boundaries of the possible.

The competitive atmosphere and low expectations of Amigos members can best be understood as a set of individual responses to the organization's marketing strategy and workers' consequent location in the bottom tier of the domestic services market. Members have little to gain from sharing work tips in a market in which their skill makes virtually no difference in their ability to get jobs. And in an organization in which resistance to employer exploitation is regarded by leaders as undermining the interests of the collectivity, mutual support is difficult if not impossible. Co-op members' perception that only individual strategies are worth focusing on, and that they share little but need and competition with other members of the group, is an accurate one within this limited framework.

In a similar vein, Amigos members' vision of domestic work as essentially unimportant, as a means rather than as an end in itself, reflects the constraints within which they are hired. There is no reason to struggle over the social construction of work when employers couldn't pay more for it even if they agreed it was worth more. In such an environment, Ana's comment that after ten years of domestic work she is still hoping to get training for other work, rather than attempting to improve the work she is doing, makes sense. In an organization in which collective action is precluded, individualized occupational strategies remain the only option. And located among employers who define workers as cheap labor, the obvious occupational strategy is one that leads out of the occupation entirely.

Choices' market strategy, on the other hand, locates its members in the top tier of the domestic services market. Choices members have taken advantage of the opportunities implicit in this situation by working for individual mobility through upgrading the occupation as a whole. They are collectively redefining domestic work as skilled labor, and on that basis struggling for increased pay and security and for autonomy and control over their work. They are in fact engaged in what in other contexts has been called a "professionalization project."¹¹

This struggle takes place simultaneously in interactions with employers and within the group itself. Choices' advertising and intake process uses a white middle-class rhetoric that allows members to enter the top tier of the market. These first contacts introduce employers to a group of skilled workers.¹² Once on the job, workers emphasize their expertise. Comments about their training and their insistence that they be

treated as experts who know and are accountable for what they are doing emerge as part of this project. However, it is not only employers who need to be convinced that these women are skilled workers; co-op members also need to be convinced of this. Group meetings become the arena in which members construct and reinforce their professionalized identity, thus the strikingly supportive atmosphere, the constant, repetitive discussions of cleaning techniques, the emphasis on the ritual of training and testing are all revealed as elements in the creation of a collective professional identity. Even the ongoing presence of women who no longer need new jobs makes sense. Members of the group have everything to offer each other, for they affirm their tenuous, shared status as skilled workers.

Understanding Choices as a professionalization project makes problematic my earlier portrayal of skilled workers entering the top tier of a preexisting "bifurcated market," however. It pushes us to reconceptualize the relationship between supply and demand in a more dynamic framework.¹³ If the market for skilled workers already existed, a collective effort of this sort would not be necessary; workers could simply get training on an individual basis. Clearly, Choices is not creating this demand on its own. But just as clearly, the market for skilled domestic workers is not an outgrowth of unmediated demographic shifts. Rather, the co-op has joined a host of contemporary entrepreneurs already attempting to create a demand for professionalized personal services among the new middle class. Cooperative members are responding to the market and to the structure of constraints and opportunities they encounter within it; but as a collectivity, they are also part of redefining the market and thus expanding the range of possibilities they face. They are not only individuals lucky enough to have entered a context within which professionalization is possible; they are also members of a group that is part of the collective construction of that new structure of opportunity.

At bottom, the professionalization project is an emergent property of the interactive structure of the group itself—of the existence of an infrastructure that makes the development of a collective occupational strategy possible.¹⁴ This process is made somewhat easier by the life histories of the women in the group. Choices members have generally been in this country longer than their counterparts in Amigos and tend to come from somewhat more middle-class backgrounds. Since they no longer expect to leave domestic work, they have an incentive to improve it. Similarly, their time in this country has given them some security, providing them with more latitude in picking and choosing jobs and consequently encouraging the development of domestic work as a career. In addition, their more middle-class backgrounds may have made

them more likely to conceptualize their work—even work for which they initially had little respect—in professional terms. Thus, although neither class nor tenure in this country is completely correlated with membership in the two cooperatives, it is likely that the preponderance of long-term residents with middle-class backgrounds in Choices has been conducive to the development of a professionalization project. However, it is the structure of Choices that has provided a context within which these characteristics could make a difference. Amigos does not provide a space within which workers can develop a collective strategy; as a result, each worker faces the market as an individual. Since domestic work is only partially professionalized, this means that Amigos members enter the market as unskilled, immigrant labor, with all the handicaps that such a label implies. Choices members, on the other hand, participate collectively in the redefinition of this work as skilled, and so realize the potential benefits of their class background and tenure in this country within the context of a more powerful occupational identity.

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF DOMESTIC WORK

This analysis raises a final set of questions, for while it explains the differential ability of the women in these two cooperatives to professionalize their work, it does not explain why domestic workers have so rarely attempted—and even more rarely sustained—such projects in the past.¹⁵ To understand this shift, we need to look more closely at the evolving social organization of domestic work itself, at the constellation of social relations within which the work is performed.

Until recently, domestic workers in this country were seen by employers, and at times saw themselves, as bound by the web of affective and paternalistic connections that constitute relations in the family. This patriarchal relationship reflected the fact that domestic workers shared both home and workplace with their employers. Not only did the domestic worker live in her employer's home, but her workplace was generally the mistress's workplace as well. These overlapping arenas lodged the worker securely within the family, leaving little room for the development of an independent occupational identity.

The overlap between worker and employer living spaces was the first of these linkages to erode. Live-in work began to decrease in frequency during the 1920s,¹⁶ when the young white women, native and foreign-born, who had previously dominated the occupation began leaving to enter factories. They were replaced by Japanese and Mexican immigrants and by Black women migrating from the South. Unlike their white predecessors, their mobility into other jobs was barred by racism.

Many did domestic work all their lives, instead of as a prelude to other work. As a result, they were generally unwilling to sleep in their employers' homes, and the occupation began to reshape itself to the fact that domestic workers had their own families. This shift to "day-work" was the first significant break in the mistress-servant relationship.¹⁷

The overlap between worker and mistress workplaces did not begin to erode until much later. Until quite recently, most women who could afford domestic help did not work outside the home. As a result, servants joined the mistress of the house in a realm in which emotions were defined as central and contractual relationships as irrelevant.¹⁸ However, as middle-class women moved out of the home, they blurred the boundaries of this realm and changed the relationship of domestic workers to the household in the process. It is easier to construct a house as a workplace when it contains only workers (or more likely a single worker) than it is when it is shared with those for whom it is "home." Similarly, employers who do paid work are less committed to seeing housework as a "labor of love" than they were when they did it full-time themselves. Thus, the increase in the labor market participation of "mistresses" has meant that paid domestic work is increasingly done in a capitalist wage-labor context, rather than in a feudal master-servant context.

In 1974 domestic work was brought under the aegis of minimum wage laws for the first time. Although wages continued to be paid primarily under the table, many employers responded to this new expectation by paying for fewer hours of cleaning per month (frequently for the same amount of cleaning as before¹⁹). This speed-up further weakened the personal ties between worker and employer. Seeing workers' time as costly, employers who previously used domestic workers as company and confidantes²⁰ were less likely to stop their work to socialize. Like other shifts in the social organization of domestic work, the imposition of minimum wage laws made the occupation less personal and affective and more contractually defined.

In recent years, agencies have entered the field in growing numbers. They hire people and send them out to private homes in which they may never see the employer whose home they are cleaning.²¹ Although many employers continue to find workers through informal routes, this absolute separation of worker and employer spheres is important both because it is expanding so rapidly and because it embodies a transformation of domestic work from servant to wage labor.

Domestic workers' evolution from the servants of one employer to wage laborers for many has opened up new possibilities both for exploitation and for resistance. Unlike their predecessors, domestic workers today can separate their work from their relationships with partic-

ular employers; thus, they can forge a collective identity based on the work itself. And in the current capitalist context, such an ability carries new payoffs. The struggle over domestic work is no longer primarily a struggle to delineate the limits of the employer-employee relationship; instead, it is a struggle over whether the work is to be defined as skilled or unskilled labor. Within the context of a feudal relationship, the redefinition of the servant's work as skilled would not necessarily have resulted in a materially different status. Today, it can make the difference between security and insecurity. Thus, the emergence of grassroots efforts at professionalization today, rather than in earlier periods, can be understood within the context of the changing social organization of domestic work. The shift from servant to wage laborer provided both the opportunity and the incentive for this new form of struggle.

A NEW SORT OF AGENCY?

Although the social organization of domestic work has shifted over time, the migrant origins of the work force have shown remarkable stability. This should come as no surprise. In both academic and more popular contexts, there is a pervasive sense that immigrant labor is a distinct component of the labor force, filling specific low-level functions in developed capitalist economies.²² Several authors provide analyses that point at immigrants' structured inability to organize as the key both to the ongoing function of immigrant labor within capitalist economies and to the consignment of immigrants to menial, dead-end, low-paid jobs.²³ Domestic work is certainly a paradigmatic example of such a job, as well as of an occupation that has proved resistant to organizing for most of its history.

However, such analyses preclude the possibility of change because they ignore agency. Immigrants cannot organize by definition, thus there is no reason to examine the features of immigrants' daily life that foster or impede the development of collective identity and strategies. However, among human beings, nothing is precluded by definition. The existence of a group like Choices pushes us to reexamine such assumptions and to focus on changes in the social organization of the work immigrants do, as well as on specific collective projects that are initiated within this new work context.

Domestic work has evolved over the last two decades in directions that have weakened the connection between worker and employer and consequently increased the possibility of connection among workers. The creation of an organization such as Choices—one that provides an infrastructure of space, time, and predictability within which the emergence of collective identity is supported—becomes particularly impor-

tant in this context. It is important because it provides a space within which immigrant workers can begin to organize and so to resist their consignment to "dirty work" within the capitalist economy.

In any particular context, organizing can shift some constraints and not others. Thus, in today's economy, there is no way for a new group to evade the credentialing requirements struggled for by others, and as individuals Choices members still have no access to those credentials. However, they do have access to domestic work, and collectively, they are able to effect change there. Thus we do not see these women moving into more prestigious and powerful occupations. What we see instead is the beginning of a transformation of domestic work itself from unskilled to skilled, from humiliating to respectable, from minimum wage to its double, from employer-controlled to worker-controlled, from "dirty" work to "clean."

AFTERWORD: ETHNOGRAPHY FOR WHAT?

Immersed in another world, watching, analyzing, gossiping, matching hypothesis to reality—moment by moment, participant observation is deeply engaging. But the analysis is another story. In the privacy of head and home I can only sustain research as part of a larger project to understand the world in order to change it. This made choosing a site particularly unnerving. I wanted a guarantee that whatever I chose would illuminate something meaningful.

During those first hectic weeks I scoured the area looking for a site. Inspired by the political success of the Rainbow Coalition, I was eager to explore the creation of inclusive identities at the grass-roots level. To my frustration and surprise, no one in the area was organizing with this as an explicit focus. This situation in itself was food for analysis, but it certainly didn't qualify as participant observation. Eventually, I settled on two Central American domestic-worker cooperatives in the hope that a cross-national "Latino" identity would emerge in such a setting even if it was not an organizational goal.

Then followed weeks of frustration. I went to meeting after meeting. Whenever the problem was an exploitative white employer, the discussion centered around "Latinos." "At last," I thought, "now *this* is oppositional identity." But then a co-op member would complain that someone else had gotten a job unfairly, and national identities would surface once again. As I chatted with people I sometimes tried to slip my questions into conversation, "By the way, do you identify more as a 'Latino' or as a Salvadoran?" It never worked. It sounded absurd, and they looked at me with amused tolerance: "She's a nice girl, if a bit

slow." It soon became evident that their identities were—like my own multiple allegiances—flexible, dependent on context. Regardless of how important identity formation might be in the broader political context, my focus on it obscured rather than revealed the particularities of what was going on.

So I kept attending meetings, enjoying the people more and more, but increasingly unsure that anything of importance was taking place. All they talked about in Amigos was unemployment and poverty and each other, and in Choices they talked constantly about cleaning: week in and week out they discussed how to polish silver and clean windows and. . . . Some days I went stir-crazy, coming home and typing out pages and pages of field notes about individual traumas I couldn't fix and heroic feats of cleaning that seemed to celebrate exploitation. A typical excerpt from my field notes in this period reads: "There's no real 'political' work going on here—no discussion of members' social location in terms of race or gender or any power issue at all—so I'm continually thrown back on looking at the organizational dynamics. Everything seems very straightforward—'let's make money'—and I don't know how to get at how people see themselves in this process."

Then somewhere in the second month I began to worry less about where I thought their interests belonged and to listen more to what they were saying. In Amigos they were talking about precarious survival at the edges of an exploitative market, but in Choices something else was happening: they were talking about cleaning as skilled work. I brought my field notes into class, and people kept asking how the women in Choices could possibly speak positively about such dirty work. This was the same question I had struggled with, but hearing it from others it felt wrong. The constant discussions at Choices had changed my vision of housework as necessarily demeaning. I began to question my underlying assumptions about cleaning as work, and about the "legitimate" political bases of identity. Was cleaning more demeaning than plumbing? Why did I assume that identity organizing would necessarily build on race or gender? As I examined my own perspective, I began to take in their world more fully. I realized that whereas Amigos' members were not constructing a collective identity, Choices' members were. It was not the identity I had expected, but nonetheless they were forming a self-respecting vision of themselves as a collectivity, a vision based on their experience of their work.

I began the project determined that my work be useful not only to other researchers, but to activists working within a particular political framework. For a long time, I was so focused on that framework that I was capable of seeing little else. It was only once my expectations had been repeatedly frustrated that I was able to see the autonomous (and

political) identities that were actually emerging before me. However, with the analysis behind me, a new set of issues arises. Now that I have come to understand processes that do not fit neatly into a preexisting political agenda, there are no longer obvious groups or institutions who could use the information I have gathered. Thus, finding those who might want this piece of the puzzle becomes a new and ongoing task. As much as it required energy to cull these images, it will take energy to incorporate their analysis into a broader political context of knowledge and action.

“Unlikely Heroes”: The Evolution of Female Leadership in a Cambodian Ethnic Enclave

Shiori Ui

In January 1989 the community of Stockton, California, was shattered by tragedy when a gunman opened fire on the children of a predominantly Indochinese elementary school. Within minutes anguished residents from the Cambodian neighborhood surrounding the school rushed to the scene. School officials scrambled to find interpreters who could help communicate with distraught parents and family friends. In the ensuing days, after it was learned that four of the five children killed by the gunman were Cambodian, leaders from the neighborhood met with officials of the Stockton Unified School District, urging them to cancel classes for a day of mourning.¹ Commenting on the role played by local Cambodians in serving as interpreters, counselors, and community leaders during and after the crisis, the local newspaper ran an article under the headline “Unlikely Heroes Emerge from School Tragedy.”² While the story focused on the bravery of these people and their devotion to helping community members, it overlooked what was perhaps the most “unlikely” aspect of the Cambodian leaders—they were women.

“There is no woman leader here.” That is what I was told repeatedly in two large cities in the Bay Area where I initially contacted people recognized by Cambodians and Americans as “Cambodian leaders.” Again and again I received the same response: Cambodian women are not active in community affairs. Voices of Cambodian women in the United States are rarely heard, despite the fact that many are experiencing rapid changes in their lives.

Some studies imply that Indochinese refugee women face unfavorable conditions or structural constraints which preclude them from assuming leadership roles. Bach and Carroll-Seguín found that such