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# Introduction to the Special Issue: Men in a Woman's Job, Male Domestic Workers, International Migration and the Globalization of Care

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## Abstract

Very little scholarship exists, which investigates male domestic workers. Yet they constitute a highly interesting vantage point from which to analyze the gendered and racialized division of labor as well as the social constructions of masculinity in both contemporary societies and in the past. In several countries nowadays a large number of domestic workers are migrants. By focusing on men employed as domestic workers in different societies, in both the global North and the global South (Italy, France, United Kingdom, India, Ivory Coast, and Congo), the articles presented in this special issue investigate the gendered dimensions of globalization and international migration, while avoiding the essentialist association of “gender” with “women.” They cover a wide range of disciplines (sociology, anthropology, and history) and methodologies (both qualitative and quantitative). Despite this variety of themes and approaches, all identify domestic service as a site where “hegemonic” and “subaltern” masculinities are produced and negotiated at the interplay of multiple social relations. Therefore, they contribute to filling a gap in the recent scholarship about migrant domestic and care labor. Investigating male domestic workers’ practices and the social construction

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of masculinity within domestic service from the late nineteenth century to the current day, this special issue illustrates not only geographical but also historical variations.

### **Keywords**

male domestic workers, international migration, globalization of care, masculinity, history of domestic service

### **Introduction**

Very little scholarship exists, which investigates male domestic workers. Yet they constitute a highly interesting vantage point from which to analyze the gendered and racialized division of labor as well as the social constructions of masculinity in both contemporary societies and in the past. In several countries nowadays a large number of domestic workers are migrants. By focusing on men employed as domestic workers in different societies, in both the global North and the global South (Italy, France, United Kingdom, India, Ivory Coast, and Congo), the articles presented in this special issue investigate the gendered dimensions of globalization and international migration, while avoiding the essentialist association of “gender” with “women.” Thus, they contribute to filling a gap in the recent scholarship about migrant domestic and care labor (Sarti 2005c; Scrinzi 2005; Kofman 2006; Manalansan 2006). Existing research has in fact mainly focused on the migration of female domestic workers, with a certain emphasis on transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), “global care chains” (Parreñas 2001; Hochschild 2000) and the domestic service relationships between female employers and female migrant workers. Men, however, play an active role, both as consumers and providers of domestic service, in the processes that connect international migration, the sexual division of labor, and the restructuring of welfare systems and care provision.

Existing studies have emphasized men’s limited involvement in unpaid domestic work by looking at the employers’ households in immigration countries. In this respect, they have pointed out that domestic service serves as a means of reproduction of gender at the interplay with other forms of inequality. Current arrangements of domestic service in fact discourage a greater involvement of men in unpaid care and domestic chores and prevent the renegotiation of gender relations within the family. In the employers’ families, it is usually a woman who deals with the (often female) domestic worker and supervises her work. At the same time, by hiring racialized and/or working-class women to carry out domestic chores in their families, middle-class women cope with the unequal division of domestic work and with issues of work/family balance (Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Scrinzi 2003). Thus, paid domestic work allows middle-class women to obtain greater gender equality while keeping working-class and migrant women in traditionally feminized nonstandard jobs.

Only a few studies have focused on men's strategies to eschew domestic and care responsibilities in their home countries. For example, Rachel Parreñas (2005) and Bettina Haidinger (2008) investigated the gendered redistribution of care in the home countries after the emigration of women. Their empirical studies on the Philippines and the Ukraine, respectively, have suggested that after the migration of women, care work is often taken over by other women, whether these are relatives or not, unpaid or paid carers. Furthermore, migrant domestic workers work out innovative ways to perform their "traditional" tasks as mothers in a transnational dimension. For women, migrating and working abroad as domestic workers may (paradoxically) reproduce, though in new ways, the traditional pattern of the "good mother" who sacrifices herself for the well-being of her children. Yet (and not necessarily alternatively) it may also increase their role and power within their own (distant) families. This may be particularly the case when, through their remittances, they become the main breadwinners within their families. Sending money and presents to the home country is often experienced as a way to fill a caring role in the family (Parreñas 2005). Furthermore, migrating as a domestic worker may sometimes offer women an opportunity to escape violent husbands, exploitative families, and so on (Parreñas 2001). In other words, for migrant women working abroad domestic service does not necessarily imply a reproduction of a subordinate role in their own families.

The contradictions are no less in those cases, certainly less frequent but by no means nonexistent, where the domestic worker is a man. Social scientists have devoted little attention to male domestic workers. Studies on men employed as domestic workers in contemporary societies are rare (Bartolomei 2005; Scrinzi 2005; Sarti 2009; Ambrosini and Beccalli 2009) and mainly focus on Asian and African countries (Tranberg Hansen 1989; Chin 1998; Bujra 2000; Ray 2000; Chopra 2006). Unlike social scientists, historians have devoted some attention to male domestic workers (Sarti 1997a with further references), probably because they were often numerous in the past, both in Europe (Sarti 1997a) and, as far as we know, in many other regions of the world (e.g., Banerjee 2004; Martinez and Lowrie 2009). Yet more or less everywhere, domestic service—because of a variety of factors too complex to be discussed here—underwent a process of feminization, although the timing and intensity of this process, of course, were not the same in every context (Sarti 1997b; Moya 2007). Thus, by the late nineteenth century in most European countries domestic service was an almost exclusively female job (Sarti 1997b, 2006). In many African and Asian countries, by contrast, male domestic workers were until recently, and sometimes still are, rather common (as shown by Qayum and Ray, and Bartolomei in this volume). In Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia, particularly after the Second World War, the domestic service sector experienced a dramatic decline: not only male but also female domestic workers seemed destined to disappear (Martin and Segrave 1985; Barber 1991; Simonton 1998; Higman 2002; Sarti 2006). Yet in the last few decades, these regions—as well as many others ranging from China to India, from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Malaysia to

the Gulf States (e.g., Moors 2003)—have witnessed a “revival” of paid domestic work, which relies increasingly on a migrant labor force. In several countries (Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Australia, and possibly France, Germany, and others) this has implied a certain re-masculinization of domestic workers (Higman 2002; Sarti 2006 and in this volume; Kilkey in this volume).

In this respect, Italy seems to be a particularly significant case and considerable attention is devoted to this country in this special issue (articles by Bartolomei, Näre, Sarti and Scrinzi). In fact, in Italy, in the mid-1990s a fourth or even a third of declared migrant domestic workers were male; and in 1996, the proportion of men among all declared (migrant and national) employees in the domestic and care sector reached 17 percent, fluctuating at around 10–11 percent in more recent years (Sarti in this volume). The high number of men among migrant domestic workers in this country can be associated with the nature of Italian immigration policies, the importance of the informal economy, the dramatic ageing of the population, and features of the Italian welfare system, which tends to rely heavily on women’s work within the family. Despite this slight re-masculinization of the sector, in Italy as well as in other European societies, domestic service is considered a typical example of a “woman’s job.” This gender-typing of the job is (or is becoming) dominant also in many non-European contexts (as it is shown by Qayum and Ray, and Bartolomei in this volume).

The articles in this special issue investigate male domestic workers’ practices and the social construction of masculinity within domestic service from the late nineteenth century to the current day, illustrating both historical and geographic variations. They cover a wide range of disciplines (sociology, anthropology, and history) and methodologies (both qualitative and quantitative). Despite this variety of themes and approaches, they present some continuities and commonalities.

To begin with, all identify domestic service as a site where “hegemonic” and “subaltern” masculinities (Connell 1987) are produced and negotiated at the interplay of multiple social relations (class, age, nationality, and/or the process of racialization). As far as the past is concerned, for centuries in Europe the master–servant relationship was a widespread power relationship and constituted a model for many asymmetric social relations within highly hierarchical societies (Sarti 2005a and in this volume, with further references). Nevertheless, people involved in master–servant relationships did not necessarily come from different social strata. Often servants were young individuals born into families similar to that of the master and were destined to leave both service and their subordinate position when they became adult, reaching the same position—as independent chief of a household—as their masters. During early modern times (1500–1800 ca.), masters and servants with similar social backgrounds disappeared and class became crucial to the structuring of domestic service relationships (e.g., Cooper 2005). Some scholars labeled this process as “degradation” or “proletarianization” of the servants (Ariès 1980; Sarti 2005c). The master–servant relationship remained crucial in structuring different models of masculinity (as well as of femininity). Over time,

however, class became increasingly important to the construction of opposing models of masculinities and, particularly, femininities within the domestic service relationship. Because of the feminization of the sector, domestic service came increasingly to correspond to a relationship between women: maids, who were in charge of the “dirty work,” allowed the existence of “idle” and “leisured” women, who constituted a crucial hallmark of belonging to the middle and upper classes (e.g., Davidoff 1974; Martin-Fugier 1979; Palmer 1989). In recent years, this pattern has undergone important changes. As is also shown in this special issue, because of their education and social origin, migrant domestic workers do not necessarily belong to a lower social class than their employers: sometimes it is rather the contrary. This apparent contradiction is largely due to their migrant status. Indeed, migration often implies a change of one’s social position in the country to which one emigrates when compared with that in the home country.

In the past, too, domestic workers were often migrants. In early modern Europe, many servants and maids worked in a city or village different to the one where they were born and some of them worked abroad (Sarti 2008). Although several mechanisms of inferiorization of servants did exist, the modern idea of “race” developed and became increasingly important from the eighteenth century onward (Guillaumin 1995). Those men and women who, until the nineteenth century, were brought from Africa or from the American and Asian colonies to work as servants or slaves in Europe were increasingly racialized (Peabody 1996; Steedman 2002; Sarti 2005b; Delpiano 2009). Racializing constructions were also crucial, with regard to the organization of domestic labor, in the European colonies and in the United States (e.g., Stoler 2002; Glenn 1992). Sociological perspectives on racism have suggested that, while colonialism constituted a central experience in the emergence of modern racism, consideration should be given to the use of such constructions in the internal space of the nation. In this respect, it has been suggested that racialization affected the working classes, national minorities, and migrants (Miles 1993; Guillaumin 1972). This process, whose extent is controversial, was associated with the growth, in the nineteenth century, of both internal and international population flows, which also involved domestic workers, increasingly made up of migrants from rural areas or from abroad. For instance, Irish women, who were largely employed in English houses from the 1870s and whose work was used to reproduce gendered constructions of national belonging and middle-class respectability, were racialized (Walter 2001, 2009).

Research on migrant domestic labor in contemporary societies has emphasized that racialized models of femininity are reproduced within domestic service, as female employers manage domestic workers doing the feminine “dirty work” in the domestic sphere (e.g., Anderson 2000; Andall 2000, 2003). Empirical studies have also revealed that in American and European households white middle-class men generally rely on white women acting as mediators between them and racialized and/or working-class women who carry out the “dirty work” (e.g., Glenn 1992; Mattingly 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Alemani 2004). This division

of work enables middle-class men to keep domestic work and its association with physical contact, dirt, and “unskilled” tasks at a distance.

What happens within the domestic service relationship when the employee is a man? It is interesting to investigate how male domestic workers experience working in such a feminized job, which is central to the reproduction of gender roles. As the articles in this special issue show, in such contexts, the employees often find that their sense of masculinity is challenged. Male domestic workers are in fact frequently subject to the authority of a female employer. Moreover, the fact of entering a feminized and formally nonskilled job that is closely associated with unpaid domestic work constitutes a threat to their sense of masculinity. In the experience of several men, entering a “woman’s job” such as domestic service implies, *per se*, feeling downgraded to an inferior social role. Those who experience this more dramatically are men who have rigid ideas on proper gender roles, whereas men who have more egalitarian views about men and women’s roles are not as shocked. The latter may suffer more for other reasons, such as the de-skilling associated with domestic labor as such (Sarti in this volume). For many contemporary domestic workers, both men and women, international migration does indeed imply a process of de-skilling and downward social mobility, though this may improve their social position at home (Parreñas 2001).

Moreover, because of the informal nature of recruitment in the sector, migrant men often find a job as domestic workers through their wives and female relatives who already work in the sector (Gallo 2006). Having to rely on such female networks to enter the labor market can increase their discomfort. The regulation of migration and its connections with the feminization or masculinization of domestic service is another significant issue investigated by several articles (Sarti, Scrinzi, Näre, Kilkey). Recent empirical research has emphasized that in Europe immigration policies reinforce the power of the employers of migrant domestic workers (e.g., Anderson 2000; Lutz and Schwalgin 2005; Scrinzi 2008; Sciortino 2009). Immigration policies, thus, play a significant role in establishing a gendered and racialized division of labor, as the migrants’ juridical status has a gender-specific impact on their inclusion in the labor market. By restricting migrants’ opportunities to legally enter and work in a foreign country, these policies can push them toward typically female jobs in the informal economy, of which domestic service is an example. At the same time, some policies allowing regular work permits or amnesties (partly or exclusively) to migrants employed as domestics may also push men to accept a job as a domestic (articles by Näre, Sarti and Scrinzi in this volume).

Finally, the strategies pursued by the employers to control migrant male domestic workers activate racialized constructions of gender, as the definition of hegemonic masculinities is reproduced by the “unmaning” of various racialized others (Näre and Scrinzi in this volume). In the past, too, male domestic workers were symbolically de-virilized: in a first phase they were infantilized while, from the nineteenth century onward, they came to be more strongly associated with women. Significantly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, in several European

countries, male servants were forbidden to wear beards and/or moustaches, which at that time were an important marker of masculinity in the upper and middle classes (Sarti in this volume; Crane 2000). Many of them were aware of the negative consequences of this prohibition on their masculinity: they complained that were not treated as men nor respected and at the beginning of the twentieth century protested against it (Sarti in this volume). Interestingly, similar representations can be found in some African and Asian countries where the feminization process has not been as dramatic as in Europe and in the United States, not least because the infantilization and de-virilization of male servants was common in colonial societies, where adult male domestic were known as “boys” (Ray 2000; Qayum and Ray, and Bartolomei in this issue; Lowrie 2008). Focusing on these contexts is thus highly interesting. Take for instance the case of India: in 1971, men constituted 63% of all domestic workers, and 50% in 1981 (Ray 2000, 693-94). Moreover, castes still play an important role in social life and there is a persistent “culture of servitude.” In such a context, the Indian servants studied by Qayum and Ray in this volume often see themselves as “failed patriarchs.” Conversely, in Congo—where, within domestic service, there is a clear gender distinction between masculine jobs, such as cooking, and feminine ones such as cleaning—male cooks often consider themselves lucky because they have a job which allows them to support their family (Bartolomei in this volume).

However, working abroad offers many migrant male domestic workers employed in Europe the opportunity to hide their real job, while protecting their sense of masculinity from criticism or shame, especially vis-à-vis their own families and relatives in the home countries (Sarti and Scrinzi in this volume). Male domestic workers develop diverse strategies to reaffirm their masculinity both in the workplace and in the private sphere. They elaborate an original definition of their professional identity and skills. For instance, the men interviewed by Scrinzi (in this volume) affirmed that male domestic workers can be as good as their female colleagues, while claiming at the same time that men are better than women at this job, because of some supposedly “naturally masculine” qualities, such as technical know-how and greater physical strength. These discursive strategies paradoxically end up exposing the mechanisms of the social construction of domestic service as a “naturally” feminine job and tend to question its association with femininity (Scrinzi in this volume). Another strategy of migrant male domestic workers consists in emphasizing their role as the breadwinners who support their families and give their children new opportunities: a strategy that we can also find among the migrant male domestic workers employed in Abidjan (Ivory Coast) interviewed by Bartolomei. The distance from one’s family due to migration, and the wage gap between the home country and the immigration country may make this type of strategy particularly successful. As noted by Näre in this issue, Sri Lankan domestic workers employed in Naples negotiate rather hegemonic and traditional notions of masculinity within their community and families (contrary to the stereotypes used by their Italian employers, which cast them as



effeminate men). Some articles in the special issue analyze whether men working in domestic service carry their skills into their own domestic arrangements. This seems to be rarely the case: the division of labor between them and their wives, mothers, and so on tends to remain quite traditional both in Europe and in Africa and India (Sarti, Bartolomei, in this volume).

Nevertheless, the employment of migrant men in a feminized job such as domestic service implies at least the possibility of challenging its association with female unpaid domestic work. The question is raised as to whether migrant men's involvement in domestic service can strengthen or subvert the sexual division of labor. Does the participation of migrant men in domestic service have the effect of raising the status of the job? This remains an open question. Existing studies of men in feminized jobs show that the discrimination experienced by some male workers is outweighed by the benefits which are associated with being a man, with regard to work and a wider career (Williams 1995). The articles presented here partially confirm these findings. Some of the articles published in this volume (Scrinzi, Kilkey) conclude that, while the essentialist-gendered ideology which lies at the heart of the construction of domestic service as nonskilled work can be questioned, the gender order tends to be reproduced according to such constructs as skilled/nonskilled work, technical/manual work, and management/execution (Scrinzi in this volume). For instance, some articles indicate that male domestic workers tend to carry out traditionally masculine domestic chores. As previously mentioned, Bartolomei shows that in Congo there is a clear gender distinction, within domestic service, between masculine jobs, such as cooking, and feminine ones such as cleaning, while Kilkey, in her article on Britain, focuses on such tasks as domestic maintenance and outdoor work in gardens and yards: an issue that raises the important question of how these stereotypically male areas of domestic work are embedded and reproduced in the international division of care. Other articles (Näre, Sarti) show us a different picture, with men occupied in traditionally female tasks, such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for the elderly. These findings raise a number of questions with regard to the interplay of gender, class, racism, and international migration in contemporary economies. These questions become particularly interesting in the context of the current economic crisis. In some countries, such as France, the Government has indeed identified the promotion of home-based domestic services as a significant strategy to offset the crisis and to combat unemployment (Agence nationale des services à la personne 2008) while, in Italy, the economic downturn seems to be pushing not only Italian women but also unemployed Italian men to enter paid domestic and care work (Sarti in this volume). The issue of male domestic workers and international migration, thus, offers highly interesting insights into the changing gendered and racialized divisions of labor in contemporary societies.

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