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Intersectionality and the critique of domestic work: building a multi-voice dialogue

Interseccionalidade e a crítica ao trabalho doméstico: construindo um diálogo com múltiplas vozes

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to mobilize intersectionality as a critical theory to rethink the domestic work performed by women. In this sense, intersectionality appears as a critical social analysis and also as social action, which in this case focuses on the debate on freedom and emancipation. The text begins with a problematization of Marxist and materialist feminist approaches, which usually take the distinction between paid and unpaid work as a crucial point and, at the same time, centre their analyses on the perspective of the "housewife." In contrast to this approach, the article, based on the analysis of the intragender inequalities existing in this type of work, reconstructs its critique by emphasizing that this type of activity is situated at the intersection of diverse forms of oppression.

Keywords: intersectionality; domestic work; intragender inequality; sexual division of labour; critical theory.

Resumo

O objetivo desse ensaio é mobilizar a interseccionalidade enquanto teoria crítica para repensar a crítica ao trabalho doméstico realizado por mulheres. Nesse sentido, a interseccionalidade aparece como análise social crítica e também como ação social, que nesse caso volta-se para o debate sobre liberdade e emancipação. Parte-se de uma problematização das abordagens feministas marxistas e materialistas, que usualmente adotam como ponto crucial a distinção entre trabalho remunerado e não remunerado e, ao mesmo tempo, centram suas análises a partir da perspectiva da "dona de casa". Em oposição a isso, baseando-se na análise das desigualdades intragênero existentes nesse tipo de trabalho, reconstrói-se a sua crítica, enfatizando que esse tipo de atividade se encontra no entrecruzamento de formas de opressão.

Palavras-chave: interseccionalidade; trabalho doméstico; desigualdade intragênero; divisão sexual do trabalho; teoria crítica.

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Introduction

It is no novelty to observe that domestic work has historically been constituted as a female task – or, to be more precise, "women's work." Even today, the majority of domestic workers are women. According to Teixeira and Rodrigues (2022), data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) reveals that there were around 67 million adult domestic workers worldwide in 2021. The authors also note that Brazil has the largest number of domestic workers in comparison to other countries. Approximately 6.2 million people are engaged in this occupation, 92% of them women and 65% self-identifying as Black.

There is a long-standing debate in the social sciences concerning this type of labour. As Brites (2013) explains, much of the literature on domestic work, which began to emerge in the 1970s, was influenced by modernization theory and by feminist concerns. On one hand, these early works emphasized the role of industrialization and technological development in reducing the number of people employed in domestic labour. This focus was viewed with some reservation in Latin American debates, however, due to the region's particular structural characteristics and the nature of its labour market. Feminist concerns, on the other hand, focused on the subordination embedded in such tasks, identifying this dimension as the patriarchal foundation of modern society. Not only domestic work, but also the question of women's labour more generally, was at the epicentre of the feminist movement's initial concerns. As Hirata and Kergoat (2007) explain, the movement emerged from growing awareness of a specific form of oppression. According to the authors, it became collectively evident that an immense volume of work was being carried out by women unpaid. In addition to being invisible, this work was not performed for themselves, but for others – in the name of "female nature," love and maternal duty. Critiques of domestic work have thus emerged from this awareness, followed by demands to remedy the oppression it entails.

Theoretical contributions to the study of domestic work are substantially diverse. Nonetheless, we should not underestimate the importance of the feminist movement itself in shaping the interpretations and critiques surrounding this activity. This essay does not set out to reconstruct the various theoretical approaches to domestic work, therefore, but rather to reflect on the way Marxist and materialist feminism initially addressed the issue, seeking to revisit their critiques from an intersectional perspective. The point of departure is the affirmation that the idea of "wages for housework," which emerged in the 1970s, reflects the standpoint of particular groups of women engaged in this activity—specifically, so-called "housewives" or "homemakers." As a counterpoint, I draw on intersectionality as a critical theory – especially as formulated by Patricia Hill Collins – in order to explore the complexity of the oppression gendered by domestic work, while also highlighting the importance of the interconnections between systems of power, which may be analysed from the viewpoint of intragender inequalities. Here, I believe Porfirio (2023) is correct to assert that although domestic work has been studied by numerous scholars in Brazil, few have incorporated the question of race into their analyses.

The article is organized in two parts. In the first, I set out to explicate the perspective adopted by Marxist and materialist theories, showing how domestic work is conceptualized within these frameworks. Emphasis is placed on the fact that their focus falls primarily on the domestic labour of the "housewife." In the second part, while not dismissing the notion of domestic work as reproductive labour, my analysis turns to intersectionality as a critical theory in order to enable a more comprehensive understanding of the forms of oppression embedded in this activity.

Domestic work through the prism of Marxist and materialist feminisms

Domestic work is a topic that has been extensively studied in academia and across various strands of feminism. In this article, I have opted to focus on Marxist and materialist feminisms, since both are crucial for reflecting on the relationship between oppression and work.

Marxist feminism sets out by problematizing the distinction between productive and unproductive labour. According to Andrade (2015), although Marx recognized the subordination of domestic and childcare work to capitalist exploitation, he did not treat them as productive labour. The issue is located in the fact that this labour does not generate exchange value nor produce surplus value. Feminist theorists criticise Marx for failing to grasp the significance of women's domestic work to the functioning of the social industry. As Andrade also notes, one of the first Marxist theorists, Margaret Benston, argued that the work performed by women outside the sphere of commodity production constituted the economic basis of their specific form of oppression.

In recent decades, as Biroli (2018) explains, Marxist feminist approaches have paid increasing attention to the relationship between gender and work. As a whole, these diverse perspectives examine the correlation between the division of unpaid domestic labour, the division of paid labour and power relations in contemporary societies. She also highlights the significance of this debate in the Brazilian context, emphasizing the pioneering role of *A mulher na sociedade de classes* by Heleieth Saffioti, originally published in 1969 and in English as *Women in Class Society* (1978).

Following this trend, Federici (2017) proposes a revision of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation. She notes that, in the Marxist explication, this process essentially involved the expropriation of land from the European peasantry and the forming of the free and independent worker. Absent from Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation is any mention of the profound transformations that capitalism introduced in the reproduction of the labour force and in the social position of women. Federici argues, therefore, that primitive accumulation entailed the subjugation of women for the purpose of reproducing the workforce. Moreover, it is not merely a process of accumulation and concentration of workers to be exploited by capital: it is also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class itself, constructing hierarchies around gender – along with race and age – as constitutive elements of capitalist domination.

Davis (2016) explains that women's domestic work experienced systematic degradation as industrialization advanced and economic production shifted from the home to the factory. Women were stripped of significant economic roles. The

physical relocation of economic production brought about a drastic transformation. Even more radical, though, was the revaluation of production necessary to the new economic system. Goods produced at home had value because they met the basic needs of the family, whereas goods produced in factories had exchange value and could generate profit. Davis thus points to a structural separation between the domestic family economy and the profit-oriented economy of capitalism. "Since domestic tasks do not generate profit, domestic work was naturally defined as an inferior form of work compared to capitalist wage labour" (Davis, 1983, p. 131).

The family became the primary centre for the reproduction of the workforce (Federici, 2017). This institution emerged as the most important for both the appropriation and the concealment of women's labour. Even when women "helped" their husbands in work activities, it was the men who received the wages. Indeed, men were even paid for work carried out exclusively by women. In this way, among the upper classes, property gave the husband power over his wife and children, while the exclusion of women from receiving wages granted poorer working-class men a similar power over their wives. Lack of money created the material conditions for the subjugation of women to men and for the appropriation of their labour by male workers. It is in this sense that Federici speaks of the *patriarchy of the wage*.

As Biroli (2018) proposes, the base of the patriarchal system under capitalism is the unequal attribution of responsibility to women and men for work that is defined as productive and unremunerated. Patriarchy, the author argues, is fundamentally a political system structured around the exploitation of women by men. Its core is the sexual division of labour, which ultimately configures two groups: women, whose labour power is appropriated, and men, who collectively benefit from this system.

The discussion on the sexual division of labour presents a range of nuances, but the one that primarily concerns us in this article is the emphasis on the distinction between paid and unpaid work. Hirata and Kergoat (2007), for example, refer to two principles in the sexual division of labour: (a) the principle of separation (there are men's jobs and women's jobs); and (b) the hierarchical principle (a man's job "is worth" more than a woman's job). This discussion also encompasses the work that women provide without remuneration. As Biroli points out, this type of labour, related to childcare and the daily tasks of domestic life, frees men to engage in paid employment.

The exploitation of women by men is thus seen to operate on two levels: one collective and the other individual. Revisiting Christine Delphy's work, Biroli explains that at the first level there is the collective responsibility of women for childcare and the collective release of men from this responsibility. The collective appropriation of women's labour contributes to the organization of individual exploitation at the second level: that is, the exploitation conducted individually by husbands. Men's exemption is collective and institutionalized and, at the same time, they can demand the totality of their wife's labour in return for their financial contribution to the upbringing of the children, the author notes. From this follows a strong critique of unpaid domestic work.

As Federici (2019) observes, the analysis of the "the issue of women" is transformed into an analysis of domestic work as a crucial factor in defining the exploitation of women under capitalism. This proposal consists in "extending the

Marxian analysis of unpaid labour beyond the walls of the factory, and thus recognizing that the home and domestic work are not alien to the factory system, but rather its basis" (Federici, 2019, p. 43).[2] From this perspective, the family is seen as a site of exploitation, where the woman is placed under her husband's control and domination. For Pateman (1993), the social contract is preceded by a sexual contract that presupposes the subordination of women. Men's freedom is constructed through the subjection of women, and the contract enables the establishment of men's patriarchal right over women.

Domestic work is primarily understood as the work of the housewife. Federici argues that this is not one kind of work like any other, but rather a form of manipulation and subtle violence perpetuated by the capitalist system. Historically, this activity has been imposed on women and, at the same time, has been transformed into a natural attribute of the female psyche and personality. Domestic work is entirely naturalized and sexualized and, once turned into a feminine attribute, all women are characterised by it. There is also the idea that this is work performed out of love. Capital, Federici points out, created the housewife to serve the male worker physically, emotionally and sexually.

Feminisms have engaged in a historical struggle for domestic work to be recognized as work, while at the same time demanding wages for housewives. For Federici (2019), the lack of remuneration for domestic work is the factor responsible for this activity ceasing to be characterized as labour.

> By denying wages to domestic work and transforming this labour into an act of love, capital killed two birds with one stone. First, it obtained a huge amount of labour almost for free and ensured that women, far from resisting this situation, would seek out such work as though it were the best thing in life (the magic words: "yes, dear, you're a real woman"). At the same time, capital also disciplined the male worker by making "his" woman dependent on his work and salary, and thus trapped him too within this discipline, providing the man with an unpaid housemaid [*criada*][3] after he himself had laboured hard in the factory or office. (Federici, 2019, p. 44)

It is from this angle that we can understand the feminist movement's struggle for a salary for domestic work. As Federici points out, although wages are not actually full payment for the work performed, since they conceal an entire sphere of unpaid labour, they do represent a form of recognition *as* a worker, making it possible to bargain and fight over both the terms and the amount of salary paid. Receiving a salary, from this viewpoint, signifies taking part in a social contract. Moreover, Federici defends the political importance of wages both as a mode of organizing society and, simultaneously, as a lever to weaken the hierarchies established within the working class. The aim is not simply to view wages as a sum

[2] Pursuing a similar thread, Saffioti (1976) argues that one of the functions performed by feminine myths in class society is precisely to mystify women in their roles as wives and mothers, thereby maintaining them in unequal conditions of competition with men.

[3] TN: In Brazilian Portuguese, the term *criada* (literally "someone who is raised") historically referred to a young woman taken into a household who performed unpaid domestic labour in exchange for food and lodging, rather than a salary.

of money, but rather as a political perspective. This perspective enables us to see how the struggle for wages can produce a revolution in our lives and in our social power as women.

The idea of some feminists is that wages for domestic work would be something revolutionary. As Davis (2016) explains, movements that focus their concerns on the oppression of the housewife reached the conclusion that domestic tasks are degrading and oppressive above all because they constitute unpaid labour. The International Wages for Housework Campaign originated in Italy, where the first public protest took place in March 1974. One of the speakers – Polga Fortunata – made the following declaration:

> Half of the world's population is unpaid – this is the biggest class contradiction of all! And this is our struggle for wages for housework. It is *the* strategic demand; at this moment, it is the most revolutionary demand for the whole working class. If we win, the class wins; if we lose, the class loses. (Fortunata, cited in Davis, 1983, p. 133)

Davis adds that the demand for wages for housewives is based on the premise that they produce a commodity just as important and valuable as that produced by their husbands. Housewives are the creators of the labour power sold by their family members as a commodity on the capitalist market.

Along similar lines, Federici (2019, p. 41) states that "[…] wages for housework are not only a revolutionary perspective, but the only revolutionary perspective from a feminist point of view." The author highlights two points. First, this is not a struggle to enter into capitalist relations, but rather an affirmation that we produce capital. In making this affirmation, we are saying that we want and are able to destroy it, not that we wish to move from one form and degree of exploitation to another. The second point concerns gender relations or, more precisely, the relationship between husband and wife. In the author's view, husbands expect much from their wives precisely because they are not paid for the work they do. For men, domestic work is "women's stuff," something that requires little effort and is done out of love. In these relationships, wages are educational because they show not only that domestic tasks are arduous and undesirable, but above all that they are work. As the author argues, "[…] when men understand our work as work – our love as work and, more importantly, our determination to reject both – they will change their attitudes towards us" (Federici, 2019, p. 52).

The critique of domestic work and the way in which capitalism utilizes it is something shared by diverse strands of feminism. Materialist feminism,[4] in seeking to emphasize that domestic work is work, also sometimes adopts a perspective

[4] Although it is possible to establish a dialogue between Marxist feminism and materialist feminism, it should be emphasized that they are distinct approaches. According to Delphy (1982), Marxism is materialist and, as such, can be used by feminism. Further, the author argues, since materialism is concerned with the question of oppression, it comprises a fundamental tool, as it is the only theory of history that regards oppression as a basic reality. In this sense, the sexual division of labour is of central importance. On the other hand, Delphy points out that feminism modifies Marxism in several ways: first, because it considers it impossible to reduce Marxism solely to an analysis of capital; second, because it does not regard the struggle between workers and capitalists as the only antagonism to influence the dynamics of society; and third, because it introduces the recognition of the existence of patriarchy as a specific mode of production.

centred on the experience of "housewives" (or, more accurately, women who carry out domestic work in their own homes) and ends up overlooking domestic workers who perform their tasks in the homes of others. For Delphy (1982), patriarchy can be seen as a mode of domestic production with marriage enabling the economic exploitation of women by men. Seen from this perspective, domestic work is linked to a specific form of surplus production, which renders the oppression of women intelligible. Notably, the author refers to the institution of marriage rather than the employer-employee relationship. As Davis (2016) explains, the e housewife reflected only a partial reality, given that she was, in fact, a symbol of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the emerging middle classes in the nineteenth-century United States. The author rightly argues that, although the "housewife" had its roots in the social conditions of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, this nineteenth-century ideology ultimately depicted the vocation of all women in terms of the roles they performed within the home. This created the idea of a form of oppression common to all women.

hooks (2019b) makes a critique of Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, a book often cited as a precursor of the contemporary feminist movement. Friedan referred to the "problem that has no name" to describe the condition of women in society. According to hooks (2015, p. 1), the designation in fact referred to the plight of a select group of middle and upper-class college-educated housewives – "housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life." Friedan does not ponder who would care for the children and homes when these women entered the workforce; nor does she concern herself with the needs of women without men, without children and without homes; she ignores the existence of all women who are not white or who are white and poor. In short, hooks argues, Friedan makes her own drama – and the drama of white women like herself – synonymous with the condition of all women in America.

Although hooks does not ignore the specific problems and dilemmas faced by white housewives, she points out that these were not the pressing political issues for the majority of the female population.

> Masses of women were concerned about economic survival, ethnic and racial discrimination, etc. When Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, more than one-third of all women were in the work force. Although many women longed to be housewives, only women with
> leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique. (hooks, 2015, p. 2)

In a similar vein, Ferguson (2020) criticises 1970s feminism for adopting an ahistorical and universal category of domestic work, which hinders an understanding of the experiences of different women. There has also been a revival of the debate around social reproduction theory, led by authors such as Arruzza and Bhattacharya (2020). As well as incorporating other dimensions of analysis like race, for instance, these authors go beyond examining inequalities in the labour market, seeking to discuss the importance of markers such as sex, gender and race for the reproduction of the workforce. These shifts are fundamental for rethinking the

critique of domestic work. However, as Ferguson (2017) points out, although Marxist feminists have drawn on intersectional feminists to extend the feminism of social reproduction beyond narrow gender/class concerns, even their most radical political articulations fall short of a complete theorization of the integrative logic they advocate. In this essay, therefore, I have chosen to introduce the intersectional perspective, recognizing that it not only seeks to combine critique and social justice, but also aims, as Ferguson suggests, to capture the unity of a complex and diverse social whole.

Intersectional theory and the critique of domestic work

The combination of different social markers in the construction of forms of social oppression has become an increasingly studied topic. Biroli and Miguel (2015) observe that the convergent analysis of gender, class and race has been pursued by Marxist and socialist feminism, Black feminism and, more recently, intersectional feminism. The first privileges the gender/class pairing, while still considering race as a relevant issue; the second explores the three categories together, though not necessarily developing a framework to explain their interweaving; and the third advances further in addressing these interconnections. According to the authors, however, the intersectional perspective does not always give sufficient weight to the class variable, failing to mobilize it as an analytical tool for explaining complex social inequalities. In this section, I seek to demonstrate the pertinence of the intersectional approach for thinking about a form of oppression that primarily affects women who are Black and poor.

Intersectionality can be seen as one of the main contributions of Black feminist thought. The debate around this idea predates the existence of the term itself.[5] At the same time, after the concept was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), it quickly spread among British, American, Canadian and German authors. Despite the ample discussion surrounding intersectionality, Henning (2015) argues that no theoretical cohesion should be presumed, given the vigorous and heated profusion of contemporary perspectives on the concept. It must also be borne in mind that intersectionality "tends to be seen as a theory, method, approach, paradigm, concept, heuristic concern, 'lens of social analysis,' basis for analytical work, analytical metaphor, and so on" (Henning, 2015, pp. 101–102). Here, I approach the idea of intersectionality as a critical theory, drawing in particular on the thinking of Patricia Hill Collins.

The idea of intersectionality as critical theory can be seen as a project still under construction and a theory in formation (Collins & Bilge, 2021). Rather than viewing intersectionality as a testable theory, the proposal made by the authors (Collins & Bilge, 2021; Collins, 2022) is to map the uses made of intersectionality. To some extent, the question is what makes intersectionality a critical social theory. A crucial point highlighted by Collins and Bilge (2021) is that praxis lies at the core of critical discourse, or any critical worldview, grounded in a critical methodological praxis and remaining attentive to it. Since the content of intersectionality explores the connections between systems of power, the authors argue, its methodology or

[5] Lélia Gonzalez (2020) has discussed the effect of the myth of Brazil's racial democracy on Black women and highlighted the importance of the combination of racism and sexism for this group.

praxis must address the question of the power relations that produce its own knowledge.

An important initial moment in the construction of this project is the author's theoretical discussion of the matrix of domination, which can be seen as a historically specific organisation of power within which social groups are immersed and through which individual relationships become established. This idea makes it possible to think about the interplay of processes of domination that may, at times, be rooted in issues of class but may also be anchored in issues of gender or race. Collins (2000), again, suggests that these matrices are organized through four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal. The structural domain is related to social structures, such as the economy or politics, that generate processes leading to inequality and discrimination. The disciplinary domain seeks to control, manage and organize behaviour through mechanisms of order, control and surveillance. The interpersonal domain concerns personal relationships and everyday interactions, connected to how people see and represent themselves to others. Finally, the hegemonic domain operates across the others and serves as a justification for oppression. The association between the axes of domination (race, gender, class, among others) and these cited domains of power allows us to analyse the matrix of domination. It becomes clear that the notion of a matrix of domination challenges simplistic understandings of domination and oppression.

In the same work, the author emphasizes the importance of Black feminist thought. This approach, as a critical social theory, reflects the interests and viewpoint of those who have developed it. The problem identified by Collins is that elite white men hold control over the western structures of knowledge validation. Consequently, the themes, paradigms and epistemologies of traditional academic research tend to reflect the interests of these men. The experiences of Black women in the United States, and those of people of African descent more generally, have been systematically distorted or excluded from this body of knowledge taken as canonical. At the same time, Black feminist thought constitutes a form of subjugated knowledge. On the other hand, Collins (2016) argues that Black women intellectuals make creative use of their marginal position within the academic environment. As *outsiders within*, they produce a Black feminist thought capable of offering a singular viewpoint on crucial questions such as family and society.

Her book *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* expands on the understanding of intersectionality as critical theory. A first key element is the emphasis on what intersectionality does, rather than simply what intersectionality is. This discussion had already previously been rehearsed by the author in partnership with Bilge. At that time, the authors presented a series of cases to illustrate how intersectional relations characterize a particular domain (in their example, soccer); how social inequality can be understood as an intersectional phenomenon; or how the Black women's movement in Brazil is organized around intersectional challenges. In this way, various uses of intersectionality are presented. The question posed by Collins (2022) concerns the need to incorporate a historical and contextualized perspective on power relations. The author's view is that intersectionality can be mobilized across different fields of study to comprehend and confront the existing structures of power in society.

The importance of adding other voices occupies a central place in Collins's discussion. The author analyses the origins of critical social theory in classical thinkers such as Marx, Weber and even Du Bois, arguing that these approaches did not give due attention to the problem of intersecting forms of oppression. The premise of Collins's critical theory is that no critical theory can minimize or neglect the experiences of marginalized groups. In this sense, intersectional knowledge projects come to the fore, as they have the potential to challenge dominant narratives. Furthermore, traditional analytical premises and categories are called into question, insofar as this approach proposes a more complete understanding of issues in all their complexity.

It is also worth mentioning one final aspect, namely the relationship between critical analysis and the transformation of power structures. Collins (2017) argues that the ideas and practices of intersectionality – moulded within the Black women's movement – have altered in form and purpose as they have been translated into different material, social and intellectual contexts. In an article with the provocative title "Lost in translation?" the author suggests that the ethos of social justice and the commitment to social emancipation embedded in intersectionality often become eroded within the academic environment. This concern is also present in Bilge's discussion (2018), who warns that the debate on intersectionality risks becoming a mere academic exercise in metatheoretical contemplation.

It is working from this theoretical framework that I propose to rethink the critique of domestic labour, incorporating above all the perspective of paid domestic workers—meaning the inclusion of other voices to reflect on a complex social issue. Initially, therefore, it is necessary to argue why wages for domestic labour are not revolutionary. The response to this question involves a problematization of the discussion on the sexual division of labour. As Biroli (2018) emphasizes, this division produces gender, but not in isolation. These differences are not constructed in the same way for men and women, nor for all women indistinctly. In other words, "the sexual division of labour indeed produces gender, but this production occurs in the convergence of gender, class, race and nationality, to include in the discussion variables directly implicated in labour relations" (Biroli, 2018, p. 36). The author adds that there is a type of exploitation that is effectuated precisely because domestic work is undertaken by women. However, this does not mean that this labour is performed under the same conditions by white and Black women, or by rich and poor women. Consequently, there is no single, common form of oppression among women.

According to the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA, 2024), Brazilian women dedicate, on average, 10 hours per week more than men to unpaid domestic and care work. In 2022, for example, women spent around 21 hours and 36 minutes per week on these activities, compared to 11 hours and 48 minutes for men. Poorer women (living in households with an income of up to a quarter of the minimum wage per person) spend more hours on unpaid domestic work than women from higher-income classes (households with eight minimum wages or more per person). Likewise, Black women perform more domestic work than white women. In an international study on unpaid domestic work, Picanço et al. (2024), using a database that allows for the comparison of 41 countries, including Brazil, observed that gender norms result in the bulk of domestic work falling to women,

even when they are engaged in paid employment and even in countries with higher levels of social development and greater equality.

Despite the above, the issue of intragender inequality is crucial. The figure of the housewife, for instance, has roots in the social conditions of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes during the period in which industrial capitalism became consolidated. Davis (2016) points out that the "housewife" reflected a partial reality insofar as she was a symbol of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the emerging middle classes. According to the author, these women began to be redefined ideologically as the guardians of a devalued domestic life. This figure presents a contradiction with other women. In terms of Black women, it is essential to note that this group was never "just" housewives. During slavery, women generally performed the same types of work as men – and thus experienced a certain kind of "gender equality" – while still performing tasks at "home."

Furthermore, Collins (2000) argues that the unpaid domestic work of Black women is simultaneously limiting and empowering. In this sense, by calling attention to the contribution of African American women to the well-being of their families, such as keeping them united and teaching survival skills to children, studies suggest that unpaid work for this group is more of a form of resistance to oppression than exploitation by men. She adds that the traditional family ideal – headed by a father earning an adequate salary, a wife and mother staying at home, and children – is not a reality for African American women. The same can be said for Black women in Brazil where the majority of households are headed by women, with Black women heading 56.5% of these households in 2022. Considering those households headed by women with children, without the presence of a spouse, the percentage of Black women living in this situation rises to 61.7%, according to data from DIEESE (2023).

Intragender inequality is also evident with regard to paid domestic work. According to DIEESE, in 2020, over 92% of people employed in domestic work were women, with approximately 65% being Black. Among employed women, one in four (25%) Black female heads of households were Black; among white women, this percentage drops to 15.8% (DIEESE, 2023). In total 20.6% of Black women heads of households were domestic workers without formal contracts, and the proportion of these households earning one minimum wage or less was 53.7%. Bernardino-Costa (2015) argues that the coloniality of power and the intersectionality of class, gender and race are structural and dynamic factors that explain the existing inequalities related to this professional category. The author also mentions that these factors allow for a deeper understanding of the hierarchical system and the inequalities experienced by these female workers. In this way, diverse elements become intelligible, such as the relationship between employers (generally white women) and employees (generally Black women), the prevalence of domestic work in the country, and the absence or inadequacy of social protection for this group. Benjamin Barber, cited by hooks (2019b), critiques the women's movement, arguing that the idea of work as a source of liberation is mostly irrelevant for exploited and poorly paid women, including Black domestic workers. Liberation would mean the opposite, that is, freedom for a mother to finally stop working.

hooks (2019b) considers it unlikely that remunerating domestic work would lead society to assign value to this type of task given that service activities are

generally undervalued, irrespective of whether they are paid or not. Moreover, even if paid, it is also improbable that this type of activity would cease to be designated "women's work" and would become recognized as important work. These activities would continue to be stigmatized as degrading. Finally, the author argues that people who perform domestic work – paid or not – continue to be exploited psychologically. This is explained by the very nature of this work, which is characterized as repetitive, monotonous, manual and not requiring much creativity.

Still in relation to the wage issue, Davis (2016) points out that cleaners, domestic workers and housekeepers are the women who know better than anyone what it means to be paid for domestic tasks. In general, the condition of these women is worse than that of any other professional group under capitalism. Most domestic workers in Brazil earn about one minimum wage, if not less. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that, as argued elsewhere (Mello & Rosenfield, 2024), the struggle of domestic workers is not limited to labour claims: it also involves demands for dignity and respect. I argue that the everyday experiences and disputes involved in domestic work can shape relationships of non-recognition and forms of symbolic demarcation that reveal the devaluation of this type of work and the people who perform it.

In a similar vein, Judith Rollins, cited by Collins (2000), argues that what makes domestic work more abusive than other comparable occupations is the personal relationship established between employer and employee. Deference and submission are essential characteristics of this type of work. Rollins discusses a series of strategies used by employers to structure power relations in domestic work and demand the deference they desire, such as: a) calling the workers by their first name or as "girls" and requiring them to call the employers "ma'am"; b) asking questions about the workers' lifestyle that would not usually be asked of people in the employers' social circle; c) requiring workers to wear uniforms; d) confining workers to a specific area of the house, usually the kitchen. Rollins recounts how she felt when she was objectified by her employers.

> It was this aspect of servitude I found to be one of the strongest affronts to my dignity as a human being. To Mrs. Thomas and her son, I became invisible; their conversation was private with me, the black servant, in the room as it would have been with no one in the room… These gestures of ignoring my presence were not, I think, intended as insults; they were expressions of the employer's ability to annihilate the humanness and even, at times, the very existence of me, a servant and a black woman (Rollins, cited in Collins, 2000, p. 57)

It should be added that, in the Brazilian case, domestic work is also devalued and oppressive because, as mentioned earlier, it is the work of Black women. The sexual division of labour combines with the racial division of labour. The latter associates white individuals with higher-paid and more qualified jobs, while relegating Black people to suboccupations and subaltern, poorly paid activities. In an already classic study, Bruschini and Lombardi (2000) demonstrated that there is a tendency for bipolarity in female labour in Brazil. On one hand, there are low-

quality occupations, considered in terms of income levels and access to social protection, such as domestic work. This is the space in which Black women predominantly work. On the other, there are good occupations that require higher education and offer better pay. This is where white women predominate. Black women end up on the lowest rung of the social ladder because they are defined in relation to men, who are the norm, and simultaneously in relation to whiteness, which is also considered a universal reference. This largely explains the process of dehumanization to which they are subjected (Lugones, 2008) and the perception that this group constitutes the "mules uh de world" (Collins, 2000, p. 66).

Another fundamental point should be taken into consideration:

> The domestic worker represents to the Brazilian white middle class more than her functional duties and professional skills; she represents a figure, a symbol that is part of the legitimization of class and race for these privileged social groups. (Porfirio, 2023, p. 8)

Hence, the author points out that, through the relationships involved in domestic work, white people construct their identity as privileged, while simultaneously perceiving domestic workers through an intense dehumanization and servitude.

What I have sought to make clear is that women who engage in domestic work are subjected to a combination of forms of oppression, which manifests in diverse ways, whether they are "housewives" or "paid domestic workers." This is related to different perceptions of womanhood and femininity, as well as other fundamental markers, such as class and race. The intersectional approach, far from leading us to an analysis that creates a hierarchy of forms of oppression (Hertzog & Mello, 2020), urges us to complexify our analysis and distance ourselves from universalizing and decontextualized explanations.

Final remarks

The mobilization of intersectionality as a critical theory in this article has enabled the questioning of a form of knowledge production that presents a partial and biased view. By highlighting the absence of pay as the essential problem of domestic work, the feminist movement led by white women and Marxist and materialist feminists constructed a narrative that takes a single form of oppression to be universal. Not by chance, this oppression is precisely the kind that, in general, has been (and sometimes still is) experienced by this particular group of women. A first lesson that intersectional theory teaches us, as Collins (2022) proposes, is precisely to open space for other voices and forms of subjugated knowledge, which helps us acquire other understandings and directs our gaze to issues that also deserve attention.

At the same time, it needs to be recognized that the intersectional perspective does not situate patriarchal oppression and the sexual division of labour as central elements in the construction of female oppression. In relation to the first aspect, Carby (2012) informs us that Black women specifically want to redefine this term. "Racism ensures that black men do not have the same relations to

patriarchal/capitalist hierarchies as white men" (Carby, 1982, p. 212). Black women have a relationship of solidarity with progressive Black men – we fight alongside them against racism, at the same time as we fight against sexism. Likewise, hooks (2019a) also points out that Black men are seen as brothers and comrades of Black women, since both are united in the struggle against racism. Black feminists are also unanimous in identifying the oppression that originates in the relationship with white women (Gonzalez, 2020; Carby, 1982; hooks, 2019a). Gonzalez, for example, discussing the racial division of labour, recalls that this debate is inseparable from one that focuses on the sexual division of labour. The fact is that, for a long time, feminists were only concerned with the gender and labour issue.

Paid domestic work lives in the shadow and is directly linked to the work of "housewives." It always has been and this is nothing new. Yet some strands of feminism have been blind to this proximity. As hooks (2019a) points out, by framing feminist ideology as though it were irrelevant to women who work (in the case discussed in this article, focusing on the perspective of "housewives"), white and bourgeois women ended up excluding other women from the movement. This group shaped the feminist movement so as to serve the interests of their class, without the need to assess the impact, whether positive or negative, that their propositions might have on the working class as a whole

In the specific case of domestic work, only an analysis that apprehends its full complexity can uncover why and under what conditions this activity produces oppression. To this end, Collins's (2022) proposal is important since it invites us to think about the connections between systems of power and to incorporate a historical and contextual approach to them. We can also add the well-developed discussion in the intersectional approach on the importance of people's positionality within systems of oppression, which shapes how they experience its effects in distinct ways. Along these lines, Abreu (2021) is correct in stating that race, gender and class are attributes that mark historical and socio-economic disadvantages for certain groups and define the social space they occupy. The author also argues that domestic work – a racialized activity – presents structural vestiges of slavery, informality, neglect and moral discrimination. It is essential, therefore, to insist that the critique of domestic work not be limited to an economic or gender dimension; it must also incorporate elements that can address the multiple forms of oppression, exploitation and disrespect that have historically shaped this activity.

Finally, as a movement that seeks emancipation, feminisms need to "blacken," as Carneiro (2003) suggests. The author emphasizes the centrality of race in gender hierarchies and observes that the gender relations established during the slavery period remain intact. This uniqueness of the historical experience of Black women has not been recognized in the classical discourse, just as there is still little or no recognition of the qualitative difference in relation to the oppression suffered by this group. Thus, the author argues that, for example, the myth of female frailty applies only to white women; the same can be said about the myth of the "queen of the home"; in short, for Black women, what is required is a feminist perspective that cannot be separated from other axes of oppression.

When feminisms neglect the experiences of Black women, they can be said to be practicing what Gonzalez (2020) calls racism by omission. Among other things, this racism is linked to how Black people are rendered invisible. This invisibility is

also present within the feminist movement, since there has been a silence within diverse feminist strands when it comes to racial discrimination.

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