

Book Reviews

Blofield, Merike (2012) *Care Work and Class: Domestic Workers' Struggle for Equal Rights in Latin America*. The Pennsylvania State University Press (Pennsylvania, PA). x + 198 pp. \$64.95 hbk, \$29.95 pbk.

The participation of many female professionals in the labour market in Latin America, depends on having a domestic worker at home. Paid domestic work is one component of the politics of care and gender relations, and this has class, gender and ethnic/race implications in contemporary Latin American societies.

Care Work and Class: Domestic Workers' Struggle for Equal Rights in Latin America shows the tension between aspirations to equal rights and class divisions, problematising the legal status of domestic workers in the region. It illustrates how class and gender interact with the state. The author has chosen Latin America to analyse paid domestic work because it is characterised by high inequalities, changing gender relations and democratic politics, and the study focuses particular attention on the case of Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay. The book neatly presents the politics of care demonstrating how it is intertwined with the nature of work in the household. Blofield examines the extent to which a private solution (paid domestic work) becomes a public solution, and the elite resistance to regulation of the private.

Despite democratic transitions in the region, legal reforms meant to protect and enhance the rights of domestic workers have been slow to catch on. Though recently, some countries (Colombia, Bolivia, Uruguay and Costa Rica) have equalised the rights of domestic workers with those of other workers (for instance, by extending maternity leave to the former). Generally speaking, however, domestic workers have tended to have a different legal status to other workers, for example, concerning working hours, salary, holidays, and benefits. In addition, domestic workers are more likely than other workers to labour informally, without written contracts and social security. This situates domestic workers in a multiply disadvantaged position suffering both from legal discrimination and a lack of legal protection under the rights that do exist.

This book has five chapters. The first, entitled 'Domestic Workers in Latin America Today', compares the politics of care in advanced industrial countries with those in Latin America, where the prevalence of domestic workers is much higher, and societies in general are more unequal. According to Blofield, paid domestic work 'should be understood in the interactive context of both gender and class inequalities' (p. 9). It is driven by high levels of socioeconomic inequalities (both domestically and internationally), and by the increasing number of women working outside the home. The author highlights the dynamic of paid domestic work, while offering detailed information regarding working hours and laws on domestic workers by country.

Chapter 2, entitled 'Overcoming Elite Resistance', tackles the question of whether and how the political system addresses the interests of groups that are multiply disadvantaged. Failures to address these interests adequately through meaningful reform are shown to reflect elite political classes that are either resistant or indifferent. Alternatively, where meaningful reforms have been made, this has tended to result from 'the mobilisation by domestic workers' organisations, a network of social and political allies, and political "windows of opportunity", mostly linked to left-wing executive and legislative allies' (p. 40).

Despite significant legal gains in some countries, the legal rights of domestic workers are often disrespected in practice. Chapter 3, 'Working in Chronic Informality', examines the legal enforcement of workers' rights, discussing workers' access to social security protections and the prevalence of labour violations.

Chapter 4, entitled 'Bolivia and Costa Rica', and Chapter 5, entitled 'Uruguay and Chile', give in-depth details of the social and legal contexts in these countries plus the

political processes by which laws pertaining to domestic workers have been established and/or reformed. In addition, the author examines the enforcement of labour rights in each of these countries. The pairing of the above cases presents the reader with a contrast between most-different and most-similar countries. Bolivia and Costa Rica are the most different countries to effect equal rights reform for domestic workers. In contrast, Uruguay and Chile are the most similar countries with different outcomes: equal rights reform in the first, but fragmentary reform and a failure to achieve equal rights in the second.

In the conclusion, the author draws together a coherent picture of the political dynamics of this labour sector across the region. Then she discusses the ILO convention on domestic workers' rights approved in June 2011. She concludes that what is needed is both a greater and more uniform degree of professionalisation of domestic work across Latin America and with it, greater state involvement in passing and enforcing worker protections, including childcare provision. She argues, quite persuasively, that these prescriptions would help to reduce social inequalities in these countries. She links care with the politics of care, stressing the need for legal equality and social justice for domestic workers. The book thereby contributes significantly to the existing literature on this subject and shows the specificity of Latin America, while helping to make visible a marginalised group that demands greater social attention. Moreover, the book challenges the cultures of inequality across Latin America that it seeks to understand and describe.

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