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DOMESTIC WORKERS' ACTIVISM: FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ARENA

 Joaze Bernardino-Costa^I

 Meg Weeks^{II}

 Renata Monteiro Lima^{III}

Translated by: Meg Weeks^{II}

^I Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasília (DF), Brazil; joazebernardino@gmail.com

^{II} University of Florida, Gainesville (FL), United States of America; weeksm@ufl.edu

^{III} Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasília (DF), Brazil; renatamestrado23@gmail.com

Abstract

This article discusses the political activism of Brazilian domestic workers and its importance for the legal advances of the professional category. To this end, we trace the history of the movement back to the founding of the first Association of Domestic Workers in Brazil and follow its trajectory through its national congresses as well as its activities in the international arena. What we observe throughout this long process is a practice of relationship-building with trade union, Black, and feminist movements. We also observe that in the struggle surrounding each legal advancement, the political activism of domestic-worker unions was present. Regardless of whether domestic workers have achieved full legal parity with other workers, we present the history of this movement as articulating a clear demand to decolonize Brazilian social and racial relations.

UNION • DOMESTIC WORK • FENATRAD • RACE

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ATIVISMO DAS TRABALHADORAS DOMÉSTICAS: DA COZINHA À ARENA NACIONAL E INTERNACIONAL

Resumo

Este artigo discute o ativismo político das trabalhadoras domésticas e sua importância para os avanços legais da categoria. Para tanto, retornamos à fundação da primeira Associação das Trabalhadoras Domésticas no Brasil e passamos pela organização nacional da categoria por meio de seus congressos nacionais e sua extensão à arena internacional. O que vemos nesse longo processo é uma articulação política com os movimentos classista-sindicais, movimento negro e movimento feminista. Constatamos que, em todos os momentos de avanços legais, o ativismo político das trabalhadoras estava presente. Independentemente de as trabalhadoras domésticas conquistarem ou não uma equiparação legal e de fato com os demais trabalhadores, registramos essa história exitosa, que pode ser vista como uma luta decolonial.

SINDICATO • TRABALHO DOMÉSTICO • FENATRAD • RAÇA

EL ACTIVISMO DE LAS TRABAJADORAS DEL SERVICIO DOMÉSTICO: DE LA COCINA AL ÁMBITO NACIONAL E INTERNACIONAL

Resumen

Este artículo discute el activismo político de las trabajadoras domésticas y su importancia para los avances jurídicos de la categoría. Para ello, retomamos la fundación de la primera Asociación de Trabajadoras Domésticas en el Brasil y pasamos por la organización nacional de la categoría a través de sus congresos nacionales y su extensión al ámbito internacional. Lo que vemos en este largo proceso es una articulación política con los movimientos sindicales de clase, el movimiento negro y el movimiento feminista. Constatamos que, en todos los momentos de avances legales, el activismo político de las trabajadoras estuvo presente. Independentemente de las trabajadoras domésticas conquistar o no una igualdad legal y de facto con los demás trabajadores, registramos esta historia exitosa, que puede verse como una lucha decolonial.

SINDICATO • TRABAJO DOMÉSTICO • FENATRAD • RAZA

ACTIVISME DES EMPLOYÉES DE MAISON: DE LA CUISINE À L'ARÈNE NATIONALE ET INTERNATIONALE

Résumé

Cet article traite de l'activisme politique des employées de maison et de son importance pour les conquêtes juridiques de la catégorie. Pour ce faire, nous sommes remontés à la fondation de la première Association des Employées de Maison au Brésil et nous nous sommes penchés sur l'organisation nationale de la catégorie par le biais de ses congrès nationaux et de son déploiement dans l'arène internationale. Nous avons pu observer dans ce long processus qu'une articulation politique avec les mouvements syndicaux, le mouvement noir et le mouvement féministe. Nous avons constaté qu'à chaque fois que des progrès juridiques se sont réalisés, l'activisme politique des employées de maison était présent. Que ces travailleuses aient obtenu ou non une égalité juridique et de fait avec les autres travailleurs, nous avons consigné cette histoire réussie, qui peut être considérée comme une lutte décoloniale.

SYNDICAT • TRAVAIL DOMESTIQUE • FENATRAD • RACE

PAID DOMESTIC WORK CAN BE SEEN AS THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG OF THE HISTORICAL construction of inequalities on the basis of class, race and gender. This historical construction, coupled with racism and white supremacy, in the words of Theodoro (2022), gives rise to a society with heightened levels of naturalized economic inequalities to the point that a salaried worker can hire another worker. In Brazil, as many scholars have shown in recent decades, traces of slavery remain very present in remunerated domestic work: sexual, physical and moral harassment, forced labor, child labor and other abuses (Gonzalez, 1979; Teixeira, 2021; Hordge-Freeman, 2022; Jimenez-Jimenez, 2018).

Domestic work currently employs almost 6 million people in Brazil, the majority of whom are women (92%). Of every 100 women employed in the job market, approximately 15 are employed in domestic work. With regards to race, recent research shows that 62% of domestic workers are Black women. The centrality of domestic work for Black women is also evident upon considering that 18% of economically active Black women are employed as domestic workers compared to 10% of white women (Pinheiro et al., 2020).

Another dimension of this construction of inequalities on the basis of class, race and gender is the vulnerability to which domestic workers are exposed in the workplace, often being the target of racial and class discrimination and sexual harassment. These forms of discrimination and violence, especially in the past, were more common among underage domestic workers – the symbolic “children of the family” (*crias da família*) – and also among those who lived in the workplace (Hordge-Freeman, 2022).

Legal and structural transformations in Brazilian society in the past several decades have resulted in a reduction in both the number of underage domestic workers and those residing in the workplace (Fraga, 2013). Among these changes are the reduction in the number of migrant domestic workers from rural areas and, in their stead, a greater number of domestic workers who live on the outskirts of large cities commuting to and from work each day. These shifts have led to the disappearance of maids' quarters from architectural plans of new housing in Brazilian cities.

Both the structural characteristics of Brazilian society, which naturalizes extremely high levels of socioeconomic inequality, and the fact that domestic work takes place within the private home, explain the precariousness of the labor relationship between employer and domestic worker. As an illustration of this precarity and vulnerability, fewer than a third of domestic workers have a work permit (*carteira assinada*) (Chaney & Castro, 1989; Carvalho, 2022; Pereira de Melo, 1998; Hordge-Freeman & Harrington, 2015). In previous research (Bernardino-Costa, 2011), we collected a number of personal accounts from adult domestic workers and found that, in their reminiscences, they experienced physical, psychological and sexual violence as minors. This reality was also expressed by Lenira Carvalho, an important national leader of the domestic workers' political movement, in her autobiography. She wrote, “As long as the domestic worker is inside [her employer's] house, she will always be a slave” (2022, p. 43, own translation).

At the same time, it is important to note that this professional sector has also enjoyed significant legal advances since the mid-twentieth century. The most notable advance came in 2015 in the form of Lei Complementar n. 150 [Complementary Law No. 150], which regulated Emenda Constitucional n. 72 [Constitutional Amendment No. 72], of 2013, known as the PEC das Domésticas. Several years later, in 2018, the International Labor Organization (ILO) ratified Convenção [Convention] n. 189 (Organização Internacional do Trabalho [OIT], 2011), which affirmed the fundamental human and labor rights of domestic workers worldwide. The

implementation of these protections stems from a long history of struggle on the part of mobilized domestic workers, both in Brazil and around the world. Despite a political and social context that is not favorable to the legal and de facto equality between domestic workers and other professional categories, the legal advances in the category seen in the last fifty years – since Lei n. 5.859 [Law No. 5,859], of 1972 – are largely due to the political activism of political organizations of domestic workers (Bernardino-Costa, 2015a, 2015b; Acciari, 2021; Ávila, 2009; Castro, 1992; Fraga & Monticelli, 2021).

Historically, Brazilian elites have interpreted debates surrounding the expansion of the rights of domestic workers as a threat to the private relationships that occur within Brazilian homes. In other words, due to the longstanding reliance of Brazilian families on (inexpensive) paid domestic services, much of the debate took place around the possible adverse effects that legislation could generate for employing families and their domestic workers (Fraga & Monticelli, 2021; Costa et al., 2016).

Despite the low number of unionized workers, their participation in the activities of their political organizations – initially associations and later unions – constitutes a true watershed from the point of view of their individual and collective biographies. Firstly, if the domestic worker – often a migrant or favela resident from a lower social stratum, with low levels of education, belonging to a race or geographic origin considered inferior (Chaney & Castro, 1989) – is initially resocialized according to the sensibilities of her boss, joining a union means breaking with the latter's values and acquiring new ones based on membership in the working class. Secondly, unions are spaces for reworking the relationship between domestic worker and employer in public terms, governed by republican principles and the law. Thirdly, the acquisition of new values and perspectives through union membership allows the worker to reject the attempt to interpret and subject labor relations to a familial relationship (“she’s basically part of the family,” goes the oft-repeated claim). According to activist Odete Conceição, “the maid is very attached to her boss . . . many times they don’t have a formal contract, because their bosses get it into their heads that they are part of the family. . . . What we want is the liberation of the person” (Domésticas reunidas pela terceira vez, 1978, own translation).

If, from the point of view of individual biographies, participation in political organizations means an affirmation of human dignity, from a collective point of view, unions also constitute spaces of resistance to class, racial and gender inequalities (Bernardino-Costa, 2015a, 2015b). As Lenira Carvalho (2022, p. 142, own translation) said, “the existence of the union helps domestic workers improve their self-esteem.” More specifically, in the historical struggle, domestic workers’ political organizations have played a fundamental role in achieving the category’s labor rights. There is also a project of political education on the part of domestic workers’ associations and unions, which has occurred in dialogue with other national and international class-based, feminist and anti-racist organizations. According to Carvalho (2022, p. 144, own translation), “I would like us to be able to have a daily experience of democracy in the unions.”

This article examines the historic struggle of domestic workers’ unions and their activism. To this end, we will review data from previously and recently published research on the domestic workers movement in Brazil. One of the authors of this article carried out research in which he interviewed 26 domestic workers from unions in Recife, Bahia, Campinas (SP), Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Bernardino-Costa, 2015b) and 23 non-unionized workers (Bernardino-Costa, 2011).

Since then he has participated as a guest at the sector's national congresses.¹ Another author of this article recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the political activism of domestic workers in Brazil (Weeks, 2023) and coordinates a project to digitize and preserve the archival collections of the Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [National Federation of Domestic Workers] (FENATRAD).² This article draws upon our sizable body of research and participant observation, in addition to the speeches and writings of domestic workers themselves.

If, in the social imaginary, engendered by social markers of race, class and gender, domestic workers are relegated to the invisibility of the kitchen, the activism and political articulations of their social movement project their actions into the national and international public arenas. Therefore, the objective of this article is to highlight the public political presence of domestic workers through their unions and also to highlight the centrality of this activism for the legal advances of the category.

In addition to this introduction, the article is divided into three sections. The first recounts the history of the social movement of domestic workers from the 1930s to the present, including a discussion of their twelve national congresses. We highlight the emergence of the first associations of domestic workers and their transformation into unions after the promulgation of the new Federal Constitution of 1988. Throughout this narrative, we also describe the interactions of domestic workers with the trade union, feminist, and Black movements, as well as drawing attention to the correlation between the sector's legal advances in terms of labor regulations and the movement's political actions. In the second section we show that these articulations also took and continue to take place in the international arena and that, as the Brazilian movement grew in size and scope, its leaders became active participants in the international mobilization of domestic workers. We also demonstrate that the peak of this international presence of domestic workers' activism occurred at the ILO's international conferences, held in 2010 and 2011, when the organization ratified Convenção n. 189 on decent work for domestic workers (OIT, 2011). Finally, in our conclusion, we review the main themes and findings of our research.

A brief history of the domestic worker movement in Brazil

The Brazilian domestic workers' movement began formally in 1936, through the work of Laudelina de Campos Melo, who founded the Associação Profissional dos Empregados Domésticos [Professional Association of Domestic Workers] of Santos (São Paulo, Brazil), the first documented organization of its kind. Although it was founded as an association, its objective was to gain the status of a labor union, since only unions could petition for the legal recognition of professional sectors and their concomitant labor rights. By the following decade, the exclusion of domestic workers from the formal labor regime was not restricted only to their inability to unionize,³ but also was extended to Getúlio Vargas's landmark 1943 labor code, the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho [Consolidation of Labor Laws], which stated in its article 7:

1 Bernardino-Costa participated in the 10^o, 11^o and 12^o Congresso Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [10th, 11th and 12th National Congress of Domestic Workers], in 2011, 2016 and 2021 respectively.

2 This project is entitled Historical Memory of Brazil's National Domestic Worker's Union Federation (2020-2024), funded by the Modern Endangered Archive Program (MEAP) of the University of California, Los Angeles.

3 Decreto n. 19.770 [Decree No. 19,770], of March 19, 1931, issued by the Vargas government, which regulated the right to unionize in the country, excluded domestic workers, stating that separate legislation would be created for them.

The precepts contained in this code, except when, in each case, expressly determined otherwise, do not apply: (a) to domestic employees, generally considered as those who provide services of a non-economic nature to a person or the family, in their residential context. (Decreto-Lei n. 5.452, 1943, own translation).

The struggle against their denial of labor rights was the primary concern of the first political organization of domestic workers in Brazil, yet it also bears mentioning that the association was founded by a militant of the Black movement at the time. Laudelina had already been active in Black organizations since 1920, in Poços de Caldas (MG), Santos (SP) and the capital of São Paulo (Pinto, 1993).

One year after the creation of the Associação Profissional dos Empregados Domésticos in Santos, Vargas decreed a pseudo-fascist dictatorship dubbed the Estado Novo, which led to the cessation of the association's activities. Although scholars have found some traces of an attempted reorganization of domestic workers in the annals of the Congresso do Negro [Black Congress] in 1950 and also in the archives of the Teatro Experimental do Negro (Nascimento, 2003), it is only in the transition from the 1950s to the '60s that we observe the resurgence of domestic workers' political organizations.

In examining this period, we observe two distinct tendencies that follow different trajectories, but reach the same destination: the creation of a new wave of associations and occurrence of the first national congresses of domestic workers.

The first thread of this story tracks the emergence of the first associations out of a relationship with the progressive wing of the Catholic Church. Some leaders from both the Northeast (Recife union) and the Southeast (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Belo Horizonte unions) recall that participation in the activities of the Juventude Operária Católica [Young Christian Workers] (JOC) was fundamental for the political evolution of domestic workers, who, with support of the Church, began to organize themselves into associations.

JOC's mission was to teach young people to be witnesses to the presence of Christ in the world and to spread Christian humanism in local organizations (neighborhoods and schools, for example). Workers from a variety of professional sectors participated in JOC meetings, including, starting in the late 1950s, domestic workers. However, after a number of years, these workers began to feel out of place with other workers, as at those meetings there was talk of expanding the rights of some sectors, while domestic work was not even recognized as a profession by public authorities. As Odete Maria da Conceição,⁴ founding member of the Rio de Janeiro Association and Union, recalled:

. . . once a month we [the different groups of domestic workers different parishes in Rio de Janeiro] would get together, and then we began to see the difference between us and the other workers, that the others had their rights, and the maid had nothing. So that's when we saw the need for us to have something to defend ourselves.

Just as domestic workers were recognizing the need for autonomous organizations, JOC began to organize meetings specifically for the professional category. For example, in 1960, JOC held the Primeiro Encontro Nacional de Jovens Empregadas Domésticas [First National Meeting

4 All union members interviewed consented to have their real names be used.

of Young Domestic Workers] in Rio de Janeiro, which brought together 24 domestic workers from various regions of the country. The following year, JOC also held the Primeiro Congresso Regional [First Regional Congress], in Recife, bringing together workers from Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba and Pernambuco (Soares, 2002).

Meanwhile, Laudelina de Campos Melo, since 1959, had moved with her employers to Campinas (SP) and founded an organization for domestic workers independent of the Catholic Church. Instead of the tutelage of the Church, this organization was created in dialogue with the Afro-Brazilian sociocultural project Teatro Experimental do Negro of Campinas and with the trade union movement (Sindicato dos Trabalhadores da Indústria da Construção Imobiliária [Residential Construction Industry Union]).

Laudelina recalled that in 1967, three years after the military coup which had caused the co-optation of unions and labor associations across the country, she went to Brasília with a caravan of trade unionists to speak with the then Minister of Labor, Jarbas Passarinho. He poked fun at her by asking, “Are you the terror of the bosses?”. This meeting was recorded by *Jornal da Cidade*, from Campinas, in the edition of July 3, 1967 (Ela é o “terror das patroas”, 1967, own translation):

She is the “terror of bosses”: “Nice to meet you! So you’re the one who is the terror of the bosses in Campinas, aren’t you?” The expression came from the Minister of Labor, Jarbas Passarinho, upon receiving Dona Laudelina de Campos Melo, leader of the domestic workers. She was not embarrassed and smiled at the minister. In fact, Dona Laudelina is not intimidated by these things at all; she has already spoken to other ministers and even presidents of the Republic to move forward with her plan to regulate the domestic profession. The day she heard the phrase, the president of the Campinas Maids’ Association was frank with the minister: “this is the fourth president of the Republic who [says he] is about to regulate the profession and at least eight labor ministers have already promised to take the draft to the executive”.

On that occasion, she asked the minister to regulate the profession and transform the association into a union. The minister emphasized that for such a thing to happen, the unionization of the category was necessary. From that moment on, national leaders intensified organizing the sector, a process that had already been occurring since the beginning of that decade.

. . . due to the minister’s stance, we got in touch with other states, with other municipalities, where we had already held other congresses, where there were already other associations and we worked to found more associations. . . . The Church helped us a lot, it helped set up the associations by means of Church staff who got in touch with the local unions, asking for support. So, we were establishing a critical mass to be able to fight. (Laudelina de Campos Melo, cf. Pinto, 1993, own translation).

From that confluence of events – meetings of domestic workers with the support of JOC and dialogue with the Minister of Labor – leaders organized the 1^o Congresso Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [1st National Congress of Domestic Workers] (CNTD) in 1968 in São Paulo, with the theme: “The demand for primary rights”. That congress helped domestic worker associations and groups meet one another and plan national actions. On that occasion, leaders planned national actions to demand the regulation of the profession, including access to social security. Four years later, in 1972, President Médici signed Lei n. 5.859 (1972), which established the right to a formal contract, social security, and twenty days of annual vacation: “It wasn’t much,

but it was a start!” recalled Anazir Maria de Oliveira and Odete Maria da Conceição of the bill (Chaney & Castro, 1989).

In 1974, the 2nd CNTD was held in Rio de Janeiro. At that congress, national leaders decided as an action plan that associations and groups should work not only to ensure that Lei n. 5.859 (1972) was implemented and extended to all workers, but also that new rights were achieved, including the establishment of a minimum salary and set working hours. Meeting attendees also emphasized that associations should act to form class consciousness among domestic workers, who had long suffered from the isolating and depoliticizing effects of working in private homes.

The 3rd CNTD was held in Belo Horizonte, in 1978. On that occasion, movement leaders evaluated the effectiveness of Lei n. 5.859 (1972), noting that not only was it unenforced by the state, but many domestic workers themselves did not know about their own rights. Furthermore, participants discussed fundamental deficiencies in the services of the Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social [National Social Security Institute] (INPS). Consequently, movement leaders demanded labor legislation identical to that enjoyed by other workers and expressed the desire to reinforce their movement through the creation of new associations and increased membership in existing associations. According to Suely Kofes (2001, p. 308), meeting attendees made the following demands: a ten-hour work day, a minimum wage, thirteenth salary at year's end, the right to a probationary contract and 30-day notice for dismissals, family insurance, a weekly day off, insurance for accidents at work, legal recourse for workplace disputes, special protections for minors between 14 and 18 years old, workplace hygiene and safety standards, and a 25% salary increase for night work.

The next congress took place in Porto Alegre, in 1981, with the theme “The underage domestic worker”. Attendees discussed the difficulty that domestic workers, especially migrants and minors, experienced in being recognized as workers with rights due to being treated as supposed adoptive daughters or as if they were “practically part of the family”. At that congress, movement leaders decided to start a campaign to encourage domestic workers to live in their own homes, because, according to them, it was necessary for domestic workers to face the same difficulties as other workers in order to develop class consciousness. This belief held that living in their own homes would help domestic workers establish their own worldview that differed from that of their employer. The set of demands regarding the expansion of rights presented at the previous meeting appeared again in the final document of the Porto Alegre congress.

The 5th CNTD, considered a landmark event for the movement, was held in 1985, in the city of Olinda, but became known as the Recife Congress. The theme was “Recognition of the profession of the domestic worker”. Influenced by the spirit of the country's redemocratization after 21 years of military rule, movement leaders seized on the promise of a new Constitution as a path to fulfill the category's longstanding demands. The movement increased dialogue with the trade union movement, especially the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), and with the feminist movement, which, through the non-governmental organization (NGO) SOS Corpo, of Recife, advised domestic workers in organizing the congress. At the end of the 5th CNTD, movement leaders prepared a document that stated:

We launch an appeal to all workers' unions that consider us as an integral part of the working class, with our enormous economic importance and our strength as women,

to participate on an equal basis in the collective struggle, and endorse the demands that are contained in the bill approved in this Congress and that we will present to the National Congress. (5^o Congresso Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [CNTD], 1985, own translation).

Although the subordinated status of women had been mentioned in previous congresses, until 1985 the movement had not explicitly made common cause with feminists. Only at the 5th CNTD and later in the Constituent Assembly did dialogue with feminist organizations begin to take root among domestic workers. Decisive for this dialogue were both the guidance of feminists during the 1985 congress and the support that the movement received from the NGO SOS Corpo during the Constituent Assembly of 1987, which defended, together with the feminist contingent in Congress – the so-called “lipstick lobby” –, the proposals presented by the domestic workers.

Between the 5th CNTD and the following one, the Assembleia Nacional Constituinte [National Constituent Assembly] (ANC) promulgated Brazil's new Federal Constitution, which guaranteed new rights to domestic workers: minimum wage, salary irreducibility, thirteenth salary, paid annual vacation with an increase of one third of the normal salary, maternity leave of 120 days, paternity leave, advance notice for dismissals, social security, and right to unionize.

Although a great advance, the sole paragraph of Article 7 of the “Citizen's” Constitution of 1988 created a “legal segregation” between domestic workers and other workers. Of the 34 rights provided for in that article, only 9 applied to domestic workers. Its restrictive wording was as follows:

Sole Paragraph – The rights provided for in items IV, VI, VIII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XXI and XXIV are guaranteed to the category of domestic workers, as well as their integration into social security. (Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil, 1988, art. 7, own translation).

Despite the disappointment of not being enfranchised like other workers, the Constituent Assembly was a very important experience for the category, in that it provided space to forge alliances with other social movements and publicly reject their centuries-old social and political subordination. “The Constitution was our route from slavery to rights”, wrote Lenira Carvalho in her memoir (2022, p. 133, own translation).

At the following congress, held in Campinas in 1989, the political organizations of domestic workers were no longer associations, but unions, since they had won the right to unionize on October 5, 1988 with the passage of the new Constitution. The theme of the congress was “Union, organization and struggle”. In addition to assessing their new rights, movement leaders once again proposed a campaign to encourage domestic workers to have their own homes, as “we need to understand that the bosses' home is not our home, and that we have the right to our life, our family and to live like any citizen”⁵ (6^o CNTD, 1989, own translation). Another topic discussed at this congress was the recognition of the participation of domestic workers in other movements and organizations: the women's movement, the Black movement, neighborhood associations, Catholic workers' ministries, etc.

5 In 1987, the Centro Josué de Castro in Recife conducted a research project entitled “The maids' room”, which was later transformed into a video lasting approximately 15 minutes. Lenira Carvalho, founder of the Association and later of the Recife Union, was the coordinator of that project.

The 7th and 8th CNTD, held respectively in Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte in 1993 and 2001, had as their themes “The new profile of domestic workers in Brazil” and “Equality in the struggle and parity in rights” and were similarly dedicated to the central post-Constitution themes: the implementation of existing rights and the need for basic organizing among domestic workers to incentivize them to join unions. At the Belo Horizonte congress, one of the topics discussed was the need to lobby Congress to approve Projeto de Lei n. 1.626 [Bill No. 1,626] (1989), introduced by federal deputy Benedita da Silva, which mandated that employers pay into unemployment insurance, known as the Fundo de Garantia do Tempo de Serviço [Fund of Guarantee for Time Served] (or FGTS in Portuguese) for the category.⁶ In the action plan for the following years, leaders identified their chief goal as developing increased dialogue with trade unions, feminist organizations, and the Black movement.

Since the Campinas congress in 1989, we note that collaborations with and the influences of both the feminist movement and the Black movement are present in the documents produced at the end of each congress. This was due to greater dialogue with feminist and anti-racist organizations and also because there was a renewal of the movement's leadership which now had organic links with the Black movement. This dynamic is exemplified by Ana Semião de Lima, then president of the Campinas Union, and Creuza Maria de Oliveira, of the Bahia Union.

The 9th CNTD was held in Salvador in 2006, at which participants celebrated the seventy-year anniversary of the domestic workers' movement and paid tribute to the pioneers and founders of the first associations: Laudelina de Campos Melo, *in memoriam* (Santos and Campinas), Odete Maria Conceição and Nair Jane de Castro Lima (Rio de Janeiro), Lenira Carvalho (Recife), Eva Cardoso da Silva Moraes (Rio Grande do Sul), Ana Semião de Lima (Campinas) and Creuza Maria de Oliveira (Bahia). Among the topics discussed, movement leaders identified the need for domestic workers to have representatives in the Legislative Branch. The proceedings from this congress also reveal how domestic workers had incorporated new interpretations of class, gender and race into their analysis of their role in Brazilian social reproduction. Moreover, since the Workers' Party government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had been elected in 2002, the movement was engaging in dialogue with the Executive Branch in various capacities (Secretaria de Políticas de Promoção para a Igualdade Racial [Secretariat for Promotion Policies for Racial Equality], Secretaria de Políticas para Mulheres [Secretariat for Policies for Women], Ministério do Trabalho [Ministry of Labor], state labor secretariats, etc.).

The 10th CNTD, held in Recife in September 2011, took place three months after the International Labor Organization approved, at its 100th International Labor Conference, Convention n. 189, entitled *Trabalho decente para trabalhadoras e trabalhadores domésticos* [Decent work for domestic workers] (OIT, 2011). As a result, Brazilian domestic workers discussed the ratification of this convention and/or the possibility of a constitutional amendment to Article 7 of the Federal Constitution.

At this congress, ongoing collaborations with other social movements were on display: several feminist and Black movement NGOs were present, such as SOS Corpo, Crioula, Articulação de Mulheres Negras, and Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras. CUT and Confederação Nacional

6 Projeto de Lei n. 1.626 (1989), which was still under consideration in Congress, was replaced by Medida Provisória n. 1.986 [Provisional Measure No. 1,986], of January 12, 2000, which became Decreto n. 3.361 [Decree No. 3,361] (2000) on the same date, signed by then president Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The bill established FGTS as elective for employers.

dos Trabalhadores no Comércio e Serviços [National Confederation of Commerce and Services Workers] (CONTRACS) also participated.

In 2010, Congress began considering the Proposta de Emenda à Constituição (PEC) n. 478 [Proposed Amendment to the Constitution No. 478] (2010), which aimed to revoke Article 7 of the Federal Constitution in order to grant domestic workers parity with other workers. After the approval of Convention n. 189 (OIT, 2011), the PEC began to be discussed on the country's main news channels. This was reflected in the 10th CNTD and from then on the leadership of the domestic workers movement began to lobby, with the support of feminist and Black feminist organizations, both the Executive Branch and Congress. The Recife congress in 2011 gave rise to a debate on what would be the best strategy to pursue this end: the ratification and incorporation of Convenção n. 189 (OIT, 2011) into Brazilian legislation or the repeal of article 7 through a constitutional amendment. Congress participants decided on the second option.

During discussions and public hearings with NGOs, social movements, and lawmakers supporting the struggle of domestic workers, the spokesperson for PEC n. 478 (2010), federal deputy and longtime movement ally Benedita da Silva, eventually presented a substitute for the PEC and proposed, instead of a full repeal, the inclusion of new items in the sole paragraph of Article 7 of the Constitution. Thus, on April 2, 2013, Congress passed Emenda Constitucional n. 72, known as the PEC das Domésticas, guaranteeing 25 of the 34 rights provided for in the aforementioned article. The sole paragraph now reads as follows:

Domestic workers are entitled to the rights provided for in items IV, VI, VII, VIII, X, XIII, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XXI, XXII, XXIV, XXVI, XXX, XXXI and XXXIII and, the conditions established by law and the simplification of compliance with tax obligations observed, main and ancillary, arising from the employment relationship and its peculiarities, those provided for in items I, II, III, IX, XII, XXV and XXVIII, as well as their integration into social security. (Emenda Constitucional n. 72, 2013, own translation).

Despite this major triumph, lawmakers claimed that some rights provided for by the new sole paragraph of Article 7 still needed to be regulated. To this end, Congress devised Projeto de Lei do Senado n. 224 [Senate Bill No. 224] (2013), a move that worried the domestic workers movement as its leaders believed that the rights in the amendment would automatically apply to all domestic workers.

As it turned out, their worry proved warranted. On June 1, 2015, Congress passed Lei Complementar n. 150, which formalizes the legal standing of domestic work contracts. Article 1 of this law states that a domestic worker is one who provides services in the employer's residence for more than two days per week, and is therefore covered by current legislation. This means that daily domestic workers, or *diaristas*, were completely excluded from the legislation.

At the 11th CNTD, held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, under the theme "Ratifying 189 means achieving equal rights: organizing domestic workers in the world", the extension of current rights to day laborers and the efficacy of rights for all workers took centerstage. At that congress, movement leaders recognized that Emenda Constitucional n. 72 (2013) was an advance, while Lei Complementar n. 150 (2015) caused some setbacks, especially because it did not include daily domestic workers, who have been growing in number in recent decades (Fraga & Monticelli, 2021). Therefore, to overcome that setback, it would be important for Brazil to also ratify Convention

n. 189 of the ILO (OIT, 2011), which in its first article does not establish a distinction between monthly (salaried) and daily (freelance) domestic workers.

Despite the maneuvers made by lawmakers to exclude day laborers from the labor legislation covering domestic workers, legal advances for domestic workers in Brazil have served as an example for a number of other countries. Thus, representatives from domestic worker unions abroad participated in the 11th Congress, sharing experiences from their home countries while also studying the Brazilian case. Present were the general secretary of the Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar [Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers] (CONLACTRAHO), Marcelina Bautista, and the general secretary of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), Elizabeth Tang. For this reason, the theme of the congress was “Ratify 189”, as this could also represent significant advances in other national contexts.

To address the ongoing challenges of implementing nominal rights, and taking into account national and global circumstances, the 12th CNTD, held in 2021, took place virtually as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, one of the first deaths from COVID-19 in the country was a domestic worker, Cleonice Gonçalves.⁷ Participants also discussed the tragic death of the five-year-old child Miguel Otávio Santana da Silva, the son of a domestic worker, while in his mother’s workplace.⁸ The pandemic occasioned many reflections on the role of domestic work in contemporary societies, and provided an opportunity for movement leaders to reflect on the hypocrisy of Brazilian society regarding the country’s most vulnerable workers. According to Luiza Batista: “When we ask society to value our work, we are denied rights. . . . But when it comes time to serve, society considers our work essential. It’s very incoherent” (Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [FENATRAD], 2020, own translation).

The 2021 congress had the theme “Domestic workers on the move: struggle and resistance in the context of pandemic and slave labor”. The plan of action approved by meeting participants set the tone for the confrontations that domestic workers will undoubtedly face in the future. Five items were approved as part of the plan: promoting the health and well-being of domestic workers; combating violence and harassment; defending and expanding labor rights; developing public policies for equality and social justice; and combating and denouncing slave labor, or “work analogous to slavery,” as it is called in Brazil.

Agenda items such as combating violence and harassment and denouncing slave labor, longstanding demands of the movement, gained prominence in the national press as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, the meeting brought to the fore issues of interest to the entire working class – such as, for example, the right to healthcare and comprehensive education for children. Confronting the challenge of extending labor rights to day laborers, as well as enforcing existing rights, continue to be part of the category’s action plan.

Nine decades have passed since Laudelina de Campos Melo founded the first Domestic Workers Association in Santos and five decades since the sector’s first national congresses were

7 Cleonice Gonçalves, a 63-year-old Black woman, worked in a white woman’s house in the wealthy neighborhood of Leblon, Rio de Janeiro. Her boss had just arrived from Italy, and suspected that she had COVID-19. Even so, Cleonice went to work, contracting the virus and dying a few days later. <https://g1.globo.com/fantastico/noticia/2020/03/22/uma-pessoa-muito-batalhadora-diz-sobrinho-de-empregada-domestica-que-morreu-de-coronavirus.ghtml>

8 Miguel, son of Mirtes Renata de Santana e Souza, accompanied his mother to work on June 2, 2020. At lunchtime, she went out to walk her employer’s dog and left her son in the care of her boss. The child expressed a desire to see his mother, so Mirtes’s employer, who lived in an apartment building, put him in the elevator alone and Miguel got off on the ninth floor. When trying to look for his mother from the ninth floor, Miguel fell and died. <https://time.com/5867784/black-domestic-workers-treatment-brazil/>

held. Central and recurrent in all congresses was the theme of domestic workers living in their own homes, as leaders saw independent living as essential for the construction of class consciousness among workers as well as the psychological rupture with the employer's worldview. In this appeal, dialogue with the trade union movement has been crucial.

In the early 1980s, the domestic workers' movement also began to ally itself with the feminist movement, although somewhat ambivalently, as solidarity was not always forthcoming between women simply because they were women (Kofes, 2001). Obviously, as elsewhere in the world, domestic workers and employers are cleaved apart by class and racial inequalities. Race, always present in allusions to slavery, house slaves, maids' quarters, etc., began to be incorporated into the movement's discourse at the end of the 1980s, when they established dialogue and collaboration with other entities in the Black movement. "We left the slave quarters only to go into the maid's quarters", wrote the activists present at the National Congress in 1989 (6^o CNTD, 1989, own translation).

We stated previously that the construction of class, race and gender inequalities, among other social factors, has been fundamental for cementing social stratification in Brazil, as well as for ensuring the precarity and vulnerability of domestic workers. We argue that the trajectory of the domestic workers' movement evinces a contestation of this stratification through the decolonial theorization of their own oppression, as well as a strengthening of their activism through the construction of intersectional dialogues.

Another dimension that our diachronic analysis of the domestic workers movement reveals is the relationship between the category's legal advances and the movement's political activism. This happened at key moments: the approval of Lei n. 5.859 (1972) occurred shortly after the 1st CNTD; the rights contained in the Brazilian Constitution were presented as a draft bill at the 5th CNTD in 1985 and in a letter presented to the ANC by movement leaders; PEC n. 478 (2010), which later became Emenda Constitucional n. 72 (2013), the so-called PEC das Domésticas, reached national prominence after the approval of Convenção n. 189 (OIT, 2011) and the lobbying of Congress by domestic workers and their political allies (union, feminist, Black and Black feminist movements). At both the 10th and 11th CNTD, participants discussed strategies so that the ILO's Convention n. 189 (OIT, 2011) could be impactful in Brazil.

The historical trajectory outlined above reveals that the activism of this professional sector has constituted an important movement of resistance and re-existence – especially when considered from the individual perspective of each unionized domestic worker. We also argue that, from a collective point of view, the activism of domestic workers has assumed a decolonial stance, which seeks to dismantle the colonial stratifications along the axes of class, race, and gender. While historical causation is complex and lawmakers and executives may have possessed other motives in drafting and passing legislation, we point out the presence of the political activism of the domestic workers' movement surrounding each legal advance.

In order to summarize our analysis, in Table 1 we present information about the national congresses of domestic workers, their themes and their adherence to political interpretations and articulations of class, race and gender.

Table 1
National congresses of domestic workers, themes and articulations of class, race and gender

CNTD – Location (year)	Theme	Interpretations and analysis
1 st CNTD – São Paulo (1968)	The demand for primary rights	Class
2 nd CNTD – Rio de Janeiro (1974)	Evaluation of the rights gained in 1972	Class
3 rd CNTD – Belo Horizonte (1978)	Extension of the CLT to domestic workers	Class
4 th CNTD – Porto Alegre (1981)	The underage domestic worker	Class
5 th CNTD – Recife (1985)	The recognition of the profession of domestic worker	Class Gender
6 th CNTD – Campinas (1989)	Union, organization, struggle	Class Gender Race
7 th CNTD – Rio de Janeiro (1993)	The new profile of the domestic worker in Brazil	Class Gender Race
8 th CNTD – Belo Horizonte (2001)	Equality in the struggle and parity in rights	Class Gender Race
9 th CNTD – Salvador (2006)	70 years of struggle	Class Gender Race
10 th CNTD – Recife (2011)	The time is now – to lift up and fortify our agenda	Class Gender Race
11 th CNTD – Rio de Janeiro (2016)	Ratifying 189 means achieving equal rights: organizing domestic workers in the world	Class Race Gender
12 th CNTD – Virtual (2021)	Domestic workers on the move: struggle and resistance in the context of the pandemic and slave labor	Class Race Gender

Source: Historical documentation of the CNTD. Table taken from Bernardino-Costa (2015b) and participant observation of Bernardino-Costa in the 10th, 11th and 12th CNTD.

Domestic workers have learned that holding national congresses is only possible if there exists a base of day-to-day organizing. To this end, domestic workers created entities to ensure organizing on a national level: the Equipe Nacional [National Team], the Conselho Nacional [National Council], and the Federação Nacional [National Federation]. These entities, more than local unions, have been the movement's main organs from which to engage in dialogue with the Executive and Legislative branches. At the same time, these entities have been able to deepen and broaden their advocacy, which has allowed them to project their message into the international arena. This is the topic of the next section.

From national dialogue to the international arena

Since the 1960s, domestic workers have sought to nationalize their social movement. In the beginning, this was done through the Catholic Church, especially the JOC, as previously mentioned. The first regional meetings of domestic workers in Recife and Rio de Janeiro reveal the importance of the Church in facilitating connections between domestic workers across Brazil. This finding is corroborated by the fact that Laudelina de Campos Melo resorted to the support of

the Church for the planning of the 1st CNTD, as revealed in her statement about the dialogue she had with the then Minister of Labor.

Only in 1978 at the 3rd CNTD did movement leaders informally found the Equipe Nacional, which would be formalized at the following congress, in 1981 in Porto Alegre (RS). The Equipe Nacional's objective was to facilitate communication between groups and associations, and, most importantly, to organize national congresses. The Equipe Nacional was made up of a representative from each association selected at national congresses.

In the 1980s, domestic workers were already participating in national union organizations, as well as in feminist groups and meetings. The newsletter of the Associação Profissional das Empregadas Domésticas [Professional Association of Domestic Workers] of Rio de Janeiro mentioned the participation of its president in the 1983 Congresso Nacional da Classe Trabalhadora [National Congress of the Working Class], in São Bernardo do Campo (SP), the meeting at which CUT was founded. The 1985 newsletter of the same organization reported that members participated in two feminist meetings: the Encontro Latino-Americano e do Caribe [Latin American and Caribbean Meeting] and the 1^o Encontro da Rede Mulher [First Meeting of Rede Mulher].

Participation in social movements, both national and international, began to enable the domestic workers' movement to reach greater heights. In 1988, its representatives participated in the I Encuentro Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar, in Bogota, alongside domestic workers from Mexico, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, Argentina, Peru and Chile, an occasion that led to the founding of the Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar, CONLACTRAHO. Since then, several Brazilian activists have held leadership positions in CONLACTRAHO.

At the 6th CNTD in 1989, the year following the founding of CONLACTRAHO, movement leaders decided to replace the Equipe Nacional with the Conselho Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas [National Council of Domestic Workers], also formed by a representative from each union (since the right to unionize had been achieved in 1988, with the promulgation of the new Federal Constitution). The Conselho Nacional began to perform the tasks that had previously been the purview of the Equipe Nacional: organizing, coordinating, and legally representing the category at a national level, as well as organizing future congresses.

The following decade, more precisely on May 25, 1997, movement leaders founded the Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas, which began to coexist with the Conselho Nacional. While the motivations for creating the Equipe Nacional and then the Conselho Nacional responded to internal demand, the creation of FENATRAD was in part spurred by the bizarre actions of an interloper. Below we include the testimony of Maria dos Prazeres dos Santos, leader of the Rio de Janeiro Union, discussing the creation of FENATRAD:

. . . at the last meeting we had in Bahia [Conselho Nacional meeting, in 1997], a man appeared, claiming to be president of a domestic workers' union with 2,000 members. But he didn't have any domestic workers with him. And I was skeptical . . ., there was a certain awkwardness because I spoke up and questioned him . . . then he left, he took his suitcase and left. That was in February. Then it was May, and we were here in Rio de Janeiro. My comrade Lourdes [Maria de Lourdes de Jesus, from the Rio de Janeiro Union] and I were asked to rush to Campinas, SP to found a Federation, because there in Brasilia our

Cfêmea⁹ comrades found out that that same man was trying to create a federation. He just didn't do it because he didn't have five registered unions. He couldn't count on the ones he had. . . . He was doing everything behind the scenes. Then Cfêmea's comrades found out and called Ana Semião. Thus the Federation was created. It was me, Terezinha de Fátima da Silva and Ana Semião, from Campinas, Creuza Maria de Oliveira, from Bahia, from Recife, I think there was also Eunice Antônia or Nila Cordeiro, I can't remember who. So we did something hastily and set up FENATRAD's first board of directors. . . . Then we had a meeting with all of Brazil, there in Brasília, to set things up legally. We all went there, more than a hundred delegates from all over Brazil. We stayed there at the Mané Garrincha Stadium in the players' accommodation, because there was no way to pay for accommodation for all of us. (Maria dos Prazeres dos Santos, cf. Bernardino-Costa, 2015b, own translation).

Thus, dos Santos and the aforementioned leaders created FENATRAD's first board of directors, designated its headquarters as the city of Campinas, and selected its first president, Ana Semião de Lima, of the Campinas Union, who remained in the position until 2001.

At the 8th CNTD, in 2001 in Belo Horizonte, the presidency of FENATRAD passed to Creuza Maria de Oliveira, of the Bahia Union. Continuing the work started by Ana Semião, Creuza developed collaborations with grassroots movements, including the women's movement, the Black movement, the student movement, the trade union movement, and progressive political parties.

As a result of FENATRAD's actions, domestic workers have become better represented nationally. For example, in the first decades of this new century, FENATRAD had seats on the Conselho Nacional de Direito das Mulheres [National Council for Women's Rights] and the Conselho Nacional de Promoção da Igualdade Racial [National Council for the Promotion of Racial Equality]. The federation also played a decisive role in the ILO's approval of Convention n. 189 (OIT, 2011) and later in the national debates around the PEC das Domésticas.

In recent years, the scholar Mary Goldsmith (2013) has masterfully recorded the international activities of domestic workers' movements across Latin America. Highlighting the role of CONLACTRAHO and its confederates – including FENATRAD¹⁰ –, the researcher carried out an ethnography on the participation of domestic workers in the 99th and 100th ILO International Labor Conferences, in 2010 and 2011, when Convention n. 189 (OIT, 2011) was drafted and approved.

According to Goldsmith, within the structure of the ILO Conferences there was no mechanism allowing for the (direct) speech of domestic workers, who instead had a delegate to represent them. The spatial distribution of ILO meetings was also deeply hierarchical in relation to the arrangement of actors in the conference room:

With the Executive Committee in the center, at a higher table, in front of them the government delegates; on the right side, the employers' delegates; on the left side, the workers' delegates. In other words, employers and workers were under mutual scrutiny during the sessions. (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 238, own translation).

9 Feminist NGO, based in Brasília, which works to monitor issues pertinent to women and gender issues in Congress. <https://www.cfemea.org.br/>

10 The following FENATRAD domestic workers were present at the 100th Conference: Creuza Maria de Oliveira (president of FENATRAD), Sueli Maria de Fátima Santos (Sergipe Union), Maria Noeli dos Santos (Rio de Janeiro Union), Maria Regina Teodoro (Campinas Union) and Ione Santana de Oliveira (Bahia Union).

Only domestic workers were present at those conferences. There were no employers present for the deliberations, only their delegates. Because of this critical absence, only domestic workers fell under the “subordinating gaze” of those at the center of the discussions.

Although they could not speak in the ILO conference room in Geneva, domestic workers were able to speak out in meetings with their representative, Halimah Yacob.¹¹ During the two week-period in each of the conferences in which the draft recommendation was discussed, the ILO held workshops in which domestic workers spoke with Yacob and advised her on the negotiation processes. In fact, discussions about the convention did not just take place in Geneva. In 2009, the ILO had sent a document to member governments containing a questionnaire on the content of the convention, which was promptly discussed by FENATRAD in Brazil and by domestic-worker federations in other countries.

Goldsmith (2013) emphasizes the participation of domestic workers in the preparations for and the proceedings during and after ILO conferences. If in the speeches of the employers there was a place for domestic workers, that being the kitchen, we must ask ourselves:

. . . what place is this? The kitchen? The backyard? The shadows? The silence? Until then, the ILO, let alone an International Labor Conference, had never been considered a suitable venue for a domestic worker. So, in that sense, their arrival and participation in the conferences was revolutionary, from my point of view. (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 238, own translation).

Since then, unionized domestic workers have become more visible internationally. The International Domestic Workers Network, which was present at the ILO meetings, became the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) in 2013, currently bringing together more than 88 affiliate organizations, including FENATRAD.¹²

At the 11th CNTD, held in Rio de Janeiro, the general secretary of the IDWF, Elizabeth Tang of Taiwan, and the representatives of CONLACTRAHO, Marcelina Bautista of Mexico and Carmen Del Cruz of Costa Rica, were present, allowing for the reinforcement of a transnational agenda for domestic workers. Without losing touch with locally rooted struggles, considering that the 11th CNTD was held a month after the parliamentary coup against President Dilma Rousseff, Brazilian domestic workers fortified alliances with other actors on the international scene, in turn strengthening their domestic agenda of dismantling racial, gender, and class inequalities. Moreover, they were able to share their precious expertise with domestic workers from other countries.

Also at the Rio de Janeiro congress in 2016, the presidency of FENATRAD passed to Luiza Batista of the Recife Union. Although Luiza only joined the domestic workers' movement in the early 2000s, she brings with her the collective wisdom and experience of the Recife Union, which had and still has on its staff some of the most important names in the movement, such as Lenira Carvalho (in memoriam), Nila Cordeiro (*in memoriam*), Eunice do Monte, and Maria Carmelita de Oliveira.

The period of her presidency was a difficult time not only for domestic workers, but also for all people disadvantaged by class, race, and gender inequalities. In 2021, the 12th CNTD was held

11 “Then Minister of Community Development, Youth and Sports of Singapore, a lawyer by profession with great involvement in trade union life in Singapore. Small woman, with a sweet but firm voice, who wore a hijab. Her mother had been a migrant domestic worker, which for many domestic workers enabled her to speak for them” (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 240, own translation).

12 The IDWF currently has more than 88 affiliated entities, from 68 countries, which corresponds to more than 670,000 affiliated people. See <https://idwfed.org/>

online, in which urgent topics affecting domestic workers, the working classes, and the Black population were at the center of the debate: the pandemic, the need to expand and strengthen the Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) [Unified Health System], daycare needs, violence against domestic workers, etc. These experiences are not exclusive to Brazilian workers, but experiences shared by racialized and poor women around the world. Movement leaders continue to highlight the struggle against slave labor, and unions collaborate with state and federal governments to monitor the laws that regulate work in private homes. According to Luiza Batista:

Even today, in the 21st century, we are fighting against something that we believed had already been abolished in Brazil, which is slavery. FENATRAD has been denouncing, for many years, the existence of domestic work that resembles slavery. We face legal barriers that do not allow the Federation and local unions to inspect homes in cases of complaints, and not even tax auditors have this authority. Today, we have the support of the Public Ministry of Labor, who, together with tax auditors, are managing to rescue domestic workers in conditions of slavery. (FENATRAD, 2024, own translation).

The international articulations of domestic workers – whose apex, we can say, were the ILO conferences – make it possible to understand local phenomena in connection with global phenomena. At the same time that the fight for the rights of specific people is fundamental, they recognize that this is not a matter pertaining just to individuals in Brazilian cities, but rather a reality shared by other women in both the Global South and Global North (Vergés, 2020).

By projecting their voices into the international arena while also speaking out domestically, domestic workers were and continue to be successful in bringing the *de jure* and *de facto* inequalities and oppressions into the spotlight. What is particularly noteworthy about the movement is the ability of women with little formal education to build a political and social movement able to influence legal transformations. Moreover, Brazilian domestic workers have also managed to present a political project that challenges the structure and functioning of the current economic model, as well as the country's enduring myth of racial democracy. In dialogue with traditions of Black radicalism, we contend that their political project is a decolonial one, seeking to undo the intersectional inequalities, oppressions, and violence that have been constructed along the axes of class, race, and gender since the colonial period. Until a future moment in which these harmful legacies no longer hold sway, domestic workers and other social activists will continue to speak out. It is up to us to listen to and amplify them.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we seek to draw attention to the ways in which the construction of the social categories of class, race and gender adversely affect poor Brazilians of color, through oppression, exploitation, and domination, but also can contribute to the strengthening of democratic processes through the recognition of the power of intersectional critique. We seek to present empirical evidence of this claim based on the activism of domestic workers in Brazil. To this end, we demonstrate how domestic-worker activism unfolded through national congresses and the movement's dialogue and alliances with other social movement actors (trade unionist, feminist and anti-racist movements) on national and international scales. Throughout the almost ninety years since the founding of the first association and the more than fifty years of national congresses, we point out the correlation between the dogged advocacy and lobbying of the professional sector and

its legal gains. This is not to claim a direct causal relationship, as we understand the complexity and multiplicity of factors necessary for such transformations, but rather we recognize the presence of domestic worker organizing as a significant factor in each legislative advance.

While one version of this story regards the movement as having been successful in demanding increased rights for domestic workers, we recognize the major challenges remaining to implement existing rights and, above all, to extend them to daily domestic workers.

On a similar note, while we acknowledge that the activism of domestic workers does not dismantle the local, national and transnational inequalities and oppressions generated by the hierarchical categories of class, race and gender, it signals the discontent of racialized populations – especially racialized women – with the matrix of social, economic, cultural, and political power in which we are all forced to live.

The challenge we face now is total decolonization, not only a rupture with colonial administrative structures, which has largely occurred since the 19th century, but also the complete rupture with global coloniality, a system based on gendered and racialized capitalism playing out in everyday social relations forged within the confines of colonial logic. Perhaps this is the inspiration that we can find in the domestic workers movement, a movement that long ago left the kitchen to clamor for equality and dignity in the national and international arenas.

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Note on authorship

Joaze Bernardino-Costa: conceptualization, data analysis, validation, writing and editing of the original draft.

Meg Weeks: conceptualization, data analysis, editing of the original draft, translation to English.

Renata Monteiro Lima: review of the final version of the work.

Data availability statement

The data supporting this article are available, in part, in the following publications: Bernardino-Costa (2011, 2015b) and Weeks (2023).

The data are also partially available at the following website:

<https://meap.library.ucla.edu/projects/national-federation-of-domestic-workers>

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