

Spring 2010

# Race, Class, Gender and the Law: A Study of the Relationship Between Empregadas Domesticas and Their Patroas

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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## Recommended Citation

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**Race, class, gender and the law: A study of the  
relationship between *empregadas domesticas* and  
their *patroas***

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SIT Study Abroad Brazil: Social Justice and Sustainable Development  
Spring 2010

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**Acknowledgements:**

I would first like to thank my family, especially my parents, Eustolia and Marcelino Mejia, for supporting my study abroad experience in Brazil. Thank you for always sharing your life experiences with me; it was you who inspired me to study in Latin America. *Los quiero mucho y siempre voy a estar agradecida con ustedes.*

I would also like to thank the wonderful people at Sindoméstico for working ardently to keep the syndicate active and an invaluable legal resource for domestic workers. I would like to thank Marinalva de Deus Barbosa, the best advisor and host mom I could have had for my ISP. You have a very graceful and caring manner of teaching and imparting wisdom; I could not have learned as much as did without your help. I am in debt with Francisca Goncalves dos Santos, Maria do Carmo, and Creusa Maria de Jesus for allowing me to come in every day and answering my millions of questions. I appreciated getting to know each one of your stories and I left Sindoméstico far more enlightened than I ever imagined I would be.

I am also grateful towards the guidance and assistance I received at SIT from Bill and Oélito, thank you for your patience. I would especially like to thank Valéria de Aboitiz for helping me brainstorm and finally narrow down my topic to something I cared about; it worked out really well.

I would finally like to thank the *domésticas* who were gracious enough to share their stories with me. All of you are brave for standing up for your rights

and refusing to be further victimized. It was after each interview that I was encouraged me to push further. Each one of you taught me to love my work and I will always be grateful for the moment you allowed me to share with you.

“A vida é muito difícil, muito sofredora, Vasti. A Luta é difícil”  
-Chica, Director at Sindoméstico/BA

**Abstract:**

This research analyzes the intersectionality of race, class, gender and governmental regulations, as they relate to violence against black women who are employed in domestic work. In order to reasonably address this larger issue in three weeks of field research, I have chosen to study this relationship as it relates to violence against black domestic workers, *as domésticas* and their female employers, *as patroas*, largely white women.

Drawing from existent knowledge regarding the forms of oppression used against the black community during slavery, I conclude that that this hegemonic, dominant societal structure continues to function today in new, yet still violent, forms of oppression and control. Additionally, I look at the policies specific to domestic workers, and show how their lack of regulation enables the continued exploitation of domestic working women, whose tasks continue to lack proper compensation and valorization.

This study is based on the information I was able to gather by working at Sindoméstico/BH and under the supervision of one of the directors at the union, Marinalva de Deus Barbosa, and nine female domestic workers, four active directors at the centre, and a lawyer.

**Personal Motivations:**

I arrived in Brazil knowing that I would want to pursue a project that addressed the intersectionality of race, class and gender-- the three social indicators which are most influential in a person's power in society. The legacy of slavery is a stronghold that continues to manipulate the lives of the same marginalized groups in society. The status of the black community, particularly black women, most clearly shows the manifestation of (literally) centuries of discrimination, and, by refusing to acknowledge such inequalities, ignores their humanity.

My freshmen year in college I was assigned a book in my "Race in American Politics Class" called *The Miner's Canary*, by Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres. The context of the book takes place in the United States, however, the allegory of the book held that when the most vulnerable population in society (in the case of the example, the canary) dies, it becomes too dangerous for the stronger group to continue further (the miner). In this sense, it is this vulnerable, unprotected group which carries the burden of situating the status of the rest of society. In this context, if we refuse to acknowledge blatant violations of human rights, we remain a very, very sick society.



**Definition of Terms:**

Aviso previo: One month's notice before

Carteira Profissional: Worker's card

Empregada, doemstica, criada or empregada domestica: female domestic worker

Férias and feriadadas: Holiday and holidays

INSS (Instituto Nacional de Seguro Social): retirement or pension fund employer pays for employee

Patroa: femplae employer

Patroa: male employer

Previdência Social: Worker's compensation

Salário mínimo or O salário: Minimum wage, R\$510/month

## Introduction:

I conducted my Independent Study Project (ISP) in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, at Sindoméstico/BA, the only union for domestic workers in the state. I worked under the supervision of Marinalva de Deus Barbosa, one of four active *direitoras*<sup>1</sup> at the syndicate. For three weeks, my job, as the *porteira*, most of the time consisted of locking and unlocking the entrance door; a precaution they began two months ago after being robbed at gunpoint.

### *Sindoméstico*

Sindoméstico began officially May 13, 1990 after decades of informal resistance. While *domésticas* always exercised individual acts of resistance against their oppressors, it was not until 1990, after the ratification of the new constitution in 1988, that domestic workers in Bahia, and more accessibly, in Salvador, transitioned from being a legally unrecognized association, to a formal syndicate, equipped to service some forms of work exploitation and enforce worker's rights. This included mandating employers to sign the *carteira*, and pay INSS, a right that was granted only in 1972 with law 5.859. Still later, in 1988, federal law extended rights for domestic workers to include social rights such as minimum wage, maternity leave and "decimo terceiro salário"<sup>2</sup> Thereby, *technically* recognizing domestic work as a profession.

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<sup>1</sup> Female director

<sup>2</sup> "Estudo condicoes de vida das trabalhadoras domesticas na cidade de Salvador, Bahia. Brasil." 9.

- "Decimo terceiro salario," literally means 13<sup>th</sup> salary, and is a bonus month of pay employees receive at the end of the year.

The establishment of *Sindoméstico*, however, while monumental in the movement for equality and fairness in the workplace for domestic workers, also plainly shows the numerous flaws in the societal culture that devalues this work, and a political system that reinforces this notion by categorizing it separately legally.

### *My Research*

My research question for this project changed from my initial proposal in order to show how governmental policies reinforce the devaluation of domestic work and legally back or overlook acts of violence. The question is as follows:

How/In what ways are black domestic women workers further marginalized as a result of their gender, race and class, particularly by their female employers, and how is this further perpetuated by current oppressive laws?

After three weeks of participating, interviewing and observing at *Sindoméstico*, I formulated 4 major themes that respond to my primary question. First, as the literature has suggested, most women who seek assistance at *Sindoméstico* are black, and, most *patroas* are white. Of the women who I interviewed, all *patroas* were identified by the *domésticas* as white. Second, almost all the *domésticas* who I spoke with were engaged in a dispute with their *patroas*. Of all the women who had a *patroa*, they all responded that they communicated mainly with the *patroa* and were mainly instructed by her. Third, the most common forms of violence received by their *patroas* were disrespecting their citizenship, offering verbal humiliation and abuse, and socially marginalizing

them, by, for example, prohibiting them to use their silverware. Fourth, women are from the interior. This fourth theme is often a consequence of verbal violence; however, it also shows the dislocation of these women who leave the interior (i.e. their family, and sometimes, their own children) in order to attempt to earn more money (often caring for other children). Fifth and finally, the use of the law to legally oppress the domestic worker. I identified three manifestations of this: first, the lack of regulation for *diaristas*, or daily workers; second, not recognizing overtime or enforcing an eight hour work day; and third and finally, holding domestic work as a category of its own and refusing the “Consolidação das leis do Trabalho” (CLT), the consolidation of work laws.

Common names for female domestic workers include *doméstica*, *empregada*, and *criada*-- all of which are greatly undervalued and used as forms of insult. I choose to use the word *doméstica* in my paper after working with Sindocástico, mainly because surrounding the walls of the syndicate, include posters that read: “Trabalho Doméstico=Trabalho Decente” and “Trabalho doméstico é profissão.”<sup>3</sup> By doing so, they re-appropriate the meaning of the term and show that the profession, like the person, deserve dignity.

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<sup>3</sup> Domestic work= decent work and domestic work is a profession

**Statement of Social Relevance:**

According to the 2000 Census, African descendents make up 45% of the total Brazilian population, yet despite this large representation, the Human Development Index (HDI), which combines per capita income, education and life expectancy into an indicating number, found that in every state in the country, the HDI for African descendants was lower than for its white population. While the reality for the Brazilian black population is a grim one, black women, further still, ranked in the lowest position, 45 points below the ranking of white women, and 73 points below the ranking of white men.<sup>4</sup>

To engage in a study of gender, race and class issues, is to acknowledge the intricate relationship these indicators have, and the significant role they have for a large part of the country's population. While issues of gender, race and class, together, have indeed become more relevant in both social and academic discussions, it is important to always indicate their relationship and the manner they influence the rights of women who are particularly socially vulnerable. I have chosen to look at women of colour and the manner their lives have been affected, not only by racism or patriarchy, but also by other women, as a manner of further studying this dynamic and nuanced form of oppression. Additionally, it is relevant to acknowledge that many of these forms of domination have been permit and often facilitated by a lack of regulation, an issue still present today.

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<sup>4</sup> Beato, Lucila Bandeira. "INEQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS OF AFRICAN DESCENDANTS IN BRAZIL" *Journal of Black Studies* 34.6 (2004): 766-786. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCO. Web. 13 Apr. 2010.

It is important to understand oppression in the form of violence, especially by other females and the historical justification for this relationship. While women are burdened by a stratified social structure that materializes in lower salaries, violence in the form of physical and psychological methods, and a narrowing of individual rights, their solidarity is hindered by a racial disconnect that appears in, for example, the relationship between black domestic workers and their female employers. It is therefore relevant for all women, that this relationship be further analyzed, discussed, and vocalized.

**Methodology:***Observations:*

I worked at Sindomestico/BA during three weeks, Monday through Friday, from 12PM – 5PM. As part of my responsibilities, I was in charge of the front desk and welcomed domestic workers and sometimes their employers come in and wait to be helped. I originally intended to sit in conversations between the lawyers and the *doméstica*, but after I began interviewing the women semi-formally in the waiting room, I learned that they were very comfortable talking to me and that I could ask questions relevant to my research by having one-on-one interviews.

*Participation:*

I was given the opportunity to participate by Sindoméstico, who allowed me to remain with them during the entire day, even before the syndicate opened to the public. While I intended to maintain an “active involvement in the cases,” as I stated in my proposal, I learned that my three-week time limitation did not permit an in-dept study of few women, as I would only get a chance to see each of the women who walked in once. Workers came in the first day to obtain information, and if they choose to proceed legally, they met with an accountant, and return only during a designated time with their employer to settle the dispute. I learned that most cases do not go to court, and the ones that do are handled only during the particular *advogado*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lawyer

Because of this particularity, I choose to reform my participation method and instead interview women while I was on duty, while they waited, and often interrupted as they saw a director or accountant.

Additionally, I participated in all the Sindoméstio 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary events, took pictures, spoke with the directors of the site and formed strong relationships with them. Most of these events occurred within the first week and a half and significantly facilitated the conclusion of my project.

#### *Interviews:*

I intended to schedule particular interviews with key people, such as the lawyers working on particular cases, the directors and specific women that exemplified the forms of violence between she and the *patroa*, however, due to the time restraint, I opted to interview many more *domésticas* and the staff at the center who I worked with daily. Additionally, because all my interviews were with *domésticas* I just met or with staff during downtime at Sindoméstico, they all had a level of informality and were not taped. While I am still gaining a grasp of Portuguese, I felt comfortable enough to not rely on a recording of the interviews. None of my interviews were ever planned very much ahead of time, and while I had general questions I usually asked, I was open to have a flexible interview and hear their stories. I believe that this method worked well for me because of my constant presence at Sindoméstico.



## Elaboration of Theoretical Framework:

### *The Legacy of Slavery*

I based my research on the social and political effects the legacy of slavery have had on black women in Brazil. A visible result of the enslavement, oppression and discrimination of blacks, especially black women, during and after Emancipation, is through the distribution of labor today. It is through this framework that I intended to assess the modern forms of oppression, both in the private realm (violence in their job as domésticas, particularly the relationship with the *patroa*) and institutional (political) forms of oppression remnant today. The status of black women today, though significantly different, parallels many of the same forms of abuse black women experienced during slavery.

The institution of slavery condoned perverse treatment of slave women by the patrões. This treatment of slave women entailed “backbreaking domestic and farm labour” for profit.<sup>6</sup> This form of exploitation excluded any kind of regulation and demanded high levels of physical endurance by the slave. Slave women were not only engaged in heavy physical work, but also experienced moral damage, such as being separated from their own newborn children in order to nurse the “children of the white plantation family.”<sup>7</sup> They left their own families in order to raise the children of the people who oppressed them.

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<sup>6</sup> Lima, Marcia and Rezende, Claudia B. (2004). Linking Gender, Class and Race in Brazil. *Social Identities* 10 (6), 757-773.

<sup>7</sup> Lima, Marcia and Rezende, Claudia B. (2004). Linking Gender, Class and Race in Brazil. *Social Identities* 10 (6), 757-773. 760

Not only were slave women physically and mentally abused, they were also negatively stigmatized as sexual objects, and consequently, treated as such. Black women were subject to the sexual pleasure of their *patrão*, and were used to serve as young men's "sexual initiation," yet, were ironically viewed "corrupters of the white family."<sup>8</sup> The social position of black women, a consequence of their race, class and gender, enabled an oppressive lifestyle that linked her to gender-specific tasks that were undervalued, demanding and unregulated by law.

In Brazil, slavery was abolished in 1888, but the struggle for the black community, especially black women, did not cease. The racial inequalities between white and black people became justified by their "non-adaptation to the capitalist system."<sup>9</sup> Their inability to gain social or political equality was linked to the competition they faced with the influx of European immigrants. With the movement of white women into the labor force, those with the most schooling could compete and "succeed in fighting for a share in the male occupational sphere, while poor women, mostly black and brown remained in domestic work."<sup>10</sup> Black women never left their occupational role as domestic employees, and the cheapening of the job title did not either.

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<sup>8</sup> Lima, Marcia and Rezende, Claudia B. (2004). Linking Gender, Class and Race in Brazil. *Social Identities* 10 (6), 757-773. 760

<sup>9</sup> Lima, Marcia and Rezende, Claudia B. (2004). Linking Gender, Class and Race in Brazil. *Social Identities* 10 (6), 757-773. 760.

<sup>10</sup> Lima, Marcia and Rezende, Claudia B. (2004). 763.

“In Brazil, black women are symbolically and practically associated with domestic work.”<sup>11</sup> Black women are linked to a job that is significantly undervalued, manifested in the lack of rights and regulation the job continues to have. 93% of domestic workers are women, and of these 72% lack a *carteira assinada*.<sup>12</sup> The amount of *domésticas* working in the informal sector, without regulation, underpaid, overworked, and without legal recourse, demonstrates the lack of recognition of the job, and of the women who make up the task force.<sup>13</sup> The legacy of slavery is strongly reflected in the fact that “the social relationship that structure this work is deeply racialised... the core kin group is normatively white; the employees, black.”<sup>14</sup> Another similar expression of the condition of black women during slavery is the significant amount of women who live with their patrões. According to a study based in Porto Alegre, of the domestic workers there, more than 30% were live-in employees.<sup>15</sup> These employees were more likely to work longer hours per day and had a greater likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment, over those that traveled to their own homes.<sup>16</sup> Forms of violence against black women today are rooted in historical examples of exploitation. The status of black women during slavery sheds light to the blatant inequalities existent today.

### *Patroas and Domésticas*

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<sup>11</sup> McCullum, Cecilia. ( 2007). 55

<sup>12</sup> IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de geografia e Estatística), 2000.

-Form of social security.

<sup>13</sup> Porto, Dora. (2008). 289.

<sup>14</sup> McCullum, Cecilia. ( 2007). 61.

<sup>15</sup> Porto, Dora. (2008). 290.

<sup>16</sup> Cerqueira, Elder, & DeSouza, Eros R. 1277.

In a comparison between the conditions of white women and black women in Brazil, with the criteria used by the HDI, black women score lower than black men, white men and white women in every social indicator. Their overall score falls 45 points below white women.<sup>17</sup> There are 1.6 million domestic workers in the six largest metropolitan areas in Brazil, and more than 90% are women.<sup>18</sup> It is on this clear distinction between the socioeconomic position of black women and white women that my research is founded on, and studies the relationship between mostly black *domsticas* and mostly white *patroas*. Porto describes the tension between these two groups of women, as the *doméstica* views the *patroa* as arrogant and proud, while the *patroa* assumes the *empregada* is ignorant and worthless, because they choose to work in arduous work. She states:

“As patroas, que têm o privilégio de exercer o poder de dominação, são vistas pelas empregadas como preguiçosas e incapazes, seres tão arrogantes que devem dar graças por encontrar uma maneira de salvar-se da execução das tarefas domésticas, mesmo que assim estejam optando por estabelecer em seu cotidiano uma relação desgastante emocionalmente que ainda hoje é caracterizada como ‘um mal necessário’. E as empregadas são vistas por suas patroas como preguiçosas e incapazes, seres tão ignorantes que devem rejubilar-se por encontrar uma maneira de salvar-se da miséria absoluta, mesmo que assim estejam optando por viver num regime de trabalho fisicamente desgastante, próximo à servidão.”<sup>19</sup>

In this arrangement, black women continue serving white women. While Porto points out that the aggression from both sides, it is the *patroa* who holds power

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<sup>17</sup> Refer to page 10 of monography, sunder section for “Social Relevance”

<sup>18</sup> IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de geografia e Estatística), 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Porto, Dora. (2008). 290.

and authority in the space of her own home. This relationship illustrates a modern form of tension: nuanced and complex.

### Findings Analysis:

The legacy of slavery on the lives of black women today is not difficult to notice. In fact, in many ways, the treatment of the *doméstica* continues to follow some of the same oppressive gestures. On the one hand, the *doméstica* is needed and is entrusted delicate responsibilities, on the other, she is a victim numerous forms of violence, and is insufficiently protected by law. While it is a reality that a *doméstica* sometimes experiences mistreatment by other members of the family (sometimes even by people outside the family), I look at the relationship with the *doméstica* and the *patroa* and the tension that exists among these two groups of women.

#### *Black Domésticas, White Patroas*

All except two of the *domésticas* who I spoke with were black. During my three weeks at Sindoméstico, I saw two white *domésticas* come in to seek assistance. I interviewed both these women. I asked all the *emplegadas* the race of their *patroa*, and they all identified their *patroa* as white. This part of my field study strongly supports my research in terms of the distribution of labor by race. There is a clear link between race and the distribution of work (hence, income) in Salvador. I asked many women whether they had experienced that they perceived to be racial tension or discrimination, all of who reported they had not. “No one ever said anything about my skin color, but I was badly treated sometimes.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Santos, Francisca (Chica) Goncalves dos. Personal Interview. 20 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 19.

### *The patroa*

All the *domésticas* who I spoke with were at Sindoméstico because they were in some sort of conflict with the *patroa*. The conflict varied from refusal to pay money owed, to more aggressive verbal attacks on their personality. “The two aspects of the difference between blacks and whites: life experience and social position”<sup>21</sup> The disconnect between the black and white experience perpetuates a conflicting situation between a group of women whose work is devalued and another group who have always cheapened it. As the president of the federal syndicate for domestic workers states:

“Because a *companheira* in the feminist movement struggling for the right to equality, the right to sex, the right to abortion, the right to pregnancy, to maternity and all of a sudden, the woman who is in her house cannot get pregnant, cannot have a boyfriend, cannot study, because she has to stay with her boss’s children so she can go out and be politically active, or go out to do her doctorate.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, it is also relevant to point out that some *domésticas* reported having more positive relationships with their *patroas*. Chica, Nalva and Maria do Carmo all claimed they had a good *patroa* at some point in their career.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Nalva, she stated she experienced a positive relationship with her last *patroa*, the first and only employer to have ever signed her *carteira*. In speaking with Angelina Lima de Jesus, she stated that she was called in by her employer, who she had worked for 12 years. Angelina left her work for medical reasons, but

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<sup>21</sup> McCullum, Cecilia. 70

<sup>22</sup> McCullum, Cecilia. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Santos, Francisca (Chica) Goncalves dos. Personal Interview. 20 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 19  
Barbosa, Marinalva de Deus. Personal Interview. 6 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 37.  
Maria do Carmo. Personal Interview. 25 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 25.

stated that her *patroa* had always been fair, signed her *carteira*, and paid INSS. The *patroa* was very “Direitinha,” or very honest.

This experience, however, was significantly less common within the women that I interviewed and less consistent with the secondary sourced I found. All women, except one, who worked for a single man, stated they were mostly directed by a woman in the home. “Most *empregadas* mainly have a relationship with the *patroa*, and as a result, most of the violence is from her. Men do not really hire live-in *empregadas*.”<sup>24</sup> The violence *domésticas* are subjected to by their *patroas* is explicit in the interviews that I conducted.

### *Forms of Violence*

#### *Disrespect of citizenship*

Most of the women I spoke with either did not have their *carteira assignada* by the *patroa* they had last worked for or had worked previously worked without *assinatura*. Consequently, most had worked years without INSS, paid holidays, had worked for less than the minimum wage, without medical insurance, workers compensation, among some of the social services granted through INSS. As elaborated previously, 93% of domestic workers are women, and of these, 72% lack a *carteira assinada*.<sup>25</sup> This form of violence leaves *domésticas* unprotected and vulnerable. “*Patroas* do not like contributing to the “Previdência Social.” It is awful, in case of an illness, they have no where to

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<sup>24</sup> Velousa, Doutora . Personal Interview. 18 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 14

<sup>25</sup> IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de geografia e Estatística), 2000.

-Legal documentation of years worked to receive social services in the future.



go.<sup>26</sup> Valdilene Messias Silva is a *doméstica* who has worked for her *patroa* for the last two and a half years, working seven days a week, holidays, without benefits, and without the *carteira assinada*. Consequently, her *patroa*, a school principle, pays her R\$400 per month, R\$150 less than *o salario*.<sup>27</sup> It is not uncommon for women to work many years without obtaining proof of work by obtaining their *carteira assinada*. Executive Director of Sindoméstico, Cleusa Maria de Jesus, shared having begun working at the age of 12 years old. Now a middle-aged woman, she has only 10 years documented in her *carteira*.<sup>28</sup> The lack of legal documentation of their years of service results in a lack of social assistance available to them in the future, and exacerbates their marginal existence in society.

### *Work exploitation*

The *patroa* also exercises her upper-hand in the *empregada-patroa* relationship in her exploitation and abuse of the *doméstica's* services. Being that the job takes places in the private domain, *doméstica's* are overworked and overburdened without penalization or consequence bestowed on the *patroa*. As Doutora Sueli stated in an interview, answering a question about the exploitation of domestic workers:

“In the new Federal Constitution in 1988, domestic work was finally recognized. These workers finally get *feriadas*<sup>29</sup>, Sundays off and a 44 hour per week schedule. The problem is that these women work far more

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<sup>26</sup> Velousa, Doutora Sueli. Personal Interview. 18 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Silva, Valdilene Messias. Personal Interview. 21 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 23.

- Minimum wage

<sup>28</sup> Jesus, Cleusa Maria de. Personal Interview. 25 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Holidays

that 44 hours per week. It is rare that a domestic worker will only eight hours Monday through Friday and only the four hours allotted to Saturday. And they have no legal right to claim overtime. The law does not recognize overtime for domestic workers.”<sup>30</sup>

Once hired, the *doméstica* often assumes all the responsibilities of the home. They wake up before the family or arrive early in the morning to prepare for the morning tasks, tend to the children, cook, clean, shop at night with the *patroa* and follow all orders granted, usually by the *patroa*.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence of lacking a *carteira*, their work is further exploited by cutting their already low wages. Sandra Gouvia Rodrigues, one of the white *domésticas* I interviewed shared that once she was hired, she was given extended tasks and paid R\$30 less per month than the agreement made previously.<sup>32</sup>

### *Verbal Abuse*

Some of the women I spoke with stated that they were commonly yelled at by the *patroa*, some called names, like stupid and ignorant, or blamed for things. In speaking with Dilma dos Santos de Oliveira, she stated her *patroa* “liked to get in (her) face. She was very verbally aggressive. She was always stressed. She worked a lot, too. She would yell orders at me sometimes.”<sup>33</sup> These aggressive forms sometimes take the form of blatant attacks and cruelty. Valdilene admitted to being called ignorant and stupid simply because she is from the interior of Bahia. When asked why she remained with her boss, she said,

<sup>30</sup> Velousa, Doutora Sueli. Personal Interview. 18 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Santos, Francisca (Chica) Goncalves dos. Personal Interview. 20 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 16-19.

<sup>32</sup> Rodrigues, Sandra Gouvia. Personal Interview. 6 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Oliveira, Dilma dos Santos de. Personal Interview. 6 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 8-9.

her *patroa* would apologize and tell her she was sorry when she threatened to leave.<sup>34</sup> *Domésticas* may also serve as “punching bags” for frustrated *patroas*, who hold a higher position of power in the relationship. In the case of Adelaide Lemos, she was constantly a victim of faulty accusations during the time she worked with her last *patroa*. “She would tell me that she could not find this or that and that I took it. Sometimes she said that I let people in the house and that they took her things, but she always found them right where she left them.”<sup>35</sup> These expressions of violence indicate the different levels of status held by each group of women, and the abusive form of reinforcing and perpetuating these roles.

### *Social Degradation*

In another dimension of the violence experienced, *domésticas* are often subjected to social humiliation in their literal segregation from the rest of society. Some women who I spoke with said they had worked in homes where they ate from separate places than the rest of the family, prohibited from using the common elevator and even from sitting on the sofa. In speaking with Chica, Nalva and Maria do Carmo, they all shared having to eat from separate plates and prohibited from using common spaces such as the dining room table or the sofa.<sup>36</sup> Their occupation of limited space takes on an element of physical violence.

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<sup>34</sup> Silva, Valdilene Messias. Personal Interview. 21 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Adelaide Lemos. Personal Interview. 28 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Santos, Francisca (Chica) Gonçalves dos. Personal Interview. 20 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 19.

“Physical violence has reduced significantly. It is still an issue, and unfortunately, we do not always get to hear about it. But there are other physical acts that are very violent. It is not uncommon to literally throw the *empregada*’s belongings out in the street, unpacked, just like trash. Sometimes fire them early in the morning or late at night without transportation money or even paying them what they deserve for working up to that point. Sometimes the women are out of the house without any money.”<sup>37</sup>

In this perspective, black women are linked to a job that is significantly undervalued, manifested in the lack of rights and regulation the job continues to have.

#### *The Use of the Law to Oppress Domestic Workers*

“The *patroa* places herself on a superior platform, ‘se pone num plano superior.’ She looks to exploit the *empregada* because it is permitted by law, ‘procura exploração doméstico porque a lei permite isso.’”<sup>38</sup>

In speaking with numerous women and Doutora Sueli and informational literature, I gathered that Brazil continues to sponsor job discrimination and perpetuates the violent forms of abuse already prevalent.

#### *The Diarista*

The practice of hiring *diaristas*, or daily workers, is a common form of subverting the law and avoid having to grant social benefits to a *doméstica*, who essentially works 44 hours. Though *diaristas*, as stated by Cleusa, should work one or two days of the week, I interviewed two women who worked five days of the week, instead of the five and a half that are required to meet the

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Barbosa, Marinalva de Deus. Personal Interview. 6 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 37.

Jesus, Cleusa Maria de. Personal Interview. 25 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Velousa, Doutora Sueli. Personal Interview. 18 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Velousa, Doutora . Personal Interview. 18 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 13.

fulltime requirement. This law serves to exploit women who essentially work almost as much as a fulltime *doméstica*, yet are deprived of social provisions offered by INSS. In the case of Indaiara de Lima Sampaio, she worked Monday through Friday all day, but did not come in on Saturday, therefore, not meeting the legal requirement, to earn minimum wage, instead, earning R\$250 for her work.<sup>39</sup> The lack of regulation on practice of hiring permits *doméstica* to go unprotected.

#### *44 Hours per Week*

The fulltime load for most workers in Brazil is 44 hours. While some workers unions like CUT (Central *Única* dos Trabalhadores) are currently running a campaign to reduce the amount to 40, it is not uncommon for *domésticas* to work far beyond the allotted time. It is common for *domésticas* to work a full day on Saturdays, work beyond the eight ours Monday through Friday and sometimes holidays. As expressed by Valdiene Mesias Silva, "I work too much there. I work holidays, I work Sundays, I have to wake up at 4 or 5AM and get everything ready..."<sup>40</sup> Currently, overtime compensation does not exist in the work category for domestic workers. Consequently, despite working far beyond 44 hour per week, *domésticas* essentially donate their extra hours of service in order to sometimes obtain minimum wage, sometimes.

#### *"Consolidação das leis do Trabalho" (CLT)*

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<sup>39</sup> Sampaio, Indaiara de Lima. Personal Interview. 6 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 5-5.

<sup>40</sup> Silva, Valdilene Messias. Personal Interview. 21 May 2010. *ISP Field Journal*. 22.

Currently, domestic work stands as its own category. Legally, this means that the rights granted to all other forms of recognized work are not necessarily granted to domestic workers. Presently, domestic workers are not granted overtime hours (this does not exist in their category of work), work accident insurance, “fundo de Garantia por Tempo de Serviço” (FGTS)<sup>41</sup> and unemployment insurance—all guaranteed in all other categories of work. Therefore, legally, their job is treated as inferior and perpetuates the abuse many *domésticas*, *poorer*, *black women*, *already* receive in the home.

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<sup>41</sup> Employers contribute 8% of employee’s income redeemable in case of death by the family or during retirement.

**Conclusion:**

During my first full week at Sindoméstico, on week after I arrived with Nalva, Sindoméstico had its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and celebrated by hosting a special ceremony in the Municipal Legislature in Salvador. Present were some of the original founders, who were honored, including Creuza de Oliveira, the founder of Sindoméstico/BA and the current president of the Federation, legislators of the Worker's Party (PT) and a room filled of *domésticas* and supporters of the movement. During the special session, Creuza gave speech where she told the story of a poor *doméstica*, and her plight to keep the integrity of her own family, despite never being around. She said that *domésticas* sacrifice their own families for other families that oppress them, and care for children that are not theirs, while they let their own fall into the cycle of violence and disparity.

The role of the *doméstica* is long and extensive. She works long hours, sometimes travels a long distance to her home, or remains in the house where she works, where it is more likely she will be further overworked and potentially suffer greater forms of violence.<sup>42</sup> The status of *domésticas*, made up mostly by black women, is not solely one of grim relationships and complete extortion, yet, its presence is strong enough to call attention to these matters and clearly identify the manner that black women continue to be stepped on, in the work force by their *patroas*, and politically by institutional forms of oppression.

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<sup>42</sup> Cerqueira, Elder, & DeSouza

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## Indications for Further Research

There were two issues that particularly interested me and should be further explored. First, about half of the women I spoke with were originally from the interior of Bahia, and moved away from their families in order to earn more money. More could be studied on the status of these women and the types of working conditions they endure there, and the transition between their *patroas* there and their *patroas* here.

Second, looking at the perspective of the *patroa* would also make for a much more interesting and elaborate study. I did not know that I would have access to *patroas*, who are summoned by the syndicate. While they are less accessible (my experience was that they waited less time in the waiting room because they have particular meeting times and are generally rushed to leave) it might work out well if planned out with a director.

**ISP Appendix:**

1. Could you have done this project in the USA? What data or sources were unique to the culture in which you did the project?

I could have done a similar project, however, Brazil is “special” in that the country, though lead by *Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT)*, the Worker’s Party, domestic workers are legally oppressed. Also, despite having some rights, such as the right to have a *carteira assinada*, these rights came only after 1973-- only three decades ago. The job distribution along the lines of race is also a much starker reality in Brazil. While a similar project could definitely be done in Brazil, I was able to look at a movement that only recently began to gain rights as workers and citizens.

2. Could you have done any part of it in the USA? Would the results have been different? How?

I could have done the review of secondary sources in the US, but I completed this section only after I had already begun working at *Sindoméstico*, and therefore the results might have been different. I would have been less informed on the issue.

3. Did the process of doing the ISP modify your learning style? How was this different from your previous style and approaches to learning?

While I have engaged a few community-based sorts of projects, I earned a lot about working independently (though I was guided by numerous people all along the way) and about the informal ways of addressing academic issues.

4. How much of the final monograph is primary data? How much is from secondary sources?

About 30% is secondary and 70% primary. Though, I think that the primary research influenced most of the monograph.

5. What criteria did you use to evaluate data for inclusion in the final monograph?

I found secondary sources that worked with my research question and applied the information that I found relevant. In terms of the primary data, I used the themes that I identified in my Field Journal and linked the interviews that most strongly indicated the issue.

6. How did the “drop-offs” or field exercises contribute to the process and completion of the ISP?

The “drop-off” was helpful in that it placed me in a part of the city I might not have visited and helped me use a different bus route. The field exercise that was most helpful was the one in anticipation of our ISP projects, where we discussed answering questions and talking to people as you had the opportunity, because you never know if you will have another chance.

7. What part of the FSS most significantly influenced the ISP process?

My experience at Sertão Vivo really facilitated my becoming comfortable speaking to strangers in Portuguese and asking questions in order to understand an issue. I was living semi-independently, in a completely different city, and really open to the unexpected. This was an extremely helpful and instructive experience.

8. What were the principle problems you encountered during the ISP? Where you able to resolve these and how?

I times, especially during the first week, I became very anxious and frustrated that more people were not coming in to seek assistance, but I learned that there would be some days that would have many more people and some with less.

9. Did you experience any time constraints? How could these be resolved?

Before I began my ISP, I was under the impression that I would be able to follow a few cases as they developed and get as far as I could with them. Three weeks, however, was not enough time to approach my project in this manner. Therefore, I had to modify my methodology to instead speak to many domésticas. This required a lower level of formality on my behalf and usually a casual conversation before or after the interview.

10. Did your original topic change and evolve as you discovered or did not discover new resources? Did the resources available modify your topic?

I intended to look at the legal development of a few cases; however, the time constraints limited what I could gather on this front. However, I did learn a lot about the legal oppression domésticas face, as well as their category of work and syndicates. Therefore, I choose to include this

component and include the laws that perpetuate the oppression of poor black women.

11. How did you go about finding resources; institutions, interviews, interviewees, publications, etc

I used my school's library database to find articles for my Theoretical framework. Valeria helped me identify Sindoméstico as an organization that I could work with. Because I was working at Sindoméstico every day, I spent most of my day there and would occasionally sit next to a few people and pick up a conversation. Occasionally these became interviews, which are documented in my Field Journal. Additionally, Chica, a director at Sindoméstico significantly helped me speak to women early on, before I gained the courage to approach these women. Interviews the director and lawyer were all done at Sindoméstico during our downtime.

12. What methods did you use? How did you decide to use such method(s)?

Because I could not literally witness the relationship between the *domésticas* and the *patroas*, I relied mostly on interviews. While I did observations, they reflected more on the structure and functions of Sindoméstico. I did attend a special session at the state legislator one night, which helped me gain insight into the legal component.

13. Comments on your relations with your advisor.

Nalva was a very helpful advisor throughout the process. She introduced me to everyone, answered all of my questions and taught me a lot about the struggle. We never had any formal meetings because I was literally always with her, so I felt I could always ask for help or clarification. She provided me with a lot of helpful literature, which cleared up a lot of confusion about the rights *domésticas* have and the history of the movement.

14. Did you research any ends? Hypotheses which turned out to be not useful? Interviews or visits that had no application?

I had interview that were less relevant than others, but nothing too drastic.

15. What insights did you gain into the culture as a result of doing the ISP, which you might not otherwise have gained?

Part of my ISP experience included living with Nalva, which turned out to be insightful, I learned a lot of the personal struggles (she and her two

sisters are or have been domestic workers themselves) endured by domestic workers, such as the lack of education, more elaborate cases of verbal abuse, health concerns, and personal toll the job can have on the individual.

16. Did the ISP process assist our adjustment to the culture? Integration?

I would say that the nature of my participation allowed me to connect with many more people and learn many more life stories than I would have had I chosen a different project, but I was never really "integrated." I have an accident and everyone knew I was going to leave in 3 weeks, so that was not really something that would have occurred.

17. What were the principle lessons you learned from the ISP process?

I learned that I learn much more from an organization on my own, rather than with a large group of 20 students. That it is important to continue learning Portuguese even after the class is over. Also, I think that living in an appropriate community is very important. For example, I mostly spoke with women who earned R\$510 or less, therefore, it was easier for me to say that I was staying in *Sete Portas*, a lower income neighborhood rather than in *Barra*, *Vitoria* or *Garcia*.

18. If you met a future student who wanted to do this same project, what would be your recommendations to him/her?

Make sure you take Portuguese class seriously and practice as much as you can with your family. You will probably speak mostly English with the other SIT students, so take advantage of the three months before you being the project. It makes the experience more interesting because you can understand what is occurring around you and can have better interviews.

19. Given what you know now, would you undertake this, or a similar project again?

Yes. And more time would help.