# Vulnerability, Exploitation and Migrants

# Insecure Work in a Globalised Economy

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# Social Reproduction and Migrant Domestic Labour in Canada and the UK: Towards a Multi-Dimensional Concept of Subordination

Kendra Strauss

#### Introduction

Migrant labour is integral to both the contemporary global political economy and its key characteristic: uneven development. Uneven development, as often theorised, emphasises the economic and political institutions central to relations of production, rather than relations of reproduction. In this sense, frameworks for theorising uneven development, even where they draw attention to the role of social relations, tend implicitly to reproduce production/reproduction binaries. At the same time, the large and evolving literature on migration and care addresses commodification, privatisation and exploitation in the 'private' realm. Linking up the political economy of migrant labour and the political economy of social reproduction often remains an epistemological and methodological challenge.

In this chapter, I suggest that the concept of social reproduction can be utilised as a foundation on which to build a framework for making these linkages: in this sense, I am attempting further to develop some of the intersections between human geography, feminist political economy and feminist labour law in order to better conceptualise the processes that contribute to the exploitation of migrant workers. I do so by examining the political economy of migrant domestic work and social reproduction in Canada and the UK and focusing on the relationship between political economic and regulatory developments.

In highlighting both common and distinct features to the trajectories of these developments in Canada and the UK, I also suggest that the recalibration of norms of social reproduction occurring in both places may be related to changing relations of subordination. As labour law's traditional role in redressing subordination in the employment relation is increasingly under attack, so too is the idea that collective social welfare should redress the subordination of the social in capitalist market economies (see also Pradella and Cillo's chapter in this volume).

### The political economy of migrant domestic labour

The efforts made by feminist political economists to link production and reproduction have, especially since the 1960s, focused on accounting (in literal and figurative senses) for the contribution of unpaid domestic work to the 'productive' economy (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007). Some have sought to develop and extend the notion of social reproduction referred to, but not fully mobilised, by Marx (1979) and especially Engels (2004). Thus feminists have highlighted the insufficiency of epistemologies that elide the contribution of unpaid and domestic labour, that create and sustain the idea of separate domains of 'economy' and 'society', and that allow theorists to argue (or assume) that non-wage and household labour are not productive or value-generating (Waylen, 1998). Heterodox political economists interested in richer understandings of labour markets also argued from the 1990s for theories that incorporated social reproduction as a key dimension of their social construction (Jonas, 1996; Peck, 1996).

How to theorise social reproduction – and in particular the range of activities, relations and sites it encompasses and seeks to explain remains, however, an open question. In this chapter, I utilise a broad, multi-scalar definition of social reproduction that incorporates household and community dynamics over time, as well as the spatial, embodied dimensions which are themselves implicated in and shaped by the social construction of categories of difference like gender, race and ethnicity. At the same time, the specificity of capitalist relations of production and associated modes of value production and appropriation require recognition of the centrality of class dynamics (Braedley and Luxton, 2015), even as class itself remains open (like gender and race) to interrogation and contestation. Working-class women, especially Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and migrant women, are doubly enrolled in reproductive work; not only does their household labour sustain the reproduction of labour power, but they are also disproportionately involved in providing commoditised domestic and care services.

Especially for female migrant domestic workers, then, gender, radicalisation and class dynamics interact not only in relation to their place in employment hierarchies in segmented labour markets but also in relation to their place in hierarchies of social reproduction. In both cases, their insertion into labour markets is often as unfree workers with precarious migrant status. This does not mean that all migrant domestic workers are all subject to 'modern slavery'. Rather, I refer here to the ways in which many immigration regimes require that 'unskilled' domestic workers and caregivers migrate as guest workers. Guest worker programmes often have conditional or - more often non-existent paths to citizenship – they tie workers to a sponsoring employer – and require that they live-in as a condition of their visa. In this way, migrant domestic workers are clearly prevented from circulating as 'free' workers in the labour markets of destination countries. Although distinct from forced labour and domestic servitude, these conditions make migrant domestic workers (MDWs) extremely vulnerable to extreme labour exploitation. As theorised by Skrivankova (2010), free and unfree labour need to be understood as relations connected by a continuum of exploitation; MDWs' labour market position and precarious migrant status (Fudge, 2011; Goldring and Landolt, 2013) are not grounded in an ontological condition of unfreedom, but rather they are actively produced and negotiated by states, employers and workers themselves.

The exploration of the processes by which the unfreedom of some migrant workers is actively produced has emerged out of a longer tradition of work on migrant labour. Analyses of the role and importance of migration and migrant workers emerged in industrial sociology and political economy from the late 1970s, which followed the emergence of key debates about social reproduction a decade earlier. Michael Burawoy (1979), for example, pointed out that an important dimension of the political economy of migrant labour is that the social reproduction of families and communities takes place elsewhere and that specific legal and political forms of governance are put in place to regulate geographical, spatial and occupational mobility of workers. These dynamics produce particular benefits for individual employers and capital more broadly (Arat-Koç, 2006). But they also highlight the role of the state in mediating the relationship between markets, workers and households in the context of socially determined norms of social reproduction.

In the late 1980s, research on immigration started to address the role and importance of women, mostly in the context of socio-cultural and economic integration (Pedraza, 1991); at the same time, analyses of legal mechanisms of control started to focus on the effects of characterisation on migrants with different statuses (Bosniak, 1988). Work that substantively addressed the specificity of migrant domestic workers as a distinct gendered and radicalised group also started to emerge in response to the growth of so-called guest worker programmes, such as the Live-in Caregiver Programme (LCP) in Canada (Arat-Koc, 1989; Fudge, 1997; Anderson, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Stasiulis and Bakan, 2003). This literature contributed a range of insights on the political economy of migrant domestic labour and encompassed debates about the relative weight of different dimensions that contributed to the particular exploitation, and oppression, of migrant domestic workers. It also grappled more substantively with the role of the state in differentiating and institutionalising hierarchies of desirability as migrant status, including beyond non-Western contexts (Silvey, 2004; Wuo, 2010; Yeoh and Huang, 2010).

There are three dimensions of the specific character of migrant domestic labour that have been identified by feminists. First, the majority of domestic labour is performed by women, and even when performed for a wage, it continues to be done by women. There is therefore a relationship, mediated by processes of radicalisation and class formation, between women's status, the work they have traditionally performed and the way in which this work is valued. Second, the status attributed to domestic labour and the vulnerability of domestic workers are linked directly to where they labour: in private households. Feminist labour law scholars have highlighted the insufficiency of labour and employment law in regulating domestic labour because of their reliance on the separation of private and public spheres (Fudge, 2012). The role of labour law in addressing and redressing the subordinate status of labour in relation to capital in the employment relation is therefore limited by the traditional assumptions implied by the standard employment relation. The distinction between public and private spheres, in political economy and in law, thus contributes to the lack of visibility of domestics as workers and their exclusion from systems of labour rights and regulations.

Third, domestic work - how, and how much, domestic workers are paid - has a different (and variable) socially determined value than other kinds of labour, and it is affected by both dimensions described above. Where domestic workers are hired in dual-earner households, there is often what has been called a 'gendered loop': a domestic worker's wages relate, implicitly if not explicitly, to the woman's wage because the former is hired to replace the work that the latter would otherwise provide for 'free' (Pratt, 2004). In theorising the relationship between the political economy of migrant domestic work and social reproduction, however, it is also important to recognise the importance of status. In countries like the UK, domestic labour may either replace the work (usually done by women) in the home when they enter the labour market or be a determinant of status and class by substituting for familial labour in situations where women do not engage in waged work. Thus, although increasing female labour market participation and the continued (and increasing) reluctance of states to support collective institutions of social reproduction are important drivers of the increase in domestic service, class production and reproduction and the maintenance of status hierarchies continue to play a role - one that may be increasing due to changing distributions of income and wealth.

The final, and related, point to make is that more recent literatures have highlighted the ways in which the political economy of waged domestic labour is increasingly interrelated with the globalisation of markets (Elias, 2010; Beneria, Deere and Kabeer, 2012; Williams, 2012). Exporting workers has become a key means by which governments cope with unemployment and foreign debt, meaning remittances are increasingly crucial to the survival of households, communities and national economies (Sassen, 2002). Through the intersection of categories of social difference, such as race, class, gender, citizenship and sexuality, precarious migrant status is assigned to foreign domestic workers in ways that structure their unfreedom and privilege the social reproduction of some groups over others. This strategy, which values migrant domestic workers for their remittances or as a partial solution to crises of care in the minority world, allows the governments of both sending and receiving nations to ignore care drains and care deficits, respectively (Bakan and Stasiulis, 2003; Fudge, 2011).

## (Re)producing precarity: The state, migration and regimes of social reproduction

The regulation of migrant domestic work reflects both general and specific tendencies within national polities in relation to the intersection of the political economy of social reproduction and migrant labour (Fudge and Strauss, 2014). The purpose of this section is to reflect briefly on differences between approaches to the regulation of guest worker programmes in Canada and the UK that have been specifically designed to place migrant workers in domestic employment and to link these approaches to broader trends in social re-structuring (especially in relation to public spending and the provision of public services).

The LCP in Canada is part of the Temporary Foreign Worker Programme (TFWP) which facilitates the migration of mostly women, predominantly from the Philippines, to work as domestic caregivers in Canadian households. The LCP requires that workers live-in, specifies the right to change employers (although this can in practice be difficult) and provides a route to settlement (through the ability to apply for landed immigrant status after three years, provided that the worker has been employed for at least 24 months providing full-time live-in care). Extensive criticism from Philippine migrant workers, activists and academics (see, inter alia, Langevin and Belleau, 2000; Arat-Koc, 2001; Pratt, 2009) has over time produced some amendments to some conditions of the programme, including giving women the right to bring their dependent children with them when they migrate - although this too remains difficult in practice. However, the key conditions that construct caregivers' exploitability, especially the live-in requirement and high initial payments to placement agencies that result in de facto indentured labour (what Parreñas (2011) has called in other contexts 'indentured mobility'), have endured even as the number of them employed under the programme has risen. Research by Kelly et al. (2011), for example, documented 12,454 arrivals (including dependents) in 2009, up from just 3,303 in 2003. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2014) reported a peak of 12,955 LCP entrants in 2007, followed by a gradual decline to around 6,000 in 2011-12. Although debate has often focused on the LCP as a privatised alternative to the public provision of childcare in Canada, an ageing population and the restructuring of care for the disabled mean that caregivers may increasingly be deployed in households in roles other than as nannies. Canada has a population of just over 35 million and has admitted 257,887 permanent residents in all classes in 2012, compared with 1,091,876 temporary residents, of whom nearly half were temporary foreign workers (Ibid.).

The Overseas Domestic Worker (ODW) visa in the UK, on the other hand, claims to be a more residual type of programme. It is designed to allow returning UK expatriates and foreign nationals approved to live or work in Britain to bring with them members of their domestic staff already employed by the household outside of the UK. Although one might assume that this applies to a relatively small high-income niche, the MDW NGO Kalayaan in UK<sup>2</sup> discovered through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request that from 2002 to 2012 up to 17,000 visas were issued annually (Roberts and Chaudry, 2013). The UK has a population of 63.7 million, just under twice that of Canada, and saw an estimated inflow of 532,000 immigrants in the year ending September 2013, of

which 212,000 were classified as long-term migrants.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the ODW visa permits a proportionally larger inflow of migrant domestic workers relative to total migrant flows than does the LCP in Canada, although Kalayaan has pointed out that the majority of workers on the ODW visa leave because the visa does not provide a route to settlement. The ODW visa has, like the LCP programme, long drawn attention from campaigners due to the high reported incidence of exploitation. The ODW visa was introduced in 1998, replacing a system under which MDWs entered the UK on a 'concession' that tied them to their employers; the ODW visa granted them the right to change employers (though not to change sector) and enshrined their recognition as a 'worker' (its own status, different from that of employee) in the UK. Changes to the ODW visa in 2012, however, both removed the right to change employers and prevented the visa from being renewed after its reduced 6-month term has elapsed. Interestingly, these changes were justified by a government keen to cut non-EU migrants on the basis that they would prevent trafficking and labour exploitation (see Fudge and Strauss, 2014, for an analysis).

The different struggles and strategies of migrant workers and advocates contra state-imposed precarity and vulnerability and employer exploitation point to both common and particular relationships between the state, capital and the political economies of social reproduction and migrant labour. In Canada, a nation built on settler in-migration, perspectives against the LCP range from calls for its abolition to those advocating its fundamental reform (the latter often centring on the removal of the live-in condition, better enforcement of employment standards and landed status from the outset). For abolitionists, the point is in part that because Canada is a settler nation founded on a history of immigration - a history shaped by racist and white supremacist politics of citizenship – the country's need for workers should be reciprocated by an a priori right to permanent residence and a path to citizenship. In Britain, there are fewer voices calling for the abolition of the ODW visa, 4 perhaps out of fear that one of the only routes available to non-EU migrant domestic workers to enter the UK will be closed. Something more like the LCP would be, in this sense, an improvement on the situation in the UK.

In Britain, the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has made reductions in immigrant numbers a key policy, leading to the closure of visa routes for non-EU workers. Because the UK is constrained, in relation to immigration policy, by its membership of the EU and common European market, the government has fixated instead on groups like foreign students and 'low-skilled' non-EU workers. Moreover, the pressure to retain such programmes from employers seeking to keep wages low is offset by strong anti-immigration sentiment among the Conservative base. Yet the UK government is clearly not yet willing to do away with a programme targeted at attracting wealthy individuals to the UK, instead proving its 'tough on immigration' credentials by reducing the employment protections embedded within the ODW visa. Moreover, because the ODW programme is not tied in any explicit way to the organisation of mainstream relations and institutions of care in the UK – it does not pretend to address a need for caregivers, unlike the LCP – the debate on the ODW programme is more peripheral to the UK's 'regime of social reproduction'.

What is clear is that the political economy of migrant domestic labour is related to, and supportive of, the polarising political economy of social reproduction in the UK and Canada. Although unique to each country (and varied within Canada's federal system), the political economy of both has been influenced by shifts (especially under conservative governments since 2006 in Canada and since 2010 in the UK) broadly characterised as neoliberal. These have included, in the UK and Canada, attacks on employment standards, labour law and unions under the rubrics of 'flexible labour markets' and 'cutting red tape'. In the UK, recent changes to the ODW visa have reduced protections for MDWs by removing their right to change employers. In Canada, reforms announced in June 2014 to the TFWP are framed in terms of protecting Canadian workers from labour market distortions wrought by the Conservative government's expansion of the Low Skill Pilot Programme, especially in the food services and hospitality sectors; the changes to the TFWP thus focus - like those to the ODW - on reducing the number of workers admitted under the programme, reducing the duration of work permits for low-wage workers and increasing fees associated with the programme. At the same time, both Canada and the UK have massively ramped up legislative and policy activity in the domains of trafficking for sexual exploitation and, to a lesser extent, forced labour and labour trafficking. Focusing on criminal law approaches to trafficking and forced labour, while simultaneously undermining labour law and employment standards, is producing the criminalisation of extreme labour exploitation and the normalisation of routine labour exploitation – with dubious benefits for migrant workers.

Both Canada and the UK have thus seen the deployment of the recent financial crisis, and related discourses of austerity, to affect socially conditioned norms of social reproduction. The refrain of inevitability

in these discourses and policies is intended precisely to ratchet down expectations about what can be provided collectively and funded out of redistributive taxation. The recourse to migrant domestic labour - and in Canada's case temporary foreign labour more broadly – is part of this process. MDW programmes preserve and reinforce privilege (as poorly paid as MDWs often are, their services are far beyond the reach of many working families) in relation to privatised care, hold wages down for feminised and radicalised work, make collective organisation by workers difficult and block routes to settlement for migrant domestic workers who contribute to, but are unable to benefit from (and therefore make demands for), quality public services. These processes benefit capital, which is less beholden to contribute (through taxation and wages) to the costs of the social reproduction of labour power and which can also benefit directly from accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004).

That the exploitation faced by MDWs has been met by general agreement on the need to tackle trafficking and modern slavery should not therefore be surprising. While anti-trafficking and anti-slavery efforts are diverse and include progressive and radical demands, state regulatory responses focus on the criminalisation of extreme exploitation and the promotion of human rights frameworks over sustained labour market reform grounded in a strong platform of workers' rights. This allows governments and fractions of capital to deplore trafficking and domestic servitude, while at the same time acting to undermine labour law and employment rights.

### Conclusion: The subordination of the social

Governments in the UK and Canada aim to deter and punish extreme forms of exploitation perpetrated by traffickers, at the same time as they institutionalise 'routine' poor pay and conditions for the majority of migrant domestic and temporary workers. This highlights a significant tension in constructing the state, which institutionalises precarious migrant status, as the locus of regulation. The state also, however, remains a field for struggles over rights, including rights to socially defined levels of support for social reproduction in the spheres of community and household. The extent to which such rights are defined by market logics and the imperatives of accumulation can be understood as the subordination of the social; the nature and extent of social subordination are shaped by class struggle.

In labour law, the concept of subordination refers to the dependency of an employee in relation to an employer; labour law, as it has evolved

in varied and context-specific ways, is intended to help achieve a balance of interests, rights and responsibilities between the parties involved in the employment relationship. If labour law itself has been challenged on multiple fronts, including by feminists who have highlighted the ways in which it has marginalised women's work and domestic labour (Fudge and Grabham, 2014), the concept of subordination is one that potentially has value and resonance beyond labour law's own conceptual 'jurisdiction'. Subordination in a more general sense refers to the condition, state or fact of being subordinate or subservient to a particular end, objective or need or the action of making subordinate in this way, and it is thus useful for analysing not only the balance of interests, rights and responsibilities between employer and employee (i.e. between capital and labour) but the balance of these dimensions more generally. Bourdieu, for example, can be read as theorising capital as a multi-dimensional relation that confers across different modalities the right to subordinate others (Bourdieu, 1984; on the social subordination of the family, see Fine, 1992).

What an analysis of the relationships between the political economy of migrant domestic labour and the political economy of social reproduction in the UK and Canada suggests, then, is the ongoing and intensifying subordination of the social in processes of state and labour market restructuring that privilege capital. This does not simply imply, however, that all processes and institutions that support social structures are somehow enrolled in, or dictated by, abstract market logics: 'the market' is itself a social construction, conjured into being by the activities of a variety of actors (including workers). Rather, it highlights the ways in which both regimes of social reproduction consolidated in post-war welfare states and those shaped by structural adjustment policies and new cash transfer programmes in 'developing' and 'emerging' economies are increasingly and explicitly hierarchical: equality and redistribution are made subordinate to norms of efficiency and costeffectiveness that relate directly to surplus value extraction, accumulation and the maintenance of relations of power and status. In countries like the UK and Canada, this means the creation of labour markets segmented by migration status that are specifically designed to privilege the social reproduction of high-income citizens over lower-income groups, and finally migrant workers themselves. Uneven development, and the extensification of social reproduction produced by the mobility of workers, also becomes the justification for such hierarchies because workers can earn more in receiving countries than in sending countries. In this way, as the Philippine Women Centre in Canada puts it in relation

to the LCP, migrant domestic workers 'mortgage themselves', enduring periods of unfreedom and sometimes of more extreme labour exploitation, in order to parlay their precarious migrant status into permanent residence – an option denied to workers on ODW visas in the UK.

#### Notes

- 1. Changes to the LCP proposed by the Canadian government in 2014 include the removal of the live-in requirement, but not the tie to a single employer, nor the condition of entry as a TFW (rather than an immigrant with permanent resident status).
- 2. www.kalayaan.org.uk
- 3. The methodologies for migration statistics in the UK and Canada are slightly different, given the context of common market for labour in the EU. Nevertheless, permanent resident numbers (Canada) can be compared with permanent immigrant numbers (UK) to give a sense of the size of immigration and migration flows. The key difference is that all those wanting to live and work in Canada need to apply through immigration channels, whereas citizens of the EU have the right to live and work in the UK.
- 4. Although at the time of writing, the ODW is the focus of a very energetic campaign in the context of the UK Modern Slavery Bill.

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