

Articles

Hi Mom

An intimate view on a  
universal topic:  
domestic workers.

Caterina Tioli





International Feminist Collective, Rome in 1975. Tano d'Amico



“Hi Mom, I want to talk with you about reproductive labor”.

My mother, on the other side of the screen looks at me disoriented and asks me somewhat embarrassed: “What is reproductive labor?”.

“Reproductive labor” is defined as work “often associated with care giving and domestic housework roles including cleaning, cooking, child care, and the unpaid domestic labor force”.<sup>1</sup> Coined by Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton, two Marxist feminists, the concept of reproductive labor stresses the attention on a clear division between productive and unproductive labor.<sup>2</sup> “These theories specify that, while productive labor results in goods or services that have monetary value in the capitalist system and are thus compensated by the producers in the form of a paid wage, reproductive labor is associated with the private sphere and involves anything that people have to do for themselves that is not for receiving a wage.”<sup>3</sup>

The question my mother asks, doesn’t come to me with complete surprise, looking introspectively into my familiarity with the topic. However, what does surprise me is that the most influential reproductive labor movements was the “International Wages for Housework Campaign”. It was an organisation launched in Italy in 1972 by members of the International Feminist Collective, such as Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Brigitte Galtier and Silvia Federici.<sup>4</sup>

Holding our phones, my mother and I look at each other astonished. It was hard to imagine that 50 years ago questions and discussions were already arising, in a country where today families are often built around the figure of men as patriarchs.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Definition of reproductive labor by Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reproductive\\_labor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reproductive_labor)

2 Definition of Marxist feminism by Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist\\_feminism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist_feminism)

3 Definition of productive and unproductive labor by Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Productive\\_and\\_unproductive\\_labour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Productive_and_unproductive_labour)

4 Italian feminism, workerism and autonomy in the 1970s, by Patrick Cuninghame <https://journals.openedition.org/amnis/575?lang=en>

5 Reflection on the documentary Comizi d’Amore directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Set in 1964, , “microphone in hand, Pier Paolo Pasolini asks Italians to talk about sex: he asks children where babies come from, young and old women if they are men’s equals, men and women if a woman’s virginity matters, how they view homosexuals, how sex and honor connect, if divorce should be legal, and if they support closing the brothels”. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057960/>

There is one main question that persist during the entire call with my mother and it helps us to reflect: “Who performed domestic work in the past and who performs domestic work today in our family?”

According to Wikipedia, “A domestic worker is a person who works within the scope of a residence. [...] Domestic workers perform a variety of household services for an individual(s), from providing cleaning and household maintenance, or cooking, laundry and ironing, or care for children and elderly dependents, and other household errands.”<sup>6</sup> The description is followed by a list of 41 positions, and within that list I recognise some which I am very familiar with: babysitter, cleaner, cook, nanny.

Another question arises immediately, but I keep it intimately to myself: has my mother been the main domestic worker in my family for the past 24 years?<sup>7</sup>

If I go back 400 years, domestic workers are perpetually present in every movie and every novel I have watched and read.<sup>8</sup> It is clear scene after scene, chapter after chapter, that for a large period of time – from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century – the “servants”, domestic workers of the past, are essential figures within domestic spaces. Not only when it comes to domestic duties – all the hard work for the house was done and commissioned to them, from cooking,

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6 Definition of domestic worker by Wikipedia + today’s facts: “While the domestic work industry was once believed to be an industry that belonged to a past type of society and did not belong in a modern world, trends are showing that although elements of the domestic work industry have been changing the industry itself has shown no signs of fading away, but only signs of transformation. There are several specific causes that are credited to continuing the cycle of the demand for domestic work. One of these causes is that with more women taking up full-time jobs, a dually employed household with children places a heavy burden on parents. It is argued however that this burden wouldn’t result in the demand for outside domestic work if men and women were providing equal levels of effort in domestic work and child-rearing within their own home.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestic\\_worker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestic_worker)

7 According to Eurostat, in Italy women participation in household and family care is 95.4%, against 69.7% for men. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=How\\_do\\_women\\_and\\_men\\_use\\_their\\_time\\_-\\_statistics&oldid=463738](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=How_do_women_and_men_use_their_time_-_statistics&oldid=463738)

8 The girl with the pearl earring, a movie from 2003 by Peter Webber, fantasise for us on the identity of the young girl behind the homonymous famous painting by Johannes Vermeer realised in the 17th century. Essentials also when it comes to creativity?. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335119/>

Pride and Prejudice, a novel by Jane Austen set in England in 1812, even if the level of the class isn’t high, the servants are always present in the back of the movie. They are necessary roles in those times. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pride\\_and\\_Prejudice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pride_and_Prejudice)





Downstairs at Downton Abbey



to cleaning, to taking care of the children; but they also, and especially, become imperative when it comes to show the status of a family: the number of servants would immediately present the level of class. Every family, middle class to upper class, would have, at least a few, added members to the house: such as maids, cooks, waiters, valets, butlers, laundresses, gardeners, gatekeepers, stable-lads, chauffeurs, caretakers, governesses, babysitters, tutors, secretaries, just to name a few. Servants constituted a whole family within a family, and had a clear hierarchy within their system.<sup>9</sup>

But what happens a few centuries later, or in underprivileged families, when the servants are not present, who takes over their role?

I understand now that the conversation should be more intimate and more reflective, for such a broad and important topic that goes back generations. I look at my mother and announce what's coming next: "I think we should talk about roles and activities within domestic spaces throughout generations. Explain to me what it was like in your family." She nods with her head, and starts to explain.

In my mom's grandparents generations, which was at the end of 1800 and beginning of 1900, - she explains during our call - she noticed two very different realities.

On the side of her father, she saw a very traditional country family: seven siblings, the only member with a salary was the father, while the mother had the main role of taking care of the children. She would always see her - my mom remembers with a subtle smile - mending with her sewing machine, taking care of the animals or the garden.

"She clearly never had any help, she literally dedicated her life exclusively to the house, which included: taking care of the children, taking care of the kitchen, taking care of the garden, taking care of the clothes, etc." - says my mom with no doubts on her face, and transferring a bit of discontent on mine. "The one having authority over the house was definitely her" - she continues with a laugh. "She was the one with a crucial, meaningful and necessary role; the one that would take care not only of the emotional aspects - which I doubt there was space for - but also, and especially, she would take care of directing the domestic daily life, which included also power over her husband, at least in the

<sup>9</sup> Servants reality narrated from the past. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19544309#:~:text=In%20the%20Victorian%20era%20it,the%20maid%20of%20all%20work>



Family memory pictures.

Portraited from left to right: my mother's mother, my mother's grandmother



domestic context.”

On the other side, the side of her mother, the situation was very different. Her grandmother had the luxury to be the youngest and the only – within nine sibling – to obtain a diploma. Eventually, she had the possibility to work and become a teacher and so she had to delegate those domestic duties to “help figures” – as she calls them.

“Her situation appeared to be – my mom continues – an exceptional situation for the beginning of 1900.”

But even if both of them, my mother’s grandfather and grandmother, would take home a salary, there was definitely no parity in the roles: it was clear in that house that the male figure had the role of governing: he would tell you how to behave, which decisions to make, etc. but “he definitely never even brought the salt to the table”, clearly states my mother.

There is an entangled reflection starting already in the back of my head, where I compare generations and question myself what has changed and what hasn’t. But before I jump to any conclusion, I want my mother to continue her story and continue to the next generation, the one she experienced herself: her mother and her father.

“Your grandparents lived in the middle of a very important period: 1968. So, even if I personally think my parents never reached an equal balance, they at least discussed about the formulation of the roles they had in the family”.

Both my grandparents worked and since their first years together they had a constant help in the house – a fourteen year old young girl, coming from the country side of Vicenza, that would live at home in her private room. My grandfather would also have a room assigned for him, as my mother names it “the space for the man”, that kept on existing even once my grandfather retired.

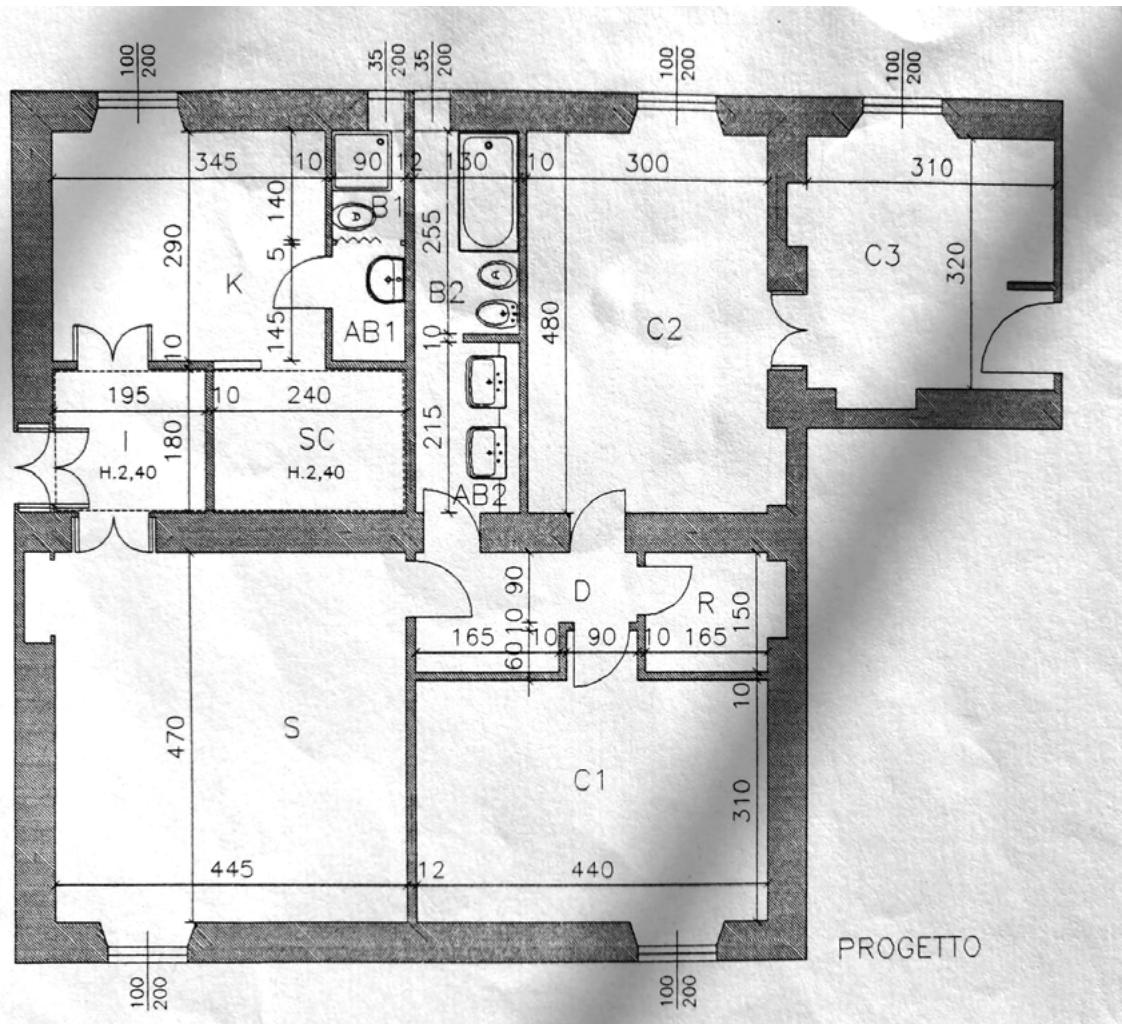
Without a personal space, ultimately, my grandmother was still the one in charge of mainly everything, from the organisational to the emotional aspects of the house.

My mother concludes, and I see there is a first taste of a bitterness in her mouth: “There was no parity in the roles of our household. They lived following those models coming from the fact that a man would never carry out domestic duties. And for my dad this was very strong: his role model was his father and his father could not stay in the kitchen; my father would have to fight against a stereotype that would have made him appear weak and non-“masculine”.”



Family memory pictures.  
Portraited from left to right: my mother, my mother's mother, my mother's brother





Floor plan of my parents' house. Room C3 was the room dedicated to my father's studio, with its own entrance to not be disturbed.

My parents is the next generation in line, which gives me the opportunity to confront myself with some events that took place in my life, and analyse the role that my parents had in a generation that comes 100 years later.

Being both architects, my parents chose different paths. My father became an actual architect, working in a studio from 9:00 a.m. till 7:30 p.m., and my mother became an art history teacher and took the decision to step down from her carrier and limit the time at work in order to focus more at home. The division of the space in our house adopted the same path of my parents careers: my father assigned himself a room, which then became his studio to use during those extra hours of work at home; my mother, on the contrary, would spend her evenings correcting homework from students laying in bed, as she recalls in her memories. Today, my mother owns a two meters desk, and she is proud of it.

When I confront my mom with this fact, she realises that there was never even a discussion with my father about their carriers decisions. She understands that now this matter probably requires at least a thought.

My parents eventually divorced when I was 4, because as my mother stated "we were used to share literally everything, and not sharing our children is probably what mostly caused an end to our marriage". Suddenly, at the age of 38 my father learnt to cook, something my mother would always do for him. My father - my mother repeats it over and over during our call - would do different things in the house, on weekends when absent from his work; but during the week his first duty was to have a job and excel in that, as his father had taught him.

What I like about my generation is that at least we are questioning roles in domestic spaces. We are inquiring the idea of equal gender, provoking thoughts which my mother, born in 1964 - only 56 years ago - that never even came to her.

Culturally and socially intrinsic in our minds, roles are clearly stated when it comes to family issues. Is it maybe time today, in the flourishing year of 2021, to reconsider those traditional domestic roles? I believe the conversation has already started, if I look around my peers.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Differently from what stated in my essay: "With 67.9 out of 100 points, the EU has a long way to go before reaching gender equality. The Gender Equality Index score has increased by only 4.1 points since 2010 and 0.5 points since 2017. At this pace of progress - 1 point every 2 years - it will take more than 60 years to achieve gender equality in the EU. We need to speed up." Maybe I'm just being more positive? <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-key-findings-eu>



One last time, on the other side of the screen, my mother looks at time with affection and says: "There is one thing that screws us as women: motherhood, right? It's an instinct that we have, the one of caring and looking after someone. And being a mother is the one thing on top of all that I would never trade with anything else."

I look at her with a gentle smile, because as a woman I understand she is right, that will never change.



Family memory pictures. Portraited from bottom to top: myself, my sister, my mother.