

PAINTED FACES :
Conflict and Ambiguity in Domestic Servant–Employer
Relations in La Paz, 1930–1988*

Lesley Gill

American Anthropological Association Congressional Fellow

“My face grew white on the job, and when I returned to my community, my friends asked me why I was so pale. They said that I looked made up. I had to rub dirt on my face so that I would look browner to them.”

Alicia Mamani, domestic servant,
La Paz, Bolivia

“The minute that you turn your back, [servants] use your clothes, your shoes, your make-up, everything.”

Pilar Cordoba, employer, La Paz, Bolivia

The institution of female domestic service in La Paz has been characterized by continuity as well as change, despite the profound social transformations brought about by the Bolivian National Revolution in 1952. Domestic service has historically been the most important source of employment for women in Bolivian cities and Latin American urban centers in general (Glave 1988; Arrom 1985; Kuznesof n.d.). Live-in domestic service continues to be the norm in La Paz, even though the number of live-out household workers is increasing. The dependent nature of the Bolivian economy and enduring gender biases have precluded the absorption of women into “formal sector” employment, and generally depressed wage rates do not permit most women in La Paz the luxury of being full-time mothers, wives, or daughters. As a result, salaried domestic service is not only persisting but expanding as a prolonged economic crisis forces growing numbers of female Aymara Indian

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immigrants from the countryside to seek wage employment in the homes of *criollo* women in the city.¹

This research note will analyze the relations of domination and subordination between mistresses and servants that characterize live-in domestic service in La Paz as well as the conflicts and ambiguities that shape their interactions. The approach employed is that of exploring the changing roles of employers and servants in production and social reproduction (those activities associated with child rearing and household maintenance) over a fifty-eight year period between 1930 and 1988. Several analysts have asserted that the concentration of women in domestic work, which is usually unpaid and therefore not considered to be economic activity, constrains their participation in production on an equal basis with men (Beneria 1979; Bolles 1986; Safa 1986). Yet how is this general subordination to be understood when some women hire others to carry out the domestic duties that have traditionally been assigned to women?

This question points to the necessity of examining the formation of class as a historical process influenced by beliefs about ethnicity and prevailing gender conventions. These notions condition the positions assumed in the labor force by men and women from different backgrounds and the power they command in the household. But class itself is intimately related to the elaboration of gender-based assumptions and ethnic stereotypes (see Beneria and Roldán 1987 and Acker 1988). Class formation gives rise to opposing interests and inequalities in the production process that are reinforced through the creation and manipulation of ethnic and gender distinctions by social actors.

By studying the formation of class, gender, and ethnic relations as a unified process, scholars will be able to comprehend the contradictions, ambivalences, and uncertainties that characterize the employer-servant relationship. For employers, domination of domestic servants denotes a complex mixture of emotions ranging from maternal concern to outright contempt for the culture and lifestyle of household workers. Servants, for their part, respond to this domination with a peculiar combination of intimacy, ambivalence, and resistance. These reactions form part of the creation and transformation of identities, as strangers are drawn together in the privacy of homes while simultaneously establishing social distance and "otherness."²

The analysis in this research note draws on three distinct sets of data. First, information on sixty-nine household workers was obtained from court cases between 1930 and 1948, and it forms the basis for the discussion of the mistress-servant relationship prior to the Bolivian National Revolution in 1952. Second, focused life-history interviews were conducted in 1987 and 1988 with sixty-one former and actual household workers and thirty-five employers. These interviews are used to supple-

ment this information and to examine the contemporary period. Third, my descriptions of the ongoing interactions of mistresses and servants draw on participant observation, but for ethical reasons, the houseworkers and employers selected for interviews did not come from the same households.

Domestic Service: Continuity and Change, 1930–1953

Prior to the 1952 national revolution, domestic service was a complex system that reflected the heterogeneity of La Paz society. Most household workers lived in the homes of the *criollo* upper class, whose wealth derived from large landholdings or mines and whose male members often worked in professions like law and medicine. The adult women of these households dedicated their energies to caring for family members and managing the home and servants. Indeed, the presence of servants was essential for a woman to be a “lady” in the fullest sense. These women did not engage in salaried employment outside the home if it could be avoided because such behavior was considered improper for women of their social standing.

Employment of servants was not limited to members of the upper class, however. Servants could also be found in the homes and businesses of families with considerably less social prestige and economic power, including bakers, butchers, owners of small shops, and tailors. These families often traced their origins to a dynamic urban Aymara culture. Unlike their upper-class counterparts, these female employers of servants commonly worked in small family businesses, sold goods in the markets, traveled between the city and the surrounding altiplano to buy and sell goods, and often used a servant for assistance in domestic and non-domestic tasks.

Servants came from both urban and rural backgrounds, although primarily the latter. The expansion of the haciendas during the first half of the twentieth century put pressure on the subsistence base of indigenous communities and forced women as well as men to migrate in search of work. Those incorporated into the hacienda labor force endured personal service obligations (*pongueaje*) in the homes of estate owners, and still others—the so-called *criadas*—were orphans or the children of impoverished families who grew up in the homes of employers. Employers did not always pay them a salary, especially when the individuals were *criadas* or hacienda *pongos*, but were expected to provide other material benefits such as food rations, shelter, clothing, medical treatment, and sometimes even a minimal education in exchange for the obedience, humility, and labor of their servants.

In the households of the wealthy bourgeoisie, servants, their families, and members of the employer’s extended family commonly lived

under the same roof, and a certain degree of specialization existed among workers in these settings. The *ama de llave* (housekeeper) administered large servant staffs, in which women served as cooks, childminders, doorwomen, washerwomen, clothing pressers, personal maids, and wet nurses. Men were gardeners, general handymen, and butlers. This specialization generated a labor hierarchy reflecting age and marital differences among domestic workers as well as urban or rural backgrounds.

The fifty-five women who testified in criminal cases that they worked as cooks were generally older and more likely to be married and urban-born than the general servants. Forty-two percent (twenty-three) were born in La Paz as compared with only 19 percent (fourteen) of the general servants. In addition, 91 percent (fifty) were twenty-one years of age or older, and 34 percent (nineteen) were either married or had been at one time.³ The general servants, in contrast, were overwhelmingly single (82 percent), and 45 percent (thirty-three) were under twenty-one. Not surprisingly, cooks exercised greater authority and often considered themselves more “civilized.”⁴ They also enjoyed a degree of independence unknown among other household workers because they more commonly worked on a live-out basis and thus were subjected less to employers’ demands for additional work.

A highly unequal series of obligations and duties revealed how profoundly class relations separated upper-class employers from employees. According to the dominant wisdom, ideal servants were loyal, humble women who denied their own needs and dedicated their lives to caring for others. Mistresses never expected female servants to have lives approximating their own, or in the case of *criadas*, to pursue the same development path as their children. Rather, mistresses prized the faithful servant who stayed for twenty or thirty years and gave up the opportunity to have a family and an independent life. Indeed, some servants—especially the *criadas*—remained in service for their entire lives due to the few alternatives available to women during this period.

For example, Margarita Pastor, Marcela Carvajal, and Angela Calvimontes received awards in 1949 from an organization of volunteer women called the *Cruzada de Bien Social* for seventy, fifty, and forty-five years of service respectively. This organization extolled the “faithful and long suffering labor of domestic servers who . . . consecrated their lives to the service of one family.”⁵ A seventy-eight-year-old woman who was honored in 1950 remarked, “I will continue to serve until the day of my death. I have worked since I was eight years old with no other purpose than to carry out my obligations honorably.”⁶

Labor relations were not always so cordial, however, and considerable tension often underlay the interactions of servants and those they served. Employers constantly suspected their workers of real or imagined thefts.⁷ Many women found these working conditions intolerable and quit

after just a few months, only to encounter similar troubles in a different household. Eulogia Vásquez, for example, accused her employer of slander and of not paying her wages. She had worked as a cook for five months during 1935 but was jailed after the employer denounced her for robbery. She stated in her testimony, "Because of my detention, I have lost my two-month-old son, who was buried yesterday. The señor slanders me miserably by saying that I robbed him, but he says this so that he doesn't have to pay me. He is accustomed to not paying his maids' salaries."⁸

Although class divisions and ethnic differences divided mistresses and servants, prevailing gender conventions weighed heavily on both groups of women, albeit in different ways. Most women answered ultimately to a male household head, who had the power to intervene in domestic affairs and contradict the orders of the mistress. He also had final authority over servants. This fact was recognized by the legal system in Article 1182 of the civil code (established in 1829), which stated: "The señor is taken at his word with respect to the amount and payment of salaries . . . and honest accounting."

Male involvement in domestic affairs became most problematic for household workers when the husbands and sons of the mistress sexually harassed and abused them, behavior that was very common. Although rape cases rarely reached the courts, several women interviewed stated that sexual abuse of servants was common practice. Such treatment of servants violated the rules of appropriate behavior that men upheld toward women of their own class. The rape of a wife, sister, or mother would have offended these men's honor and elicited a swift and violent response, a distinction that constantly reminded household workers that they did not enjoy the same "protection" (albeit hypocritical and confining) as their mistresses.

Although female employers disapproved of the sexual transgressions of men, they had little recourse because of their own subordination and a legal system that defined them as minors. For example, in 1933 Cristina López tried to bring suit against a hotel employee who had raped her servant. The case was never resolved, however, because López lacked the needed authorization of her husband to engage in a civil suit. In addition, the law required that the servant who was raped, not the employer, initiate criminal proceedings, but only after proving that she was an "honest woman."⁹

The transformations that reshaped Bolivian society following the 1952 national revolution and the subsequent agrarian reform did not directly touch the nature of female domestic service in La Paz. The city contained a population of almost two hundred thousand persons fifteen years of age or older, and 76 percent of the economically active, female indigenous population was concentrated in domestic service and small-scale commerce. Women accounted for 73 percent of the fifty-five hundred

persons employed in domestic and personal services and represented fully half of the economically active indigenous women in the city (Dirección General de Estadísticas 1950). Working conditions for these women remained much the same: the eight-hour workday, which was a right for workers in other sectors, continued to be an elusive goal for household workers; the state-operated social security system refused to include them; and unionization and a minimum wage did not exist in practice, although employers were now forced to pay their servants a salary. Nevertheless, important changes in the larger Bolivian society gradually affected the nature of domestic work and impinged on the interactions of mistresses and servants.

The Bolivian National Revolution and Its Aftermath

Following the revolution and the 1953 agrarian reform, the urban oligarchy lost many of its former privileges as a result of the destruction of the hacienda system and the abolition of pongueaje. This outcome led in turn to a decline in the number of multiple-servant households and to the disappearance of specialization among household workers. Amas de llave and wet nurses virtually ceased to exist. Families could no longer count on the free labor of hacienda peons in their homes nor on the availability of food staples from rural properties. At the same time, urban food prices rose precipitously, and the cost of living increased (Wilkie 1987). In many cases, formerly wealthy families were obliged to sell or rent their spacious dwellings and move into smaller quarters. In these circumstances, large household staffs became unrealistic, especially when household workers were accompanied by family members, favoring the employment of single servants who could perform a variety of chores.

Female members of the deposed oligarchy not only had fewer servants to manage but also were increasingly obliged to seek work outside the home to support themselves and their families. This development came as a great shock to many women, who saw their position as distinguished ladies of leisure threatened by the upheavals of 1952. Several of those interviewed for this study remember that period as a time of great insecurity and apprehension. Although many found jobs in new white-collar occupations like tourism and secretarial work, most eventually withdrew from the labor force when their families' economic prospects stabilized in the 1960s and early 1970s. These women once again dedicated themselves to caring for their homes, husbands, and children, even though they had to make do with fewer servants.

The revolution generated few opportunities in the urban labor market for low-income females, despite the expansion of the educational system and the establishment of universal suffrage for women and Indians. Limited growth in urban industrial occupations tended to favor men

(see Albo et al. 1982), and some manual occupations previously filled by women, such as seamstress and cigarette maker, gradually disappeared (compare Scott 1984). Rural immigrants and low-income urban women faced the same narrow range of jobs that offered little chance for greater economic mobility, and as a consequence, domestic service, followed by small-scale commerce, continued to employ most women who worked outside the home.¹⁰

An increasing flow of female immigrants to the city sought work as domestic servants because the growth of minifundia in the countryside and the lack of government support for small-scale agriculture were aggravating rural poverty. An average of ten thousand men and women migrated to La Paz every year between 1965 and 1975 (Aranibar et al. 1984). Women migrated to the city in greater numbers and at a younger age, however, because the marginalization of peasant agriculture and the unequal gender division of labor left them increasingly precarious productive roles and fewer opportunities for wage employment in the countryside than men.¹¹ In the city, women could capture a wage at a younger age than a man by working as a live-in domestic servant. They also received room and board as part of the work arrangement and thus freed their families from having to support them in rural areas.

At the same time, limited urban economic growth and expansion in public-sector employment during the 1960s and early 1970s produced new groups of middle- and upper-income professionals, state bureaucrats, military officers, and merchants who demanded domestic services. They established neighborhoods in the lower altitudes of La Paz and moved into the high-rise apartment buildings that began to appear during the 1970s. In addition, a group of merchants and entrepreneurs around the Avenida Buenos Aires, who represented an increasingly self-conscious urban Aymara community, were also employing household workers.¹²

Live-in household laborers began to perceive their work differently than before, and domestic service ceased to represent the long-term occupation that it had been for many women. The post-1952 generation began to enjoy greater independence than earlier household workers, and few of these women envisioned their future as domestic servants. They hoped to further their education, enter small-scale commerce, or marry a man who could support them and their children. Many never realized these ambitions, of course, and were forced to leave their households because employers no longer wanted them on a live-in basis after they had children. At the same time, the practice of employers raising children as servants in their homes was declining among the dominant group of criollo employers, although it continued among poorer families with ties to the countryside.

This trend was accelerated by the economic crisis that engulfed Bolivia in the late-1970s and continued into the 1980s. Middle-income

homes, which had previously absorbed most household workers, saw their earnings drastically reduced by the rampant inflation of the early and mid-1980s, and many families sought new ways to restructure domestic tasks by hiring household workers on a part-time, live-out basis or by forsaking the assistance of servants completely. These employers were unwilling and often unable to increase servants' wages, and many female immigrants and household workers turned to street-vending as an alternative source of income. The number of itinerant vendors in La Paz burgeoned during the early 1980s, and employers who recalled this period emphasized their difficulties in retaining household workers.

The crisis confirmed an already well-established belief among members of the criollo middle and upper class that female children should receive the necessary skills and education to support themselves economically, if necessary. Parents could no longer reasonably assume that their daughters would be cared for and protected by husbands for their entire adult lives. Declining living standards brought on by a grinding foreign debt combined with rising divorce rates to push more and more of these women into the labor force. The twenty-one female employers interviewed who were under forty-five had enjoyed greater access to higher education and were more likely to have full-time professional careers outside the home than were older women. They were also more likely to be heads of single-parent families who spent a considerable portion of the day working away from home. Consequently, they tended to be more dependent on servants and generally made a greater effort to accommodate the needs of household workers.

As a result of the crisis, live-out domestic employment also became increasingly important for many immigrant and lower-class women, especially single mothers, widows, and those with no other means of assisting their families. Because of employer resistance and their own domestic responsibilities, they could not work on a live-in basis and therefore sought more flexible jobs as washerwomen, part-time cooks, and similar occupations. Younger women without children who were entering the labor market for the first time often wanted the same kinds of work, which aggravated competition between the two groups.

The change in domestic service from a long-term occupation to a sporadically pursued job was clearly visible by the late 1980s. Some fifteen thousand women were working as domestic servants (Ministerio de Planeamiento 1986), and most of them were rural immigrants. The sixty-one women I interviewed had stayed an average of only 1.9 years in any single job. They had begun working at an average age of thirteen but rarely continued to work on a live-in basis after twenty-five. Few had experienced any economic mobility or educational advancement: 60 percent (thirty-six) had not completed more than three years of school, and 23

percent (fourteen) reported that their mothers had also been household workers (compare Smith 1973).

While these women were enjoying greater independence than earlier generations of household workers, they had lost many of the material benefits of paternalism from bourgeois employers without receiving greater protection and job security from the state. Employers no longer invested their time, resources, and energy into the welfare and training of houseworkers because they feared that these women would leave as soon as they could command a higher salary elsewhere. Yet employers continued to expect loyalty and high moral standards from their workers, and those who had had servants in their families for generations constantly complained that they were no longer as faithful as in the past. These grievances reflected a different reality and also expressed the frustration experienced by women who had lost control over the lives of servants.

Individual workers often experienced a range of employers from different social and economic backgrounds over the course of their careers as domestic servants. Where they worked and the conditions they encountered were largely determined by personal contacts in the urban milieu. Most acquired their first jobs through a friend or a relative already established in the city, but others lined up in front of the centrally located Camacho market and negotiated working arrangements with prospective employers who approached them. A few sought employment through agencies that match workers with a variety of jobs.

When they began to work, live-in workers, particularly recent immigrants, found themselves in an unfamiliar environment and often felt frightened and insecure. The city disoriented them, the food often seemed strange, and citydwellers intimidated them. They were confronted with concepts of appropriate behavior in middle- and upper-income criollo households that were completely foreign to them, and their long braids and many-layered skirts (*polleras*) set them apart from the latest European and North American haircuts and clothing fashions adopted by the women of these neighborhoods. To understand the experiences of houseworkers, their interactions with employers must be analyzed.

The Mistress-Servant Relationship: Intimacy and "Otherness"

The personal nature of the mistress-servant relationship gives domestic service its special character (see Katzman 1981; and Rollins 1985), and it generates a host of contradictions and ambiguities that are intimately related to the class and ethnic backgrounds of specific social actors. For example, during the course of a working day, servants come into close contact with the private aspects of their employers' lives with-

out participating directly in them. Servants are neither part of the family nor complete outsiders (see Young 1987). They must be attentive to the constantly changing moods and interpersonal alliances of employer families, yet servants' presence sometimes passes unnoticed by the others. A servant must attend to her employer's smallest request, but her own needs and feelings are frequently denied. Finally, the houseworker is neither a laborer in the traditional sense nor one who carries out the unpaid domestic tasks of a wife or mother.

The tensions arising from these ambiguities are played out and recreated through a complex process of conflict and accommodation that characterizes the mistress-servant relationship. A servant's incorporation into the employer family varies according to the class and ethnic backgrounds of these families as well as personality differences, the structure of particular households, and their internal hierarchies. A young servant, however, is almost forced to establish a personal relationship with the mistress because of her own feelings of isolation. She cannot easily communicate with friends and relatives left behind in the countryside or with distant urban neighborhoods. In addition, many young women have never lived away from their families, and at least a third of the women interviewed lack one or both parents. Because of their age and insecure position, servants are also particularly vulnerable to the images and attitudes encountered in their employers' homes and are susceptible to the maternalistic pretensions of their mistresses.

Employers integrate servants into their homes by adopting a maternalistic attitude toward household workers and treating them almost as adopted children. For example, mistresses may promise the worried relatives of young servants that they will protect and guide the women so that no harm befalls them in the unfamiliar urban environment. Where real and fictive kinship ties exist, particularly with urban Aymara mistresses, employers may also offer to educate and clothe servants who are their relatives and godchildren from the countryside. Giving servants special gifts at Christmas and secondhand clothing are additional ways that employers create close but unequal bonds with household workers. Also, the frequent experience of viewing the evening soap operas together tends to socialize mistresses and servants into one homogeneous social and cultural system.

At the same time, however, employers use a variety of mechanisms to define the distinctiveness and otherness of the household worker. This practice is demonstrated by the maintenance of "servant's quarters." In wealthy households, the worker typically occupies a small room next to the kitchen. Furniture is basic or nonexistent, and the employer will often store such items as brooms, cleaning rags, and spare propane tanks for the stoves in it, completely disregarding the household worker's privacy. A separate bathroom also suggests the employer's fear of contamination.

Although these accommodations may be a physical improvement over the servant's impoverished rural lifestyle, they contrast starkly with the opulence of the employer's home, and the household worker's confinement to this room and the kitchen, when she is not working in some other part of the house, underlines her inferior position. This contrast is found less often in poor households, where servants and employers may all sleep in the same room.

Employers also create social distance by the imposition of certain linguistic practices. They refer to the household worker as "chica," "hija," or "muchacha" regardless of the woman's age, thus suggesting that she is childlike and irresponsible. Also, they almost always call maids by their first names and address them with the familiar Spanish *tu* but expect the women to call them "señora" and use *usted*. Employers may also require workers to add such titles as "joven," "señorita," and even "niño" to the names of their children. It should also be noted that because many household workers in La Paz speak Spanish as a second language, their accent and grammatical mistakes are constantly ridiculed by their employers.

The emphasis on servants' distinctness can also lead employers to deny their humanity by behaving at certain times as if they do not exist. Family fights and conversations in the presence of household workers often take place as normally as if they were being conducted in private. This ability to deny the very existence of household workers and treat them as nonentities reflects deeply entrenched prejudices. The Aymaras and their culture have been oppressed and devalued for centuries in Bolivia, and many Bolivians from both urban and rural backgrounds continue to perceive evidence of this presumed inferiority.¹³ One extension of this kind of racism is the negation of household workers' sexuality by well-to-do criolla women. These employers often do not perceive their maids as individuals with the same needs and problems as other women, including themselves. They may consider servants to be unclean, awkward, and physically misshapen—the antithesis of feminine beauty and grace as defined by the dominant society. For example, one employer expressed a typical attitude in joking about her servant's appearance in a bathing suit and laughingly describing the young woman's attempts to swim as similar to those of a beached whale.

Such attitudes are also expressed toward other women who employ servants, particularly the so-called *cholitas pacenas*, who are the prosperous representatives of an urban Aymara lifestyle. Although often financially well-off by local standards, these women could never enter the social circles of criolla ladies, who establish social boundaries and cultivate class position on the basis of manners, family tradition, and the elegant but understated observance of "Western" fashion trends, factors that are inseparable from ethnic status.

Employers from differing backgrounds also subtly manipulate the

outward symbols of household workers' ethnic identity in an attempt to redefine them to suit the employers' personal needs. For example, several middle- and upper-income criolla women stated a preference for servants from the countryside who use the pollera and related accoutrements. The comments of one woman from the affluent neighborhood of Obrajes are typical of many others: "I prefer [a servant] from the countryside, not the ones from the city who are outrageous. There is no trust . . . In contrast, the [servants] from the countryside who use the pollera don't learn very fast, but they are more humble."

In the cosmopolitan homes and neighborhoods of these employers, patterns of dress clearly distinguish the servants from the served. Women who wear a pollera or a uniform modeled after it are quickly identified as household workers and are thus set apart from others. The pollera, which in other contexts symbolizes cultural and ethnic pride, consequently takes on new meaning in these neighborhoods. It symbolizes servitude and otherness—a different lifestyle, a distinctive set of values—all of which make it easier for employers to differentiate themselves from their servants and reaffirm their own superiority.

In other cases, exactly the opposite occurs. Employers who themselves come from rural backgrounds may pressure their employees to use more typical Western dress. In doing so, they seek to distance themselves from their rural origins by attempting to display greater "modernity" in the home, a goal that may affect the maid's appearance. These employers argue that a blouse and skirt or slacks are much more economical than the typical clothing of urban Aymara women, which includes a shawl, a hat, earrings, and a pollera that may cost as much as one hundred dollars. Some employers also maintain that polleras are unhygienic and too cumbersome for work.

These practices create the necessary conditions for continuing the inequality characteristic of domestic service: the presence of another person—alien and distinct—to receive orders and strengthen employers' ego by assuring them that there are always others more vulnerable and powerless than themselves. Moreover, household workers are far more versatile than any domestic appliance and can be called on to carry out the most trivial tasks at any hour of the day or night. This is indeed the essence of servitude.

Household workers' lack of control over most aspects of their work along with the uncertainty of the job define many of this occupation's unique characteristics. There are no criteria for evaluating servants' work. For instance, cosmopolitan criollo employers and household workers (especially peasant migrants) have very different concepts of time. Employers demand efficiency, punctuality, and order and often consider their maids to be slow and careless. In addition, the female head of the household normally defines the chores to be done and makes decisions

about pay, vacations, and work schedules, given the absence of a written contract specifying employer and employee obligations.

But the job involves much more than the obvious tasks associated with household maintenance, such as cooking, dusting, mopping, and washing laundry. It also goes beyond answering the telephone, buying bread from the corner store, opening the door for visitors, serving refreshments to guests, and numerous other details. In addition, household workers must behave in accordance with the style and mood of their employers and adapt themselves to the rhythm of life in the employer families (see Taussig and Rubbo 1983).

By hiring other women to carry out domestic chores, female employers are able to dedicate themselves to more prestigious activities, such as administering the home, pursuing a professional career, or simply exchanging gossip with friends in their free time. Professional women who work outside the home are able to avoid the "double day" by depending on the labor power of domestic servants to maintain their own "liberated" lifestyle. But all women employers are able to take advantage of class and ethnic differences to avoid questioning dominant ideas about women's work and to mitigate their own gender subordination.

The presence of servants also socializes children into dominant attitudes about class, ethnicity, and gender roles. Moreover, bourgeois children have few duties in the home: girls must learn to administer domestic activities, be gracious hostesses, and manage the servants, but boys have virtually no responsibilities. Parents encourage their children to study and pursue social activities with friends and family members until such time as they are ready to assume leadership roles in a society divided by racist, sexist, and class practices. The presence of a live-in household worker facilitates this education by assuring that the relationships present in the home approximate those found in the wider society.

Resistance and Accommodation

Household workers have few means of resisting employers' attempts to control the work and conditions of the job. They are cut off from their communities of origin and detached from the social relations that have sustained the dynamic Aymara culture and its continuing resistance to various forms of social oppression. Yet within their capabilities, houseworkers try to wrest control over the tasks required of them and to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect. Their struggles combine a mixture of passive and occasionally open resistance with accommodation to the power exercised by employers and the circumstances of the workplace and the urban milieu.

Like other dominated peoples, many household workers may "ac-

cept" dominant beliefs about ethnic, class, and gender roles and adopt new styles of dress and behavior patterns to minimize the effects of these attitudes. María Choquehuanca, a former household worker, described this pattern:

Generally young women come directly from the countryside to work for the señoras. I see them with their country clothes and their sandals. They find work, but the señoras exploit them because they don't know how to do anything. They go from one señora to another and gradually become more refined and act like real "cholas." They start to discriminate against their family and even change their last names because country names aren't as dignified in the city. The city really changes people from the countryside.¹⁴

This "acceptance" is often more apparent than real, however. In their employers' homes, household workers may dress and behave according to employers' expectations in order to survive under conditions where realistic alternatives do not exist. Older former household workers, who have had time to reflect on their experience, are more critical of domestic service than their younger counterparts, who must confront demanding employers on a daily basis and make the best of a situation not entirely of their choice. None of these women want their daughters to be servants, however.

On return trips to the countryside and during Sunday visits to friends and relatives in the city, household workers reaffirm their identity and display a certain degree of newly acquired urban sophistication. Ties with communities of origin have become increasingly important because of the economic crisis, which has aggravated urban unemployment, devalued wages, and increased the cost of living in La Paz. Sending remittances to rural kin and making frequent visits help to insure an individual's rights to community resources. At the same time, household workers experience considerable pressure to conform to local standards of dress and behavior when they go back. Those who deviate from the norm are subject to ridicule.

In the city, these women may spend their free day in the higher, poorer neighborhoods with an aunt, sister, parent, or other relative, washing clothing, listening to any of several local radio stations that broadcast in Aymara, and simply relaxing. Through these contacts, they begin to broaden their friendships and acquaintances beyond their immediate circle of urban kin. For example, several of the household workers interviewed have participated in or belong to Protestant religious sects. Usually introduced to these sects by relatives, they find in the churches a number of other individuals in circumstances similar to their own. Servants working in the high-rise apartment buildings in the center of La Paz may also become friends as a result of continual chance encounters in the elevators and hallways of these buildings. Many also spend part of their free time talking and strolling in the public parks, where they talk with

friends and often arrange meetings with young men. The men may be fellow rural migrants who are completing their obligatory military service or working sporadically as bricklayers. These relationships help household workers reassert their own identity, even as that identity is being changed by the new circumstances and new ways of relating to others that they encounter in the city.¹⁵

During the course of their work, servants also gain an intimate understanding of the familial and personal problems of their employers, which helps them retain self-respect despite humiliating treatment. Many household workers deride female employers for remaining in bed until late in the morning. They also criticize their employers' child-rearing practices and the lack of respect that these children show others. Servants are also keenly aware of the contradictions between employers' private behavior and the images that they present to the public. This intimate understanding of employers' frailties and shortcomings makes it easier for household workers to reject their employers' evaluations and world-views and maintain a sense of self-worth.

Other ways that household workers respond to perceived injustices are by engaging in petty theft and intentional carelessness. These behaviors are most common when employers do not pay a salary or refuse to give workers a raise. A household worker's last resort when conditions become intolerable is to quit; not surprisingly, mistreatment and low pay are the two most frequently cited reasons for leaving jobs. Many women will simply disappear after receiving their monthly salary and not return, thus avoiding a confrontation with an irate employer who often feels overwhelmed in the absence of a servant.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated how class, gender, and ethnic relationships structure the interactions of mistress and servant and condition their involvement in the labor force. The nature of exploitation of houseworkers varies over time and with the personalities and socioeconomic backgrounds of employers. The decline of the multiservant household and the downward mobility of some employers has generated new pressures and demands on household workers, but various enduring practices continue to shape the contours of this relationship between two women. They include deference rituals, uncertainty of work, virtual obligation to accept degrading treatment, and invisibility of the household worker. Through these practices, relations of inequality are created and recreated.

Household workers respond to their employers' attempts to control them and their work with a mixture of resistance and accommodation. They maintain dignity in a difficult situation by engaging in subtle forms

of defiance and by reinforcing their identity through ties with their communities of origin and new alliances in the city. Yet at the same time, the experience of domestic service changes them. They begin to question their cultural heritage and values as they are forced to accommodate to their employers' lifestyles and to living in a rapidly changing urban milieu. As workers struggle to come to terms with their own identity, they must confront employers who manipulate the symbols of ethnicity and impose self-serving definitions of what it means to be a houseworker.

The confrontations between servants and employers may never be completely transcended as patterns of domination and resistance evolve and change. The ways that household workers manage these paradoxes in the future will depend on changing forms of domestic service and female employment opportunities in La Paz and the future organization of women around issues of class, gender, and ethnicity.

NOTES

1. Taussig and Rubbo (1983) also discuss the persistence of domestic service in southwest Colombia.
2. See Gerald Sider's (1987) analysis of similar processes in his discussion of relations between Indians and whites in the southeastern United States.
3. Given the age of these women, however, one can safely assume that several unmarried women actually maintained consensual unions with men that went unreported in statistics on marriage.
4. In practice, however, these distinctions were not always rigidly upheld. Women moved back and forth between jobs, depending on the need and availability of personnel, and many did a considerable amount of general housework despite their title.
5. See "Condecoración a empleadas domésticas," published in the La Paz daily *La Razón*, 29 May 1949, p. 5.
6. See *La Razón*, 20 June 1950, p. 5.
7. Sixty-two of the selected criminal cases between houseworkers and employers dealt with robberies (69 percent).
8. Archivo de La Paz, Distrito Judicial La Paz, 1935, Caja 1655.
9. Archivo de La Paz, Distrito Judicial La Paz, 1933, Caja 1634.
10. In the mid-1970s, the structure of the urban labor market continued to reflect the segregation of women into domestic service and petty commerce. Thirty-six percent of the twenty-four thousand economically active women worked in services, while 25 percent engaged in small-scale commerce (Albó et al. 1982).
11. See Crummett (1987) and also Radcliffe's (1985) study of a community in the Peruvian department of Cuzco for further discussion of gender differences in the migratory process.
12. See Albó and Preiswerk (1986) for further discussion of this emergent Aymara bourgeoisie in La Paz.
13. Various authors have commented on this aspect of racism in other contexts, such as the United States and former African colonies. See Ellison (1972) and Rollins (1985) on the United States and Fanon (1963) on Africa.
14. Interview with María Choquehuanca, 15 June 1987, Villa Tunari (La Paz).
15. Household workers have also recently begun to organize a union, but as of 1988, the organization was still very weak and encompassed only a hundred women.

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