From Servants to Workers in Chile

The petition we are sending to Congress shows you, our brothers and sisters in work and suffering, that we are not alone in our aspirations, and this is how our Society for the Future of Household Employees will become the largest in Santiago, and without exaggeration we can say the most powerful in all of Chile, because everywhere in the country there are domestic workers, called “domestic servants” (sirvientes domésticos) by our bosses. This is why, brothers and sisters, we should have no fear in asking for our most legitimate rights as citizens; it is our own brothers who invite us, without hatred for anyone, to join this Society.

—Society for the Future of Household Employees, November 1923

Girls: we have to decide whether or not we are workers like all the rest of them, because we work with our hands. . . . If we do not take this step [of joining the national union confederation], our Union has no reason to exist, because we will not free ourselves on our own.

—Ivania Silva, April 1972

In a letter directed to the many thousands of domestic workers laboring in Chilean households in 1923, a handful of Santiago union activists issued their call for mobilization, drawing readers’ attention to the contrast between the employment of massive numbers of men and women in domestic service and their lack of rights, as workers and citizens, in Chile’s emerging labor relations system.1 In the heady days of expanding urban and industrial growth, increasing worker mobilization, and legislative debate on “the social question,” the 1920s provided an auspicious moment for Chilean domestic workers—from gardeners and cooks to cleaners and nannies—to petition and agitate for increased government oversight of their working conditions, salaries, and
benefits. The starting point for a domestic workers’ union that has lasted more than a century, The Society for the Future of Household Employees laid the foundation for activist empleados’ recurring demand for labor rights and full citizenship, spawning labor activism that would spread to Catholic associations in the 1950s, to political parties in the 1960s, and to women’s movements by the 1980s.

Half a century after domestic worker activists first published these complaints, and in the throes of Salvador Allende’s socialist experiment, Ivania Silva urged her colleagues in domestic service to recognize that empleadas were “workers like all the rest of them,” entitled to what had long been recognized in Chile as workers’ legal right to contracts, hour limits, minimum wage, severance pay, accident protection, and the right to strike. The violent military coup of the following year abruptly ended not only civilian democratic rule, but also debates on proposed legislation to grant domestic workers those same rights. Only after the transition to civilian democracy in 1990 would domestic workers’ demands be partially ratified, through laws that protected domestic workers’ maternity leave, severance pay, and vacations. Having already established a powerful presence in the women’s movements that protested the Pinochet dictatorship, domestic workers reaped some benefits from the return to democracy, even as the political transition itself was constrained by the neoliberal economy and authoritarian enclaves that remained a partial legacy of the military regime.

How exactly did domestic workers move from “servants”—a highly visible but informal occupation, subjected to multiple forms of paternalistic control—to “workers”—a mobilized and vocal labor sector that could effectively lobby the state for recognition of their basic labor rights? This chapter starts to answer that question by exploring domestic workers’ legal status in the nineteenth century and evolving political role in the early twentieth, as employers and union organizers struggled to define the terms and conditions of service work in Chile’s rapidly changing urban centers. In a manner entirely consistent with the representation of other non-industrial workers in this period, the men and women employed in domestic service were treated as non-workers, viewed with fear by employers and sympathy by organized labor in the larger struggle over workers’ rights and the role of the state. As domestic workers began to mobilize in their own associations in the 1920s, however, legal and social norms regulating their work and rights began to shift. It was in these early decades of the twentieth century, therefore, that we find the first evidence of domestic workers demanding their rights—to dignity and protection—“like all the rest of them.”
From Servants to Workers in Chile

Domestic service relations during the colonial *Reino de Chile* and the early Republic were shaped by patterns of indigenous slavery, rural migration, child circulation and domestic economies that varied tremendously over time and with respect to region and administrative authority (both Spanish and national). The founding of the Chilean republic had codified the legal exclusion of *criados* (or servants, as they were then still known) from the country’s earliest legal codes and practices: Chile’s first Constitution, for example, explicitly denied suffrage to servants, an exclusion reaffirmed in the Civil Code of 1857. Without exception, in Chile as elsewhere in Latin America, in the late nineteenth century statesmen established rights of liberal citizenship through legal codes that both enshrined and constrained individual rights, usually in service to the requirements for labor and capitalization demanded by the expanding raw export economies of the late nineteenth century. Early nation-building in Spanish America relied by the 1870s on a series of anti-vagrancy laws that served not only to maintain social and racial hierarchies, but also to address labor shortages in both household labor and local industrial production. In places as distinct as the Argentine interior and the Guatemalan highlands, for example, by the 1860s national laws were introduced to surveil the movement and economic activity of both male and female “vagrants,” whose inability to show legitimate, stable employment led to their arrest and forced domestic and industrial labor with local employers. For states that had only recently abolished African slavery following independence, or ones like Chile still engaged in “Indian wars,” individuals’ lack of documented employment facilitated the provision of coerced and often unpaid labor in economies driven by rapid expansion in both commercial agriculture and extractive export industries. In similar fashion, the growing cities of late-nineteenth-century Latin America were busy sites for the forced redirection of female and child labor to elite households, a process upheld by city police and the religious organizations that housed orphans and prostitutes, training them for placement in elite homes.

As they consolidated political and administrative control in the late nineteenth century, therefore, republican regimes of Spanish America consolidated export-led economic growth and codified emerging social hierarchies, excluding domestic workers from the rights of citizenship and codifying their status as dependents within employers’ households. Labor relations, including the right to written contracts, were duly enshrined in these same civil codes, but explicitly excluded both domestic servants and rural *peones* or day laborers. As documents
marking the transition from common to rationalist law, the civil codes of Latin America and Iberia drew an intractable distinction between domestic and other forms of salaried labor. Significantly, this distinction formalized the subordination of domestic workers not on the basis of gender or racial identity, and not because the private space of the home was sacrosanct, but in the interest of public order in new and disorderly nation-states.9 In a period when domestic service was performed by men as well as women, and more often than not embedded in complex family structures that subordinated family members along with allegados (kin from other households), illegitimate children, and other workers under the rule of a male patriarch, the status of those engaged in reproductive labor for other families was structured through law as well as multiple registers of social inequality such as age, race, gender, and rural, family, and/or national origin.10

By the late nineteenth century, surging industrial employment in predominantly male industries of mining, transportation, and manufacturing led to workers’ increasing participation in political organizations visibly impacted by global labor movements. Increasing numbers of strikes and the violent repression of organized labor provoked urgent reform efforts in the first decades of the twentieth century, during which legislators and political leaders from a range of ideological perches proposed new mechanisms to study, regulate, and control workers and their organizations.11 With very few exceptions, empleados domésticos (along with rural day laborers) continued to be excluded from these legal reforms, which did not consider them workers in a formal sense, subject to state protection. Even the most liberal legislative proposals, such as President Alessandri’s 1921 Project for Labor and Social Welfare Codes, which at least addressed women workers’ need for maternity leave and the regulation of industrial homework, nevertheless excluded domestic workers from labor contracts, accident protection, and other rights provided for other workers. This exclusion was made more evident in the 1931 Labor Code, which included a separate article on empleados but provided few benefits for a narrow category of domestic workers, those who worked full time for a single employer. By contrast, when in the 1930s Chile consolidated its extensive social welfare system—a diverse set of institutions that guided social security, health services, and other social welfare efforts—the state included domestic workers as contributors to and beneficiaries of the state’s welfare largesse. So, while the legal status of empleados shifted significantly in the 1930s—recognizing their status as workers in both labor law and social welfare policy—the Chilean state continued to treat domestic and rural labor as distinct categories of work, ones regulated more by aspirational paternalism than state intervention.
Although domestic workers’ legal exclusion was explicit in emerging labor rights granted other workers, so, too, was the struggle against it. By the 1920s domestic worker activists could rely on the support of multiple allies in their struggle for rights—labor inspectors, journalists, Catholic priests, socialists, feminists—who protested the inadequacy of the state’s domestic service provisions. In particular, the participation of lawyers and social workers in the expanding welfare state by the late 1930s generated extensive data and analysis about domestic workers’ health, income, and sexual abuse. The focus of reformers on women domestic workers only intensified in the postwar period, as the service occupations performed largely by men—drivers, cooks, gardeners—were redefined and “domestic service” performed almost exclusively by women. The feminization of domestic service in the 1940s—and a corresponding increase in female leadership of the union—proved fertile ground for Catholic mobilization of domestic workers in the 1950s, a movement that provided religious services, primary education, and social services to increasing numbers of empleadas in cities across Chile. Catholic organizing among domestic workers in this period proved extraordinarily effective, an effort that began in Santiago’s parishes and grew into a movement that offered basic services and advocacy for tens of thousands of empleadas across Chile in the 1960s. The tide of political reform and revolution that swept through Cold War Chile also shaped domestic worker mobilization, in which leaders of the Catholic association turned increasingly to union activism, and launched under the Allende government a sustained effort to transform their trade through new labor legislation and union participation. Domestic workers who organized and promoted such legislative proposals in the late sixties and early seventies came closer than any other regional movement to claiming their full status of workers, an effort truncated by the same military intervention of 1973 that brought the Chilean road to socialism to a violent end.

Notwithstanding the systematic violence and political repression instituted by the military government after 1973, Chile’s domestic workers’ movement continued, relying on their continued invisibility as “workers” and association with the Catholic Church to provide support and solidarity to domestic workers throughout the country. Forming new alliances with labor and feminist movements mobilized to unseat Augusto Pinochet in the 1980s, domestic worker activists highlighted their occupational exploitation to challenge both state and domestic patriarchy. Domestic workers and middle-class feminists worked closely together in the 1980s, producing new studies of domestic service, migration, and class relations that shaped both movements and strategies of women’s
struggle against the dictatorship. These collaborations in turn directly impacted the social policies of the civilian democratic governments after the 1990s, which moved quickly to address the most egregious and damaging exclusions of domestic workers from labor law.¹²

For most of the twentieth century, then, important changes in the discursive construction of paid domestic work and workers in Chile was linked to organized domestic workers’ access to new political allies, their grassroots activism, and the sensitivities of successive political movements and regimes. On the one hand, the political mobilization (and consequent polarization) that characterized reformist and revolutionary projects for social change in the 1960s and early ’70s strengthened the syndicalist and political content of domestic workers’ mobilization, justifying their incorporation into the Workers’ United Central trade federation (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores or CUT) and inaugurating important legislation to strengthen domestic workers’ labor rights. The political repression and economic conditions of the military period, on the other hand, forced domestic worker activists to take up new strategies of self-defense and solidarity, encouraging new alliances with both domestic women’s movements and international funding agencies. Workers Like All the Rest of Them traces these shifting solidarities, in order to better understand how the mobilization and visibility of domestic workers has contributed the steady transformation of legal and political discourse in Chile around paid domestic labor, a transformation reflected in the semantic journey from “servants” to “workers.”

**What’s in a Name?**

At the center of the ubiquitous representations of domestic workers in twentieth-century Chilean sources—in which they appear as everything from victims of bourgeois consumption and male sexual prerogative to the affective center of family life and Chilean culture—lies a persistent struggle over the appropriate terminology to apply to those women engaged in paid domestic work. The politics of domestic service in Chile have been marked by this struggle over terminology, and by the transformation—in fits and starts, without much broader consensus—of *las sirvientas* (servants) into first *empleadas domésticas* (domestic employees) and later (briefly) *asesoras de hogar* (home managers), *empleadas de casa particular* (household employees) and, finally, *trabajadoras de casa particular* (workers in private homes).¹³ Most of the twentieth-century archives and interviews used for this study employ the shorthand dominant in Chile at
least through the 1960s and common even today: la empleada or “employee,” which in this context is shorthand for empleada doméstica or “domestic employee.” The empleada/o doméstica/o, literally “domestic employee,” originally referred to men and women paid to provide household services, whereas obrera/o described those employed in manufacturing jobs; since the 1940s, empleada commonly refers to a female domestic worker, and should not be confused with the empleado or empleada/o particular, a white-collar worker entitled to greater social status and rights in the workplace.14

Leaving behind the nomenclature of “traditional Chile”—in which they had most commonly been called “criados” and “chinas”—twentieth-century activists asserted their preference for “empleados domésticos,” invoking the respectability associated with public and private-sector “empleados” (employees) and distinguishing their trade from the morally suspect “woman worker” employed in industry. As early as the 1920s, however, some activists had begun to substitute “de casa particular” (of private homes) for “doméstica,” a term that provoked repeated complaints for the subordination suggested by the word “domesticated.” Although in the 1960s some politicians began referring to domestic workers as “asesoras de hogar” (home managers), such terminology was never widely adopted, giving way instead to the continuing use of “empleada de casa particular.” Finally, due to a strange convergence between domestic worker activists, the feminist movement, and military reforms to the labor code, the terminology for domestic workers still employed today in Chile was legalized in 1978 as “trabajadora de casa particular” (worker in a private home), a phrase that continues to compete with its popular equivalent—la empleada—and the revival of older terms, such as la nana (the nanny) in recent decades. The importance of these struggles over naming cannot be overstated, since in the past as well as today, traditional terms such as “la nana” and “sirviente” are regularly and strategically deployed in public discourse, suggesting the continuing vulnerability of domestic workers to extra-legal arrangements and pressures.

The importance of this terminology as a site of historical struggle is further illustrated by the reflections of a Father Bernardino Piñera, who in a 1997 interview observed that:

In the 1940s, there was nothing degrading about being an “empleada de casa particular,” who later was known as a “trabajadora de casa particular,” which complicated things for employers, who suspected that the workers had been organized by the CUT. Later they were called “asesores de hogar,” which seemed silly to me, since the only thing the empleadas don’t do is
“manage [the household]” . . . she is the one who works . . . . The changing terms imply that there is something about the profession that doesn’t function: before they were “the servants,” then “the domestics,” “the underlings (criadas),” . . . “the chinas” (which was derogatory). And so the “empleada de casa particular” was an appealing term because it sounded a little like the “empleado publico” and “empleado particular.” . . . In the end, I don’t know what term works best.15

Workers Like All the Rest of Them relies upon but modifies the terminology of choice of contemporary Chilean legal and political discourse—trabajadoras de casa particular, or workers in private homes—adjusting this term further to assimilate the English-language terminology common in US and international workers’ movements: domestic workers.16 Where sources uniformly referred to domestic workers as empleadas—rather than empleadas domésticas—I have likewise adopted the shortened term.

Domestic Service in Historical and Comparative Perspective

Despite the relative scarcity of studies that have examined the significance of domestic service in Latin America from a historical perspective, domestic workers’ central role in mediating a wide range of social relations would seem self-evident.17 The field’s first wave of scholarly research in the 1980s reflected the urgency of raising critical questions about servants’ “place” in their employers’ households: leading titles included “Myth of ‘Being Like a Daughter,’” Muchachas No More, “She Has Served Others in More Intimate Ways,” and Precarious Dependencies.18 These titles reflected feminist scholars’ dominant concern with the ways that domestic service confounds and conflates familiar conceptual categories: between family and work, intimacy and struggle, and productive and reproductive labor. While this scholarship successfully identified the discrepancies between employers’ and domestic workers’ understanding of paid domestic work, this literature examined only female service workers and treated them as victims of economic exploitation, urban anomic, and patriarchy, paradigms that have since received more careful scrutiny.19 But at the time, Elsa Chaney and Mary Garcia Castro defined the state of the field through Muchachas No More, an edited collection of historical and ethnographic case studies on Latin American domestic service, including several activist essays and primary visual materials for use in the study of contemporary movements.20 The emerging legitimacy of domestic workers as subjects for
study was further confirmed by two monographic works that integrated the study of domestic workers into broader social and political histories. According to Sandra Lauderdale Graham’s classic study of domestic service in late-nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, the social and economic relations evident in the institution of domestic service owe their apparent inflexibility in large part to the legitimizing function of tradition, in which employer and servant are bound by unspoken laws of patronage and fictive kinship, as well as to the racial and sexual hierarchies that ensure the continuing availability of servants for hire. However, as Lesley Gill has shown in the case of twentieth-century Bolivia, the diversification of the female labor market, employers’ changing expectations and requirements, and the impact of revolutionary political movements have undermined both the social legitimacy and structural conditions for “traditional” domestic service, providing female domestic workers with greater opportunities for autonomy. The study of continuity and change in the social relations of domestic service has proven to be an important avenue for investigating broader issues of race, class, and gender relations in Latin America from both historical and social science perspectives.

The pioneering work of Chaney and Castro spurred a new generation of social science research on Latin American domestic workers in the 1990s, producing a wave of studies and scholarly activism on subjects as diverse as labor legislation, political identity, cultural representation, race/ethnicity and class relations, women’s movements, and transnational migration. As research studies of gender and sexuality, informal labor, and global care chains expanded in the early 2000s, so too did investigations and linked activism on domestic workers and “care work” in Latin America and across the globe. In the current moment, led by US and Latin American scholars primarily in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and political science—but with the continuing participation of early pioneers such as María García Castro and Mary Goldsmith—researchers in this field have established the RITHAL research network (Red de Investigaciones sobre el Trabajo del Hogar en América Latina or Network of Research on Domestic Work in Latin America). RITHAL’s growing scholarly network, publication archives, and conference activities testify to the relevance of the domestic and care work research agenda for scientific inquiry as well as feminist scholarly activism in contemporary society.

Existing scholarship on Chilean domestic service, by comparison, has been both temporally and conceptually limited until fairly recently. As elsewhere in Latin America, information about Chilean domestic service burst into public spaces because of the commitments and labor of both activists and middle-class
feminists, producing a range of ethnographic, testimonial, and economic publications about domestic service conditions in the 1980s. These studies condemned domestic service as a manifestation of sexual, ethnic, and class subordination. While this left us with a rich and diverse record of working conditions and mobilization of domestic workers in that period, the research tended to assume a static view of the occupation—and solely of the women employed in it—across time. As advocacy, this scholarship served its purpose, sustaining feminist scholars’ emerging solidarities with domestic workers’ associations, but was more limited in advancing our understanding the central role domestic workers have played in Chilean society. Since the 1990s, Chilean social scientists have returned to the study of women’s labor with a sustained focus on Andean and Caribbean immigrants employed in the domestic service sector.27

Studies of domestic service in Latin America, a subject that became increasingly relevant in the expansion of feminist history and social science literature of the 1980s, have argued that service occupations are the most important sectors of female economic activity in the modern period, making it a quintessential form of “women’s work,” and one that sustains a gendered division of labor even as modern economies incorporate other women into other forms of industrial and service labor. To a greater degree than other service and industrial occupations, scholars argued, domestic service has been ruled more by social custom than by the labor relations constructed throughout the region in the early twentieth century. More recently, the burgeoning social science literature on global migration and domestic service has exploded national boundaries and emphasized the importance of migration—both internal and international—in the domestic service employment sector. Focusing largely on cases of massive flows of female migrants from underdeveloped to developed economies in the late twentieth century (such as the Philippines to Italy, or Ecuador to Spain), Rhacel Parreñas and others have effectively refocused and reenergized the comparative study of domestic service, positing the framework of “global care work” to emphasize the interdependence of global economies through the cleaning, cooking, babysitting, and other care work performed by migrant women.28 Along with recent studies of protective legislation debated in Latin American polities as well as international nongovernment bodies, these studies also explore the contested definition of domestic workers’ labor, socioeconomic status, and political rights.29 Workers Like All the Rest of Them builds on this interdisciplinary, activist, social science scholarship, taking a century-long and national-level approach to similar questions regarding the construction of domestic workers as legal and political subjects.
Arguments about Domestic Workers in Chile

Workers Like All the Rest of Them not only restores domestic workers and their agency to the history of Chile: it also makes a series of arguments that should change how we think about the origins of social inequality, the nature of reproductive labor, the role of the Catholic Church, and women’s political participation in twentieth-century Chile. One of the most exciting results of the historical approach I take in this book is that it forces us to rethink common assumptions about domestic service in Latin America. As I discussed in the introduction, domestic workers—past and present—have regularly been deployed in service of traditionalist narratives to normalize and justify persistent racial and ethnic hierarchies. Likewise, self-styled advocates for domestic workers rely on a variety of rhetorical strategies—legislative, political, and religious—to press for changes intended to uplift and protect domestic workers from unscrupulous employers. What both these approaches have in common is their reliance on distorted and teleological notions of the past, in which domestic service—portrayed as yet another symptom of European conquest of the Americas and the fixed racial and gender orders it imposed—persists despite the rise of liberal nation-states as a persistent legacy of colonialism and social inequality. However appealing this underlying narrative, Workers Like All the Rest of Them shows that these workers, as well as the measures they promoted to defend their work and their trade, encountered obstacles that were not colonial in origin, nor were they structured through fixed and ahistorical categories of personhood. Rather than inhabiting a timeless and oppressed social category, domestic workers chose jobs and employers under historically changing conditions, and did so from subject positions that included male and female, rural and urban origins, indigenous and mestizo identities. Their stories, including the abuses and barriers they faced and the victories they won, challenge dominant narratives about Chilean domestic service as a timeless form of women’s work and subjugation.

The second major finding of this study is that, when we restore domestic workers to Chilean history, we also challenge their legal and political erasure from the history of workers’ rights, recognizing empleados’ agency and participation in the political struggles of their day. As in much of Latin America, throughout the twentieth century women’s domestic service labor remained critical to both the reproductive work of Chilean households and the economic survival of poor families, particularly in the rural sector. By placing this service sector, indispensable for the operation of Chilean households as well as the economic survival of working-class families, at the center of Chile’s national history, this
work pushes the conceptual boundaries of both women’s and labor history, and offers a critical rereading of Chilean labor relations and political discourse from the point of view of those historically left out of national narratives. This reading challenges the much-vaunted history of Chilean modernization—and implied exceptionalism—that was effectuated through this and other exclusions (of rural workers, for example) from state oversight and welfare benefits. Chilean discourse on the status of domestic workers—evident in legislative debates, social work studies, union demands, and priestly declarations—illustrates the andro-centric and class boundaries of democratic citizenship, demarcating class, ethnic, and gender identities that provided a steady supply of cheap reproductive labor—and working-class “care”—to more affluent households in Chile throughout the twentieth century. The unlikely mobilization of domestic workers in this same period, particularly in alliance with the Catholic Church, challenges liberal and Marxist historiography alike. Centering domestic workers in the history of Chilean labor disrupts the orthodox binaries of public-private, skilled-unskilled, and productive-reproductive labor that have for too long dominated histories of organized labor and obscured the role of service workers in the history of Chilean class relations.

Despite this worker-centered approach, *Workers Like All the Rest of Them* also tells a third story—about the nature of the state in modern Chile—informed by recent histories of social welfare, middle classes, and professions in Latin America. In their struggles for social and legal recognition, domestic worker activists made a series of strategic alliances with key social and political groups, which earned them material, ideological, and political benefits. Responsive to these demands, as well as independent motivations rooted in socialism, social Catholicism, and transnational professional norms, Chile’s doctors, labor inspectors, and social workers—many of them employed in the expanding services of the Chilean welfare state—rendered domestic workers visible through studies that assiduously documented their working conditions and challenges. Mobilized domestic workers in turn lobbied these state allies, demanding labor protections and social services, a journey that began in the 1920s with persistent outreach to state officials and the executive, continued through the extraordinary activism and outreach sponsored by the Catholic Church in the 1950s, and culminated in campaigns for new labor legislation under the socialist coalition government of Popular Unity in the 1970s. The subsequent reversals in public and government support for domestic workers’ labor rights under the military regime were hardly specific to this occupational sector, but they did reinvigorate traditional representations of servant-employer relations, perhaps
strengthening the post-transition demand for subservient, informal domestic labor from non-Chileans in the 1990s. Thus workers in this trade came full circle over the course of the twentieth century, first struggling openly against informality in the 1920s, only to return in the 1990s to a struggle to maintain labor rights finally recognized in the early 1990s for all “workers in private homes.”

A fourth set of conclusions arrived at in this study are centrally concerned with the ways that gender and sexuality shaped both the working conditions and the workforce of empleados over time. Although in recent decades domestic service has become a global women’s occupation, it has not always been so. As the history of early domestic workers’ associations reveals, men’s withdrawal from “domestic service” tells a critical story of how—as male labor of all kinds was codified, protected, and politicized—domestic service persisted as a cheap and docile labor force (“domesticated”), because by the 1940s, rural indigenous and mestiza women became its most important demographic. The long view of Chilean domestic service movements therefore also reveals the importance of both men and women domestic workers as subjects, and examines of their connection to a variety of service occupations performed both within and outside of domestic spaces. In the broader literature on global domestic service, male domestic labor has been studied in the many specific cases where men and boys have dominated particular occupations, such as Chinese immigrant workers in nineteenth-century California or African houseboys in colonial Tanzania, but too rarely have scholars examined male and female domestic service together and across time, subjecting the changing sexual division of labor in this trade to historical scrutiny. Domestic service was also a significant employer of Chilean men in the early decades of the twentieth century—almost 19,000 were employed in 1907 as gardeners, chauffeurs, and valets—but by the 1940s most men in these service jobs were no longer considered empleados domésticos, but rather independent contractors with their own rights and unions. In spite of their fewer numbers, Chile’s male domestic workers dominated associations in their trade until the 1940s, at which point servants’ associations were increasingly defined as all-female, a transformation evident in the all-female composition of domestic workers’ associations by the 1950s. To accept the classification of domestic service as “women’s work” is to erase conceptually, and thus historically, the participation of men in an arena that has so crucially structured class and ethnic relations in Chile. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the shifting gender composition of domestics’ associations in the 1940s and ’50s, emphasizing the role of the Catholic Church in affirming the feminine and subservient nature of the occupation.
"The Servant Crisis" and Domestic Worker Mobilization

When we turn to the question of the struggle for domestic workers’ rights as such, a goal that would take almost a century to obtain in any form, we can trace the origins of domestic workers’ movements to the tumultuous first two decades of the twentieth century. At that juncture a variety of short-and long-term changes in Chilean economic and political organization converged to disrupt many of the basic terms of “traditional” Chilean class, ethnic, and gender relations. From the late nineteenth century, which saw the end of military struggle with indigenous forces on the nation’s southern border as well as a brief civil war sparked by irreconcilable political conflict between conservative and liberal forces of the Chilean elite, Chile entered the new century in the midst of significant economic and demographic changes, spurring rural-urban migration and urbanization, expansion and consolidation of labor organizations, a shift of Catholic Church leadership toward greater pastoral and social Catholic activities, and an increasing rhythm of legislative proposals designed to address the “social question.” Chile’s 1910 centenario was marked by increasing levels of change, conflict, and possibility, particularly for the nation’s rural and working-class citizens. In the midst of these changes, of course, was la sirvienta, at once providing crucial caring labor for the reproduction of elite families, and symbolizing the traditional aristocratic households that would become less prevalent as the century progressed. By looking at how a variety of social actors—from elite employers to Catholic observers and labor activists—weighed in on “the servant crisis” and “the social question” in that period, we can better understand the origins of ideological formations and social movements that would endure and evolve over the course of the century.31

In the years following the turn of the century, and like their counterparts in Europe and the United States, employers found a ready forum for their discontent about their servants, airing their concerns about the “servant crisis” and servant misbehavior in Santiago newspapers.32 Complaints ranged from bad attitude to theft, and frequently described an idyllic past in which an abundance of servants had worked with loyalty and energy without complaint. In an advice column to young housekeepers, one contributor to El Porvenir lamented the “general breakdown of the servant class, which is a calamity for the home”; in days gone by, she wrote, servants earned just three (rather than the current twenty) pesos per month and “there were some great empleadas, the kind who last forever and end up as members of the family.”33 Several contributors complained about their servants’ preference for the term empleada or joven (young
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woman) over sirviente, leading one patrona to admonish: “In my humble opinion, I don’t see any way to make these good people understand that it is not degrading to be a servant. If it’s degrading to serve, well, we all serve someone.” Another employer blamed the growth of industry for the shrinking number of servants and their “exaggerated demands”: “The factories, and workshops of all kinds have been consuming, slowly but in large numbers, the working hands (brazos) who were employed in managing brooms and operating stoves.”

In short, employer complaints abounded, prompting some Catholic ladies to engage in efforts to organize and (re)train women for domestic service. One of the first mentions of any form of collective organization for domestic workers, in fact, appeared in the popular press in 1914, which reported with some sarcasm on the existence of a society of domestic servants founded in 1907 by a group of elite women, whose over 600 members “listen to moral lectures intended to make them love their [social] condition.” According to this account, in addition to teaching domestic education and founding an asylum for aging servants (“Asilo de la Casa de Purisima”), the talks to empleadas focused on persuading the society’s members that industrial jobs were even worse than the ones they held in private homes: “They are told about the real advantages of their situation over that of women working in the factories, exposed to illnesses and without secure positions, and they are prudently warned against the dangers that can face them if they work in bad homes.” One letter that appeared in another popular daily complained that domestic servants in Valparaíso were organizing a strike for higher salaries, an event that was recorded nowhere else: “Cooks, laundresses, wetnurses and nannies, etc. etc., are working actively to cause a general strike among the domestic workers, in order to obtain through bad methods the salaries they say they have not been able to get by just working hard.” Articles published in the early workers’ press also articulated a kind of normative paternalism, entreating employers to voluntarily treat their workers better; in return, servants were responsible for respecting their employers, serving them well, and resisting the temptation to gossip about former employers.

Some observers of the servant crisis focused their attention—both positive and negative—on the vocational schools for girls operating in Chile after the turn of the century. Established in the 1880s by industrialists and educators seeking to improve the female workforce and enhance honorable and domestic options, the Girls’ Professional Schools (Escuelas Profesionales de Niñas) offered courses in sewing, clothing design, cooking, hat-making, and other industrial skills to thousands of Chilean working-class women. Some argued that creating vocational schools specifically for servants would raise the prestige of the occupation
and allow “the ladies of the people to feel a great and enviable calling for personal service as hand-servants, to scrub the cutlery and clean the soot from the stove pipe.” But another, particularly vitriolic contributor attributed the shortage of servants to the heightened social expectations created by female education, both academic and vocational. Some women who learned sewing (or any one of fifty useless trades) in an industrial school, wrote “X.,” then believed themselves to be above domestic service, while those who learned other subjects became critical of their social condition: “instead of learning practical things and the habits of order and cleanliness, we teach them a little bit of history, another bit of political constitution, the basics of geography and science, and a collection of meaningless things that only serve to distract them from the truth about their social condition.” A later contributor on this theme agreed, arguing that there were plenty of Chileans willing and needing to work as servants, but “now it’s time for the Republic to regenerate and moralize them, and they all prefer to be citizens and not servants. What’s to be done?” Not only did such education undermine the availability of domestic workers, it also threatened the very existence of Chilean
cuisine: “We could even lose the recipe for homemade *charquicán*—which just like the traditional chicken soup is already a relic—but on the other hand even the *china* from Curacaví knows her second-grade equations and that it is illegal to assault a public official.” Another commentator responded to the suggestion that servants would be more abundant and better trained if the government were to create specific vocational schools for them, arguing that this was impractical, however, as one unintended result of improved industrial training had already been to raise clothing and hat prices in Santiago.

Other voices calling for change, however, focused on the behavior of employers. Citing minimum wage and working conditions legislated in the United States, one article in the daily press argued that although “the problem of domestic service” was caused by socialism, which sowed class hatred between servants and their employers, the state should intervene to regulate the trade, and female employers should rescue girls from dangerous factory jobs and provide safe, dignified domestic service jobs that would train them to run working-class homes. Invoking a paternalistic approach, this writer called on patronas to humanize the servant-employer relationship: “The young servants are at great risk. Their masters (*amos*) have to be not only their counsellors, but also their protectors. . . . The fact is that there are many masters who think they’ve done well when they pay exactly the right salary to their criados. The mistaken idea persists: that a servant is a machine for serving, and the boss is a machine for paying.” The same author, writing for a different newspaper, went on to clarify the role of the state: “The State should take good care of this social class, investigating their complaints with care and finding the solution to their problems” through labor laws and regulation of employment agencies. But in both cases the author stressed that the responsibility for reversing the servant crisis—and rescuing women from factory work—lay with the proper conduct of the patrona, whose maternal oversight should ensure the good morals and proper education of the criada. It was not unusual for some, presumably male, writers on the servant crisis to call on patronas or their daughters to take up some of the housework and childcare created by the lack of available servants, and like their counterparts in the US and France, simply make do with less servant help overall.

One of the most visible arenas where the servant crisis played out was in the Catholic, private, and state employment agencies that proliferated in early twentieth-century Santiago. In June 1925, for example, the employment agency run by the Catholic Women’s Unions (Sindicatos Católicos Femininos) detailed the agency’s activity from January to May in three placement areas: sales and office
workers, domestic servants, and industrial workers. Noting that commercial and office labor was at that point not regulated by the Labor Office, and that placement rates for obreras had been very low, the report shows the most activity in their work with “the servant class” (la servidumbre), where hundreds of monthly inscriptions resulted in modest placement of 52 to 128 women in domestic jobs each month. The agency matched women with prospective employers as cooks, personal servants, dining servants, washerwomen, errand girls, cleaners, servers, wet nurses, and nannies, and reported great success placing cooks and servers.  

From this report we see that the agency was used more by women seeking work than by employers (308–470 worker registrations versus 79–199 requests for workers), and that women seeking work as general housemaids were less likely to find work than their more specialized counterparts. Significantly, in later decades (and as state regulation of private agencies increased) the Labor Office ran its own placement agency in Santiago, advertising in local papers the need for cooks, personal servants, and serving and specialized empleadas.

Plenty of conversations about employment agencies, however, focused on their criminal activities: agents provided employers with false references and then tipped off thieves who were planning their next robbery. In a news article complaining about the “false servant class,” P.P.H. described empleadas’ strategy for deceiving unsuspecting employers: “Even in cases where they provide useful and valuable information, as when the household has valuable objects, the empleada who started by gaining the trust and respect of her bosses is quickly transformed into a diseased, unruly, and crude person, until she is fired and starts all over again, making new inquiries on behalf of the individual or gang that she serves.” Further, the author argued, police and city officials had failed to regulate the agencies: “From the aristocratic Ladies’ Club to the modest group of San Pablo, there are hundreds of agencies who earn 200–300 pesos every day, operating without responsibility or any kind of sanction.”

Much later, after domestic workers had begun to form their own associations, they too would protest the existence of employment agencies that served only to assist crime and besmirch empleados’ honor: domestic workers’ union minutes from 1939 record that: “It was agreed, next, that the group should declare publicly to the heads of households, in response to some reports about an empleada who did her work only to steal, that we are in a position to offer people trained for service, and to whose honor our institution—which has been a legal organization for thirteen years—will attest.”

Quite another story of the domestic servant “crisis” emerged in the workers’ press at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the exclusion of female
domestic workers from women’s earliest mutual aid associations in the 1880s, domestic workers did appear with some frequency in some of Chile’s labor publications, where characterizations of domestic workers ranged from symbols of the embodied (and sexual) nature of capitalist exploitation to actual complaints brought forth by domestic servants. In the newspapers of the Democratic Party—Chile’s first workers’ party, founded in the 1880s—domestic workers were enjoined to form their own associations and struggle alongside other workers in order to achieve their basic rights. Significantly, these accounts addressed both male and female domestic workers. In one particularly passionate argument in 1907, Francisco J. Zuñiga Reyes called for domestic workers to organize in the face of their evident, brutal enslavement. Citing a recent example of an employer beating in public the nanny who had served him for nineteen years, Zuñiga cited the example of an Argentine domestic workers’ association and wrote that “it is long past time that we should pay attention to our colleagues, disgraced like us, to establish a resistance society, if possible, and make these high-class ‘heroes’ of the golden spoon understand that they are not masters of any servants, but rather employers of their workers.” Responding to an Ilustrado article on “rotos y chinos”—derogatory terms for working class men and women—a writer for another democratic paper urged male domestic workers to shed the old ways of compliant servitude in Chilean society, and to struggle for their rights as men: “you slackers, fight against your status as vassals, because you are men, men who may have more rights than we editors to live and subsist, because with your sweat you earn those rights for yourselves, you drones!” In the labor press of the era, male domestic workers appeared as symbols of capitalist exploitation and icons of worker struggle, a pattern that would continue to mark mixed-sex unionization in the 1920s and 30s in Chile.

The virility of male domestic workers was also evident in other articles that protested men’s low salaries in the domestic service sector. In June 1907, one Democratic Party newspaper reported the low salaries of domestic workers employed by the State Rail Company: “The comrade we’re talking about, who has been in his position for sixteen years, now earns the miserable salary of twenty-four pesos per month.” Asking the government to reduce the high salaries of railway managers, the newspaper asked for “a little more compassion from the gentlemen managers toward those poor slaves . . . and pay them—even if it’s just to overcome hunger—what the domestic workers of the State Railways should earn for their work.” This demand for a man’s rightful wages was bolstered by the fact that the individual in question worked not in a private home but alongside other men, manual laborers in the railway system.
For the socialist and even the daily press, the plight of the wet nurse also served to illustrate in graphic terms the exploitation of the proletariat. Starting with the figure of the bad bourgeoise mother, who “seeks for her ‘blue blood’ child, of ‘aristocratic blood,’ the services of a wet nurse with worker’s blood, plebeian blood,” the proletarian wet nurse was forced to deprive her own children not only of her milk but also of her love and attention. Bourgeois children, a socialist writer asserted, who are raised on wet nurse’s milk are conditioned from this early age to live off the lifeblood of poor people: “The bourgeois gentlemen are born and need milk to survive, workers’ blood; they grow up, and to keep on living, they suck, exploiting them, the blood of the workers.” Other stories in the labor press repeated this refrain, describing the dire consequences of the death of a wet nurse’s child at the hands of the “third mother,” the relative or neighbor who cared for empleada’s children while she labored. Through stories of extreme physical and emotional exploitation of wet nurses and nannies, labor journalists dramatized the effects of capitalist exploitation. Like contemporaneous accounts directed at women workers and prostitutes, the anarchist press also analyzed domestic service as a site of female sexual exploitation, extending the mantle of radical solidarity to this group of non-workers (the mothers and sisters of the “real workers”).

In another example, on May Day 1921, Acción Directa published a “Manifesto for our domestic service comrades,” listing the many evils of servant-master relations: wet nurses sacrificing the milk meant for their own babies, older servants thrown out on the street, and the haughty condescension of masters (especially women) that included punishing servants for small mistakes, verbal abuse, and withholding servants’ pay. Characteristically, compared to labor movement texts about women industrial workers in this period, this “manifesto” also emphasized servants’ sexual exploitation: “The woman’s love in your heart does not even belong to you: you have to settle, many of you, for sometimes serving as mere instruments of lust and at other times, brothel slaves subject to the whims of the ‘señorito.’ You have to suffer all of it!” The article ends with a call for domestic workers’ organization, emphasizing the support offered by working-class men:

Comrades (compañeras): lift your heads, bare your breasts, dignify your sex. We men will be at your side, we who struggle to destroy the evil castle of so much tyranny. We are your brothers and we want you to be free, honorable comrades of men, since you are loving mothers, wives, daughters, girlfriends. . . . Get together, comrades, in one big family, to defend yourselves from the feline claws of your mistresses.
In another call for female domestic workers to organize, a 1922 article told the story of Carmen Vargas, a real-life recent rural migrant who found work in a boardinghouse in downtown Santiago. After suffering the employer’s verbal and physical abuse, and her sister having failed to gain her release from the house, Carmen escaped to a neighbor’s house via the roof: “This true story is the story of almost all the empleadas. And as long as they don’t change their attitudes they will suffer the same treatment. The only thing that can save them is forming an association.”

Despite the widely disparate diagnoses of the “servant problem” in early twentieth-century Chile—differences hewed along lines of class as well as ideology and religion—what these views collectively demonstrate is that the “servant,” male and female alike, had become a controversial public figure. In ways consistent with contemporaneous views on “the social question,” Chilean observers of domestic service subjected workers to instructions (be more compliant/rebellious), warnings (your manhood/maternity are in danger), disrespect (your occupation is criminal/passive), and encouragement (find good employers/throw off your chains). These discussions also presaged the competing assessments of domestic workers in the context of Chile’s twentieth-century welfare state, labor movements, and political parties, predicting with a high degree of accuracy how these workers would be addressed, cultivated, and cajoled in a variety of social roles.