

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Theorizing the value of work through the eyes of Latin American domestic workers in the Netherlands

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Domestic work is a fundamental societal labour that must be done in any socio-economic system, in any country, at any time in the life cycle. However, despite its huge relevance for human flourishing, domestic work is contrastingly located “at the bottom of the value ladder” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010, p. 89). Specifically, domestic work in the Netherlands is not treated as other types of work. The regulation of domestic work consists of several exceptions to the civil and public Dutch law obligations imposed on the employers (Rijksoverheid, 2015, p. 2). Households can hire domestic workers for fewer than 4 days a week and “are exempt of paying taxes on wages and social insurance premiums” (International Labour Organization, 2021, p. 206). As a consequence, workers lack decent working conditions and have restricted public access to social protection, among other consequences.

The situation of domestic workers in the Netherlands has been studied from different perspectives using qualitative methodologies of research and focused on specific countries. Literature on migrant care workers in the Netherlands has focused on countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and other dispersed parts of the world, but little is known specifically on Latin American migrant domestic workers. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, some conceptualizations on the value of work are insufficient in explaining the importance of domestic work as well as the reasons why it is undervalued. Notions of value are concentrated in market relations for Neoclassical Economics, in wages explained by work experience, education, and information for Human Capital perspective, and in a more complete and systemic view for the Social Reproduction Theory. Nevertheless, none of them have addressed the micro level of value analysis, in other words, the subjects’ experiences around the value of domestic work.

In consequence, this research aims to explore alternative insights on the value of domestic work, considering the voices of migrant Latin American domestic workers. To do that, I situated myself in the feminist standpoint view epistemology, and with the aim of reflecting and diversifying methodologies of research in feminist economics, I conducted qualitative methodologies and used an interpretative approach to analyse the findings. There were held two exploratory Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 13 semi-structured interviews with Latin American migrant domestic workers from Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Cuba for answering the research question *What is the value of domestic work for Latin American domestic workers in the Netherlands?*

Findings revealed enriching perspectives on the value of domestic work. For Latin American migrant domestic workers, the value of their work is organized in levels and dimensions (see Figure 1). Levels refer to the value of domestic work for domestic workers, for employers, and for the society. For its part, the dimensions are specific contributions of domestic work, which consist of (i) the emotional or unmaterial labour, (ii) cleaning or material labour, (iii) environmental labour as well as the (iv) dimension *essential chain labour*.

Figure 1. Levels and dimensions of the value of domestic work



Source: own elaboration based on the FGD and interviews, 2022.

The individual value level was built from the domestic workers' expressions related to the meaning of their work for their lives. Firstly, the income that they received from their work has allowed them to increase their economic autonomy. With this money, they can afford subsistence for themselves and their families back home. However, the value for them expresses in the possibility and effectiveness of being able to negotiate better working conditions. They consider that they are the first persons that must value their own work, and they do this through the individual and collective actions taken to improve their working conditions. Nevertheless, bargaining power is not homogenous. It depends on their time working as domestic workers as well as their migratory status. Moreover, for domestic workers there is a relationship between the value of their work and the physical consequences on their bodies. Maritza asked me explicitly to include in my research that domestic work must be better valued because it is hard physical work that deteriorates their bodies. For them, documented and undocumented workers, the bodily consequences are a codification of the burden of being a domestic worker for long time periods doing displeasing activities. It is a demonstration of the undervaluation of this kind of work.

Employers value domestic work because it is a necessary job in the Netherlands and because the activities that domestic workers perform are fundamental. The type of activities reflects the dimensions to which domestic work contributes (see Figure 1). The emotional or unmaterial dimension refers to all the activities that domestic workers carry out in terms of companionship, affection, and emotional support to the members of the employers' household. According to their experiences, some domestic workers take care of children, and provide emotional support to elderly employers or clients. The second dimension refers to the fundamental activities of cleaning that all domestic workers do as part of their work. These two dimensions intersect and demonstrate that domestic work sustains the daily needs of vulnerable and interdependent beings and cannot be separated, since material labour implies an emotional dimension. This important work is not precisely highly valued. According to Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2010), the devaluation of domestic work is not only in terms of poor working conditions, but in terms of the social significance of this work. This contradiction of being a fundamental work and its devaluation is solved by the fact that are specific bodies who do this job as Lucía explains it "*The foreigner is the one who gets dirty here, the foreigner does the things they don't want to do*" (interview, 2022).

For the society, domestic work also contributes to an environmental dimension explained by all the contributions to the waste separation and recycling of trash, as well as to control of bad smells and plagues. There is also an intersection between that dimension and the environmental dimension, which connects the employer's with society's level. This suggests how domestic workers think their work transcends physical boundaries and contributes to a macro perspective of the environment. Domestic work as essential chain work has to do with its role in the functioning of the rest of the economy, regarding the material, unmaterial and environmental dimensions. The participants elucidated the indissolubility of those labour dimensions and recognized from their experiences the location of their work within the household as the basic unit in the economic system. This is demonstrated very well by

Alicia when she explains what would happen if no domestic worker went to work: *‘People who have children would not be able to go to work. That would affect them economically and socially because if teachers don't go to work, it's a mess. If doctors don't go to work, it's a mess. So, it would be a big problem (...) if someone doesn't help someone who is sick, it would be a mess. From what little I saw in my work, if it was a month or more without [domestic] workers, it would be chaos’* (interviews, 2022).

However, the participants highlighted that domestic work is invisible and this takes different forms. They feel unsupported by the government through the lack of decent working conditions; second, they mentioned how talking about undocumented workers by employers could be socially rejected, and third, they acknowledge a statistical invisibilisation in public registers. This invisibility is an example of the devaluation of domestic work, which occurs not because it is not an important job for those who provide it or those who benefit from it, but because these care activities are not a priority for society, even though they are necessary. Those activities sustain life.

In this sense, public policy interventions around domestic work should aim at the sustainability of life. The devaluation of domestic work is experienced by the people who provide this work and, therefore, interventions must be aimed at sustaining the lives of those who sustain life. To this end, the actions implemented must be multisectoral and multidimensional. Based on the findings of this paper, three policy interventions are stand out:

- **Migration policies and labour regulation:** If the purpose is the sustainability of life, beyond migration status, priority should be given to the type of work performed. In other words, migration status should be conditional on the type of work. One form of recognition is through direct migration regularisation measures that allow them to work freely, based on the fact that they are domestic workers. The main consequence is that the workers can access a regulated labour market with decent working conditions, for instance, to have clear differences in skills, kind of activities, and corresponding wages.
- **National statistical systems:** If this work is what sustains life, then there should be periodic data collection that makes visible the working conditions in which the work is provided as well as characterizes domestic workers in an intersectional way.
- **Labour regulations and health services:** Part of the manifestations of devaluation are the occupational hazards that domestic workers experience in their bodies. The specific occupational risks of domestic work should be considered as a specific contribution that employers should pay for domestic workers and that in the long run can be taken over by public funds.

To researchers:

- **Environmental dimension and domestic work:** further develop the contributions of domestic work to the environment in a Dutch context.
- **Technology use and the value of domestic work:** participants mentioned a topic that could be considered in defining the value of domestic work for future initiatives. Experiences with household appliances and technological advances prompted some of them to consider how important their work will be in the future. They asked what the value of domestic work would be if technology replaced human labour, such as ironing, vacuuming, folding laundry, recycling, and caring for people and animals.

To organisations:

- **Making the value visible:** there are multiple dimensions to the value of domestic work. Further work can be done on how to make the contributions of domestic work visible in the country.

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