

## **Une chaîne de précarité sexospécifique : les employeuses à faible revenu et leurs travailleuses domestiques adolescentes dans le secteur informel de Lima**

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### *Résumé*

*La participation croissante des femmes au marché du travail dans un contexte de développement capitaliste se fait au détriment d'autres femmes et filles au sein de l'économie de service informelle, particulièrement pour celles qui fournissent des services domestiques. La littérature féministe s'est penchée sur ce problème chez les femmes de classe moyenne ou supérieure. Mais on en sait moins sur la façon dont les citadines à faible revenu répondent aux besoins de leur maisonnée lorsque les services sociaux sont inexistantes ou inadéquats, surtout pour les enfants et les personnes âgées. Cet article examine la relation entre les femmes défavorisées, chefs de famille et employées précaires du secteur informel de Lima au Pérou, et les jeunes filles, majoritairement adolescentes, qu'elles emploient comme travailleuses domestiques. Je soutiens que les services ménagers fournis par ces jeunes filles renforcent la sexospécificité du travail précaire. J'ai constaté que les travailleuses de moins de 16 ans sont classées comme des aides domestiques, sont généralement employées par des membres de leur famille, et ne reçoivent souvent aucun salaire. Celles qui ont plus de 16 ans sont habituellement considérées comme des travailleuses et n'ont pas de liens familiaux avec leurs employeuses, mais reçoivent des salaires peu élevés. Dans les deux cas, la relation travailleuse-employeuse est asymétrique et basée sur une précarité mutuelle.*

# Low-income “Employers” and Adolescent Domestic Workers: A Gendered Chain of Precarity in Lima’s Informal Sector

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## *Abstract*

*Women’s increased participation in the workforce in a context of capitalist-led development is happening at the expense of other women and girls in the informal service economy, particularly those who provide support in domestic services. Feminist literature has examined this issue among middle- and upper-class women, yet less is known about how low-income urban women meet their household reproduction needs in economies that provide limited state-run social services, especially around child and elder care. This paper examines the relationship between impoverished urban female heads of household precariously engaged in the informal sector in Lima, Peru, and the mostly adolescent girls they employ as domestic workers. I argue that the household services provided by young girls reinforce gendered labour in precarious work. I found that workers below the age of 16 become classified as “helpers” and are usually employed by family members and generally do not receive wages. Those aged 16 or older, however, are usually viewed as workers and do not have a family relationship with their employers but receive low wages. In both cases, the worker-employer relationship is asymmetrical and based on mutual precariousness.*

## **Introduction**

On a hot summer day in January 2018, my research assistant and I travelled, first on a “combi”<sup>2</sup> and later, on foot, to a small market in the San Genaro neighbourhood within the Chorrillos district of urban Lima. Located in one of the area’s most impoverished shantytowns, the “market” where Isabel (born in Apurimac in 1968) asked us to meet her was not to be found on Google Maps! With the help of our local guide, we made our way to Isabel’s market stall atop a dusty hill. Here, she proffered us a couple of wobbly stools in her tiny space, an enclosure filled with canned goods, rice and other food staples. This being the first of our interviews with low-income

female heads of household, we sought to understand how working women in some of Lima's poorest urban neighbourhoods meet their household and care needs. Isabel's testimony was revealing.

A mother of four children — aged 28, 23, 20 and 18 — as well as grandmother to two five-year-old boys, Isabel recounted how her niece had arrived from the Peruvian southern highlands in Apurimac six months before to live with her and “help” at home. While two of her children had their own families elsewhere, Isabel shared her home with her other two children and a grandchild. The older of her children at home, the mother of the grandchild, worked long hours as a waitress. Isabel's youngest child, a boy, had recently finished high school and, as she noted, “sleeps all day.” Isabel explained that her 15-year-old niece was instrumental in allowing her small business to function. She noted: “Without Mari, I would have to close my place in the market and go home to cook.” Furthermore, she explained that without Mari's support, she would be forced to bring at least one of her grandchildren to work. Clearly, without Mari's help, business would suffer; Isabel would have insufficient time to sell her products, and some items would surely spoil.

Our conversation with Isabel laid bare that neither her partner nor her adult children provide much support. Charged additionally with caring for her grandchildren while their mothers work outside the home, Isabel relies on the services of an adolescent niece, who helps her with the children, as well as with some cooking and washing. In the summer months, given Isabel's schedule, we estimate that this would mean at least a 10-12 hour workday for the girl. In exchange, Isabel provides a home and the intention of sending her to school, as well as the occasional “tip” so that “Mari can recharge her cell phone.”

Isabel's case is a powerful illustration of how household and care needs are being met by some very low-income women in one of Latin America's urban capitals. Despite a global context in which women work outside of the home and female-headed households are on the rise, we know little about how poor, urban women in Latin America — often internal migrants employed as paid domestic workers in third party homes or working in other informal, precarious jobs — attend to their own household needs. My ongoing research in Peru suggests that paid domestic service is utilized not only by the middle and upper classes but is also employed by low-income families to address household reproduction needs in a context in

which neoliberalist policies ensure limited state services, including childcare and eldercare (Pérez, 2020).

National statistical data reveals that the penetration of social programs in poor, urban Lima neighbourhoods is quite low (ENAHO, 2016). Qali Warma, a program that aims to cover the dietary needs of low-income children who attend state schools, provides the most coverage. However, this represents only 16.48 per cent of those surveyed nationally who classify in the lowest income bracket. The situation for childcare and eldercare is even worse. For example, Cuna Más, which provides early childhood care for 0-2-year-olds, and Pensión 65, a non-contributory state stipend for adults who are 65 and older — both national social programs meant to serve the extreme poor in both rural and urban areas of the country — maintain an abysmally low presence in Lima's urban low-income populations. Cuna Más's presence in Lima is only 0.23 per cent among the lowest income groups; Pensión 65, is even more negligible — only 0.07 per cent of lower income urban Lima households surveyed declare receiving support from this program. Thus, state-led support for both children and older adults in urban Lima is limited at best.

In this context, approximately 64% of women in Peru are working; 76% of whom are employed in the informal sector. When we consider all working women in both the informal and formal economies, three categories stand out: 36.7% are self-employed, 16.2% are engaged in unpaid family work and 5.2% are paid domestic workers in third party homes (INEI, 2018a). Thus, at least 20% of these women — in all likelihood more, due to the high rate of informality -- are working in some kind of precarious employment with no benefits. Given this and the lack of state support, as suggested above, the only source of support is often another underpaid — sometimes unpaid — young woman or girl.

The reliance on cheap domestic labour is not new to Latin America. Much has been written about how the middle and upper classes rely on paid domestic and/or care workers for their household needs (Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Blofield, 2012; Chaney and García, 1989; Gorbán and Tizziani, 2014; Kuznesof, 1989; Lautier, 2003; Stefoni, 2009), with some agreement among international feminist scholars about the importance of this labour for the reproduction of these social classes. (Bakker, 2007; Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Fudge and Owens, 2006), some suggesting that these workers serve

as a subsidy to other social classes (Blofield, 2012; Salazar Parreñas, 2001; Vosko, 2010; Young, 2001). Likewise, the research on global care chains (GCC) has also been important in terms of elucidating how capitalism is upheld on the foundation of a complex network of migrant women who support others through domestic and care work across national boundaries, those with less resources attracted by richer countries to serve middle-class professionals (Hochschild, 2000). Here, too, Sassen (2000) has observed female GCC as the “feminization of survival.”

However, GCC literature has focused mainly on poor-to-rich country migration; we know comparatively less about how national, internal migration serves the social reproduction needs of poor, female-headed families. I argue that in this situation, women employers and female adolescent workers are each other’s lifeline, with an asymmetrical reciprocity being a key currency in the absence of other state supports, such as early childhood care and elder services in urban areas. The research shared here thus provides a closer look at how Peru’s commitment to neoliberalism, including labour flexibilization (Cavero, 2018; Gonzales de Olarte, 1998; 2015; Manky, 2017), is accomplished at the expense of women and girls who work in precarious domestic labour and service jobs (Adrianzén, 2018).

My primary concern in this article is to illustrate how women workers (henceforth, employers) transfer household reproductive chores to other poorly paid, or unpaid, young women (henceforth, workers). Here, the domestic support that these workers provide is a necessary input for employers’ own labour power.<sup>3</sup> I discuss two key findings. First, children below the age of 16 are classified as “helpers”; they usually members of the family and generally do not receive wages. Second, those 16 and older are viewed as workers and are not usually blood relatives; they may receive a modest wage. In both cases, the helper/worker relationship with the low-income employer, like that of domestic workers with middle- and upper-class patrons, is asymmetrical and justifies the employers’ transfer of home services to the worker/helper at low or nonexistent wages. But, in contrast to middle- and upper- class employers, the relationship between employer and helper/worker is also one of mutual precariousness. It is precisely this precarity that fuels — or “powers” — other work. On one hand, this is done through the cheap labour that impoverished women provide to other households and/

or informal, poorly remunerated work. On the other, the sometimes unpaid, or low-paid, support that these women obtain at home is what allows them to step out to work.

Because care is generally a private matter and relegated to women — much like in other parts of Latin America — for traditional middle and upper classes, domestic and care services are obtained by employing cheap labour, usually provided by poor, internal migrant women of either indigenous or Afro-Peruvian origin. But as women's participation in the labour market grows for all social classes, on what — or whom — does this participation depend in a context in which state-sponsored services are largely absent and informal and precarious labour is dominant? Based on the findings resulting from 18 interviews with the female employers of mostly adolescent female domestic workers in low-income, metropolitan Lima districts in 2018, this paper seeks to begin to answer this question.

### **Raw Material for Precarious Labour: A Female Domestic Work Chain**

Globally, women's increased participation in the workforce, including some women's gains in the labour market, have come at the expense of less fortunate women and girls in the informal service economy (see Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1998; Fraser, 2016; Wright, 2006; Young, 2001). This is particularly poignant in the developing world, as female workers under capitalism “evolve into a living state of worthlessness” (Wright: 1-2). As this idea is normalized, “the third world woman's path of destruction also leads the way to the capitalist development that heralds modern progress” (Wright: 6). Likewise, domestic and care workers — a significant labour force in Latin America composed mostly of women — experience a similar trajectory (Blofield, 2009; 2012; Razavi, 2011). Despite providing a service that allows for household reproduction, capitalism ensures that this sector remains undervalued and a source of cheap labour (see Blofield and Martinez, 2014; Fraser, 2016; Wright, 2006), its workers frequently subjected to intersectional discrimination and abuse (see Erlich, 2000; Hooks, 1984; Jokela, 2015; Razavi 2011).

At the same time, on a global scale in the wider labour market, both lower and middle classes are struggling for decent wages against a backdrop of generalized labour precarization

(Standing, 2011). In this context, poor paying jobs with reduced or nonexistent benefits, coupled with increasingly female-headed households, presents a “crisis of care.” The inherent contradiction of capitalism is that it destroys the very input that sustains it (Fraser 2016: 99), and women represent that casualty (see Federici, 2004; Folbre, 2012; Wright, 2006). At a minimum, they are the gender that pays for this model of development through its unrecognized and undervalued contributions made from the domestic sphere (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1998). The result is that as women step out to work, particularly in countries in which there is little or no publicly provided support for the care of children and dependent adults, household and care support derives from the private sphere. Those who cannot pay, but who must step out to work regardless, turn to other options ranging from bartered, reciprocal agreements, to leaving children in the care of other children or alone (Anderson and Hughes, 2015; Razavi, 2011).

While much has been written about the price that middle-class women pay to work (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1998; Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2002; Mies, 2014) — either through the employment of another woman in domestic and care duties and/or through her own double shift — less is known about how low-income women — often employed by middle-class women — mitigate domestic chores and responsibilities against their need to work. Research has recognized the role which family members — grandmothers, particularly — play in caring for the home and children of women who have migrated to work in other countries (Salazar Parreñas, 2015; Hochschild, 2002). Yet, a knowledge gap persists in relation to the strategies used by low-income urban female heads of household — such as the employment of adolescent girls or children — that enable their work outside of the home in contexts where labour informality and flexibilization are prevalent and social services limited.

The literature on how care chains support informal, precarious work is important here. While research on GCC has done much to shore up transnational care chains composed of women who cross borders to provide domestic and care services (Hochschild, 2002; Razavi, 2011; Salazar Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2012), the Peruvian case illustrates how the same phenomenon occurs with low-income urban women through a reliance on “nationally based domestic labour chains.” Here, we will find that the centre of the

gravitational force is an internal migrant-woman-employer who is the provider of both shelter and support to another young female worker who, in turn, allows for the employer to work in precarious informality — sometimes in domestic and/or care work in a third-party home. The rest of this paper explores these ideas in greater detail.

## **Methods**

The data provided here is derived from a qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers of household helpers/workers between January and March of 2018. I also refer to Peru's national household survey (ENAHO) to elucidate our interviewees' income levels as well as to pinpoint the presence of social services in Lima.

Interviews were conducted with 18 of metropolitan Lima's poorest women (employers) to learn about how they organize their household care needs. The established filters were that the interviewee be a woman who worked outside her home and whose household income was within the lowest income bracket; that she had at least one child and/or a dependent adult in her care; and that she retained the paid or unpaid labour of someone to aid her in her domestic and care work. Names used herein are pseudonyms.

## **A Word About the Women Interviewed**

### *Profile and Access to State-Sponsored Services*

Averaging 38 years of age, the women interviewed for this study resided in marginal, low-income, urban Lima neighbourhoods, including San Juan de Lurigancho, Vitarte, Rimac, Comas and San Genaro, an especially impoverished area of the Chorrillos district in Lima. Thirteen fell within the lowest income bracket, with a maximum earning of S/.2189 per month (roughly \$670). Additionally, most women reported being in a relationship (married or sharing a home) with a man; all but one had at least one child and/or an older adult in her care; and most (14) were employers of a household worker.

Half of the women interviewed were migrants who arrived in Lima as children or adolescents. Of these, five came to Lima specifically as child workers. The other half were Lima residents, born to migrant parents. Eleven of the women employed family members; one employed an adolescent boy from the neighbourhood

who worked for tips and support with school; and two others employed adult female neighbours who earned monthly salaries.

Six of these helpers/workers were children 15 years old or younger, the youngest two were a boy of 9 years and a girl of 10 (most of the helpers/workers were girls). Finally, most of the helpers/workers were local to the area where they were employed. The older the child, the more responsibility was given. However, all helped with household chores, including cleaning and household errands, cooking, washing and the care of younger children. We found that youth aged 12-19 worked between 6 and 12 hours a day.

Employers experienced stressful work-life situations. One part of the group worked in the informal economy, either self-employed in street/market-vending or in domestic work; the other was formally employed by a cleaning services company, a very low-wage earning sector. Compounding the economic picture, all lived in periphery neighbourhoods with limited, if any, social services. For those who travelled outside of their vicinities to work, this could involve more than an hour each way via Lima's fractured and chaotic transportation options. For these women, work days were long; they rose daily as early as 3:30 a.m. to organize things at home prior to leaving for their jobs. Moreover, privacy was scarce and family responsibilities plentiful.

Of the 18 women interviewed, 17 had others living with them — at least 2 other people and as many as 11. They insisted that they did most of the work at home (i.e., cooking, organizing) so that the family member who supported them while they went to work was only left with the bare minimum chores. However, the "bare minimum" varied from person to person — from help with dishwashing to a full gamut of services. As noted previously, the age of the helper might be a predictor of responsibility, in which longer days and chores that combined both housekeeping and watching other children could start as young as 15 years.

At the same time, all expressed need for the help of a third party. Given that most of the women interviewed had a man in their life, such a comment suggests that even in cases where there is a partner, he cannot — or will not — provide additional household support, or, if the partner is able and willing to help, it is insufficient. Though we heard specific testimonies about partner abuse, neglect and abandonment, in most cases, it was not clear to what degree the partner was fully present. What is evident, by contrast, is that

for most of the employers interviewed, stepping out to work was a matter of need. All experienced a double shift, regardless of whether they also employed some form of help at home.

### **Key Differences Within the Group Interviewed**

There were a few key differences among those interviewed based on the migrant status of the employer, her own history with child labour and her familial relationship to the worker. First, work-life conditions appear to be worse for those employers who are both internal migrants and employers of children 15 years old or under. Having been child workers themselves in some cases and employed in low-quality and/or highly precarious work, these employers' monthly earnings fell within the lowest range of the income bracket, between S/.850 and S/.2,000 a month. In these cases, the child workers they employed were found within their extended family, including a combination of nieces, cousins and, in one case, a grandson. Arrangements are highly informal: children are provided only with food and shelter, the possibility of going to school and/or occasional tips.

Second, and in contrast to the above, those who employed adolescents and adults aged 16 years and older generally provided regular payment, even if it was a small amount; in these cases, the person employed was not a family relation. Most of these employers were not migrants and generally enjoyed a comparatively higher income, though still low. In this group we found employers who represented the second generation of their family residing in Lima; they also hired the oldest workers and paid the highest wages.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Interviews reveal three key findings, discussed below. First, as suggested briefly above, age determines whether work is defined as “help” or as work and remunerated. Second, I found that in most cases, helpers are female adolescents who are part of a family-based domestic labour chain. Third, and related to the first two findings, this chain allows for the employer to step out to work in precarious and informal labour.

#### *Age as a Determinant of Labour Characterisation and Wages*

For children below the age of 16, their services were characterised as “help,” and payments — if any — were not constant.

About half of those interviewed only provided an occasional “tip,” and in those cases, all but one of the “helpers” was a minor. By contrast, those aged 16 years and older received some form of regular wages.

This is consistent with my research on domestic workers’ first labour experiences (Pérez 2020; Pérez and Freier) and Lima-based data.<sup>4</sup> That is, children may work in exchange for something — not necessarily a monetary payment — and, in fact, their work is not seen as such (either by the employer or by the child worker). I can share at least three reasons for this based on the interviewee responses and my own observation.

First, the work provided by the child is viewed as a learning experience, a rite of passage within the extended family. In some cases, the work may be tantamount to minor chores. In other cases, such as some of those described in further detail below, the work might involve more than simple errands and may include dangerous work, including cooking, cleaning and caring for smaller children. The ILO defines hazardous work for children as activities that are likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. Hazards could be being exposed to dangerous tools such as sharp implements or, other hazards less apparent, such as abuse. In domestic work, for example, children may be exposed to hazards such as long work hours and living in isolation away from their family or peers, which can provide opportunities for sexual exploitation and/or inhibit social development. Other hazards are also present as domestic chores involve carrying heavy loads, being exposed to hot stoves and using sharp knives (ILO: 28).

Second, family employers have also been child workers and this history may obfuscate the view of inappropriate child work. Finally, in this study I found that because employers had limited resources — both economic and social — one of the few options for household support came from someone else — in the cases analyzed here, a child or adolescent. According to the employers with whom I spoke, the child also benefitted from economic and/or emotional sustenance, including food and housing and/or some minor monetary compensation.

The idea that the employer is providing a service to that child was a common theme among the group interviewed. As Leinaweaver (2005) noted in an earlier study in Peru, there is the suggestion that the employer is helping the worker to *superar* (overcome), creating

a sort of stepping stone — or a link — to a better existence through the lessons obtained in this living-working experience. For example, Maribel (born in 1979 in Tarapoto) employs her partner's niece, a ten-year-old girl, three times per week to help at home, washing dishes, two hours every time. The explanation that Maribel provided is that she and her partner are “helping because she [the child] is humble ... helping her to learn how to do things so that she might have something.” Maribel described a situation in which the child lived in a dysfunctional family, often responsible for the care of her two younger siblings. The opportunity to help in her aunt and uncle's home offered the child the possibility of a brief escape that might include some minor monetary and emotional reward. This case might suggest the first kind of relationship, in which this child provides a minor service with no observable danger to her.

By contrast, Catalina (born in 1975 in Ancash), referring to her 10-year-old niece and sister who live with her family, remarked: “I leave her at home with instructions. I do it to help my sister who was putting up with abuse from her ex-partner. We try to give our niece incentives. We give her a tip and we say to her: ‘You see, if you help, we give you something, we go to the movies. But you must do your part. These are your obligations.’ ” Here, Catalina referred to chores in the home, including cooking, which might present more of a danger for a child of 10 years. Likewise, our interview with Dariana (born in 1976 in Ancash) revealed that her orphaned niece arrived in her home at the age of 9. The child has since then provided domestic services there and now, at 15, is the one responsible for caring for Dariana's six-month-old infant.

In all three cases mentioned above we can observe an exchange. In the first, the child receives a small tip, and in the last two, there is room and board and the opportunity to go to school, though regular payment is not a practice. Moreover, I found that where the worker is a child, the theme that the employer is providing a service seemed to override the fact that the child may be providing more than a simple chore, as was the case for Catalina's and Dariana's nieces.

In this scenario, then, the service provided by the adolescent or child is not viewed as work. It is possible that those interviewed characterized the relationship in this way because child labour is illegal in Peru below the age of 14, and they did not want to recognize these services as work in the presence of strangers. As

noted above, it may also be because they do not consider this help as work, particularly as many of these same employers had been child workers themselves. For example, Isabel, mentioned at the outset of this paper, travelled with her older sister from the highlands of Apurimac to begin work in Lima when she was only seven years old. In our interview, she suggested that her niece feels safer working for her because she knows how to care for and guide her. She said: “Because I have gone through this, I must now look out for her.” Indeed, migrant women in the lowest income bracket and with histories of child labour, like Isabel, were the most common type of employer interviewed in this cohort.

Conversely, I found that for those employing adolescents and women aged 16 or older, the work takes on the quality of a job. Regardless of the remuneration (mostly low and without full benefits, as might be suspected, given the informal nature of the work and the income levels of the group interviewed), there is some regularity in the payment and in the consideration that this is work and not “help.” Of note is that the only two employers who were second-generation Limeñas fell within a higher income bracket and worked for formal, private institutions. These revealed that they provided better payments (S/.700 a month for 8 hours a day and S/.1000 a month for up to 12 hours a day, respectively) and some level of effort to comply with the few legal rights that these workers enjoy.

It may be possible that in these cases the idea of familial networks that provide support in daily survival are less strong and/or that a couple of the women employed in these cases were adults with prior experiences in this work and, thus, a better knowledge of their rights. This differentiation might also suggest that migrant status and the length of time one’s family has been in the country’s capital may be factors that determine the profile of the household worker. In this case, it seems to have resulted in older workers and a more formalized employer-employee relationship within an otherwise informal sector.

#### *A Family-Based, Domestic Labour Chain Comprising Mostly Girls*

Isabel maintained a household of at least three adults and two children, including the niece who helps her in the market. Similarly, Dariana’s home included no less than nine people, mostly adolescents and an infant whose father had recently abandoned the

family. Like Isabel, she had also been a migrant child worker in Lima and, at the time of our interview, was her home's main breadwinner. Both cases provide key illustrations of a family-based domestic labour chain and its role in ensuring that the family's main earner is able to step out to work.

As Isabel's case suggests, taking in a family member is done as part of a larger family chain or network. Moreover, as a former child worker, she relayed a sense of responsibility for supporting her niece and family in this way.

Likewise, however, I found that the provision of some level of assistance — pecuniary or otherwise — in exchange for “help” with the chores, is a direct result of the employers' economic limitations. In other words, for most of the female heads of households interviewed, it is the services, including some level of childcare, provided through this kinship relation that makes working outside of the home possible. Isabel's case illustrates the value placed on family ties to resolve household care needs. Without the help of her young niece, her livelihood would suffer. Her income would decrease because the domestic chores, including the care of her grandson, would fall mostly to her.

Yet, consistent with literature on the undervaluation of domestic and care work, the same middle- and upper-class minimization and devaluation of this labour also occurs among urban women in the lowest income group interviewed here and the youth they employ. I encountered a condescending attitude towards the helper/worker, not unlike that described by White (2000) in her study on kinship and reciprocity among family workers in Istanbul.

For example, despite the knowledge that the helper/worker is an important source of support, employers also maintained that they were the ones helping the family member. As Isabel described, because her niece was in a “rebellious teenage phase,” the child's mother thought it best that she should migrate to Lima to work and attend school. This is a common theme among most of our interviews — while recognizing the help from the young family member, the employer underscores that she is providing a service by taking the adolescent into her home and/or sending her to school. Yet other research suggests that the end result of this family domestic labour chain may not serve the long-term interests of the adolescent worker regarding social upward mobility. Rather it may limit her to similar precarious work in the future (Anderson, 2009; Pérez, 2017; Pérez

2020; Pérez and Freier).

Nevertheless, other employers interviewed expressed similar sentiments as those shared by Isabel. For example, when speaking about her orphaned 15-year-old niece who has lived with her since the time she was 9 and who helps her at home, Dariana said: “She goes to high school in the morning and later she helps me in the afternoon. I give her a tip; I buy her uniform, school supplies and clothes. I provide for all her needs. I leave my baby with her, not with my daughter.” Likewise, Camila (born in 1979 in Lima), referring to her son’s girlfriend, told us: “She also helps my sons with their homework. She is 19 years old and since she was not working, I offered her S/.20 a day to care for my boys. She’s been with my son for three years and she has no intention of furthering her studies.” For her part, Teresa (born in 1985 in Lima) pointed out that it was her 15-year-old niece who sought out the possibility of taking care of her child because it afforded her the use of her family’s computer. Although, as Teresa noted, she did not directly request this help, she is supportive nonetheless, giving occasional presents or by helping her niece’s mother (Teresa’s sister) whenever she can. As she remarked: “Because it was within my means, I gave them my television ... and [things] like that.” In this way she acknowledges her niece’s “help.”

Though comments such as those shared above surfaced in most of the interviews, they were most prevalent in those cases that involved the employment of a child or adolescent family member. Half of those interviewed were explicit about the importance of the help they were giving to the helper/worker — the idea that the employer had stepped up to the responsibility of taking in this child. At the same time, they also conceded that the child provided a service and, as Dariana suggested, she only leaves her baby with her niece. That is, the girl enjoys both economic support and her aunt’s confidence that she can care for the six-month-old infant. Dariana also makes the point that she provides the girl something in return. Ultimately, as expressed above, the sense that the family employers convey is that they are filling an important void for these family-workers. And they are doing so under quite difficult circumstances.

Based on observation and the group’s testimonies, despite the economic hardship that the employer faces, she accepts one more responsibility in taking in the worker. This is a double-edged sword. While helping another person entirely, or partially, is certainly an

expense and responsibility, the home and/or space to work provided by the employer is not free — everyone must pull their weight so that both household chores and work outside of the home are possible for the employer. As noted, this perspective is tied to the idea of family reciprocity; the notion that you do for others as others have done for you.

No one interviewed suggested that child or adolescents work was inappropriate. As former child workers themselves in most cases, they did not view these chores as work but as a rite of passage in which adults obtain domestic and/or care services for which they are willing to provide a home and access to school for their junior female relatives in some cases, and perhaps a tip or gift in others. Moreover, the reliance on kinship-based networks is further enhanced by cynicism regarding state-run programs.

Interview responses suggest a distrust of state services and the conviction that one should take care of one's own children, or at least employ family support, a much safer option. Also, as noted previously, the Cuna Más presence is highly limited in Lima. When specifically asked about early childhood services through Cuna Más, knowledge was limited. Six women indicated that they had used the Ministry of Education's programs for their children (like, but distinct, from Cuna Más). Only one had used Cuna Más. Thus, what I found here are women who need to support their families, often under very precarious circumstances, and given limited state services, their distrust of the same and their cultural expectations of themselves as women, they turn to mostly young female kin for household support.

This situation is reminiscent of Hochschild's idea that "mothering" is passed down a hierarchy where each woman becomes a provider and must hire a "wife" (Hochschild: 137). What I found in the case presented here are two phenomena that are linked. First, there is the notion that care and domestic work is to be done by women or girls. Regardless of whether they need to step out to work, they are responsible for maintaining the home front. Second, in a context in which state supports are virtually absent, domestic and care responsibilities roll down to the next most vulnerable person in the chain. In this case, most were female adolescents.

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These youth thus make it possible for their employers to provide cheap labour elsewhere. The situation on the whole underscores the feminization of poverty — and survival (Sassen, 2000) — through their own role as part of the foundational structure that allows their employers' precarious work outside of the home. As noted, reciprocity is key in this relationship. While there is a body of work that has studied this among women in rural settings in Peru (Bloom Lobo, 1976; Leinaweaver, 2005; Wilhoit, 2017), little is known about how the same unfolds in the relationship between urban women and adolescents.

In her recent research on rural women in the Andes, Wilhoit observed that “reciprocal work in childrearing and tasks of household reproduction enabled them to engage in a precarious labour market and provided a mutually supportive environment that many had lacked in marriage” (2017:7). Unlike Wilhoit's assertion that the reciprocity she observed in her rural community study provided for a “mutually supportive environment,” the same is not readily apparent in the present case. Rather, the urban cases I examined are more akin to a “feminization of survival” by both employer and worker (Sassen, 2000). On one hand, the employer needs the helper/worker in order to step out to work. The helper/worker needs the employer for varying degrees of support, ranging from a roof over her head, meals, a tip or wages and/or emotional sustenance (Pérez, 2017; 2020; Pérez and Freier).

A larger concern in this study is that the makeshift work arrangements observed do little to improve work-life conditions for women and girls. Rather, the domestic labour chain fortifies a status quo in which the poorest women remain in historically gendered domestic and care work services and/or other precarious labour. For example, Jessica (born in 1992 in Huanuco) — the youngest of those who employs children and one of those in the cohort who works for a cleaning company, among the lowest monthly income earners — told us that she paid each of her migrant cousins a small amount per week (approximately S/.25 each) to help with her children. Jessica's situation was especially difficult.

When her partner and father of her children nearly killed her in a domestic dispute, she was forced to flee her home in Lima, a housing arrangement in which her parents lived only metres away. On the advice of the government ministry she consulted, Jessica left

her home because she was told that she could not be protected in her neighbourhood. Given the state's clear message that she was "on her own," she left her home and the support of her parents to live with other family. There, she employed the help of her cousins — children themselves — to care for her young boys.

For Jessica this support is extremely important so that she might go to work. For the cousins, the weekly "tip" is certainly more than they would make otherwise. Ultimately, however, what these efforts amount to is that Jessica works in a highly gendered and low paying sector. Her cousins attend school but are also on their own and live in precarious circumstances; the little support available to them is through the possibility of the domestic/care work they provide for Jessica's sons.

In Jessica's case, as in several others in the cohort, we can see the family chain. Given the precarity of the living situation, often in subpar housing, poor incomes in low quality jobs, highly feminized work in private homes or office cleaning services, and having small children, it is necessary to find support, likely from some family member(s). On one hand, the belief is that these kin — particularly if the person is a child or adolescent — is benefitting from whatever resources the employer is providing. On the other hand, the employer is able to pay a small sum or provide some other support that enables her to step out to work, most probably in very low-quality employment.

Though Jessica's testimony is particularly extreme due to the violence involved, others shared similarly complicated histories of working hard to make ends meet, often in the face of absentee partners, numerous family members who depended on them in Lima or elsewhere and/or unstable, precarious jobs. The needed support tended to come from adolescents or children, suggesting in a several cases in this cohort their own experiences as child workers was repeated in their employment of young family members.

But it also makes evident the state's neoliberal position, which includes its limited role in citizen service provision. Peru maintains one of the highest rates of employment informality, low wages and nearly absent social protections in Latin America. The result is that domestic and care support continue to trickle down to women — and as this case suggests, to girls and adolescents in the poorest sectors as their employers step out to work in similarly precarious situations.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to contribute to research on informal and precarious female labour and the feminization of survival in at least two ways. First, it has broadened the perspective that suggests that women in domestic and care work provide a subsidy to the middle class through their unregulated services (Blofield, 2012; Young, 2001). I examine this relationship among low-income, urban women of the same social class and ethnic background, a subject less studied. Second, I argue that the women and girls studied engage in a national domestic labour chain that, while providing some mutual support, ultimately serves to maintain highly feminized, precarious labour, meeting capitalism's demand for cheap labour (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1998; Federici, 2004; and Fraser, 2016).

I have shown here that as more women work outside of the home; as state sponsored services are mostly absent; and as gender stereotypes persist relative to the primary roles of women and girls in the domestic sphere, for those Peruvian women in the poorest income brackets, often internal migrants, it appears that the most accessible support is derived from a family relation, another woman and, often, an adolescent girl. Moreover, the labour power provided by these girls, especially, is not ascribed a unique value. Rather, at best, there is a recognition by employers of a reciprocal relationship, and at worst, the helper/worker's services are constructed as "payback" for the provision of shelter, food and the possibility of going to school.

What is evident in most of the group's responses — even in cases where the workers were older — is a general vulnerability for employers and employees alike because choices for household care are limited, at best, and nonexistent, at worst. Thus, historical gender, social and labour discriminations keep these women in a highly precarious state. Another woman — often an adolescent or girl — assures that the other can go out to work, usually in informality and/or in service to others in a home far away from her own.

Further research is required to unravel how gender, ethnicity, poverty, internal migration and limited state support combine to ensure that the price to pay for household reproduction and work outside of the home for low-income women is predicated on female child and/or adolescent labour.

## Endnotes

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2. In Peru, combis are small, privately owned mini-buses that provide transportation in most of the country's urban centres.
3. According to Marx, labour-power is the “mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description” Joohuyn Lee, 2017. The consequences of labour power as a commodity. Social Theory (blog), UBC, September 24, 2017, <http://blogs.ubc.ca/socialtheory/2017/09/24/the-consequences-of-labour-power-as-a-commodity/>
4. Asociación Grupo de Trabajo Redes (AGTR)/La Casa de Panchita (Lima-based NGO in the service of domestic workers). Database, 2018, personally looked at during a visit in January 2018.

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