

'It's truly exploitative': Labour control and exploitation in domestic work in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the complex interplay between control and exploitation in domestic work. Applying a labour exploitation continuum framework informed by an intersectional lens, the study draws on the work experiences of 15 Mexican domestic workers through five key dimensions of domestic work: workload and working hours; employment (in)security; compensation and benefits; occupational health and safety; and discrimination, violence and harassment. The article contributes to a broader understanding of the control-exploitation continuum, identifying a range of everyday exploitative practices such as low pay and long hours to extreme exploitation, such as sexual violence. Furthermore, control and exploitation vary across intersecting identities and are felt more acutely by some (more) marginalised identities. This article makes a dual contribution by highlighting the spectrum of exploitation faced by domestic workers in the global South and the role of extreme control mechanisms in exploitation, while also challenging the dominant focus on international migrant workers when examining the dynamics of labour exploitation.

Introduction

The issue of labour exploitation in paid domestic work has received significant scholarly attention, resulting in a number of empirical studies examining the various forms of exploitation experienced by domestic workers (Awumbila et al., 2019; Ribeiro Corossacz, 2019). In particular, research has largely focused on the exploitative experiences of domestic workers within global care chains (Hochschild, 2000), particularly those from the global South working in the global North (Fernández García et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2019; Hopfgartner et al., 2022). While extreme forms of labour exploitation such as forced labour, modern slavery¹ and human trafficking have been extensively examined in this context, comparatively less attention has been paid to the day-to-day forms of exploitation. These everyday exploitative practices, while not necessarily criminalised, shape the work and employment experiences of many domestic workers. Moreover, the complex interplay between the exploitation experienced by domestic workers, including underpayment and overwork, and the pervasive control mechanisms used by employers in the workplace, such as extreme surveillance and monitoring, is often

neglected in wider debates on the exploitation of domestic workers.

Drawing on the narratives of 15 domestic workers in Mexico, this article contributes to debates on the dynamics of control and exploitation embedded in domestic work. While much of the extant research has focused primarily on 'super-exploited' migrant domestic workers, this article shows that while non-migrant² workers also experience extreme forms of exploitation, 'less severe' or 'routine' forms of exploitation (Davies, 2019b; Scott, 2017) - such as inadequate pay and unsafe working conditions - are far more prevalent among them. Although routine exploitative practices often go unnoticed or are perceived as an inevitable part of domestic work, they have significant negative impacts on domestic workers, limiting their employment opportunities, affecting their mental and physical health, jeopardising their livelihoods and, in extreme cases, endangering their lives. Using a labour exploitation continuum (Scott, 2017; Skrivánková, 2010), informed by an intersectional analytical lens (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989), the analysis shows that interviewees frequently experience various forms of control resulting in a continuum of exploitative practices. Within this continuum, most of the experiences reported lie in a 'grey area' (2017)

¹ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), modern slavery is "comprised of two principal components – forced labour and forced marriage. Both refer to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or cannot leave because of threats, violence, deception, abuse of power or other forms of coercion" (ILO, 2022, p.2).

² Throughout this article, the term 'non-migrant' is used to describe domestic workers who were born in Mexico. It is worth noting that a significant proportion of interviewees are in fact internal migrants. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in Mexico, where migration is mostly from rural and economically deprived areas to more prosperous urban centres (Tilly et al., 2019).

between two extremes: ideal and desirable working conditions ('decent work'³) at one end of the spectrum, and criminalised exploitative work practices ('undecent work') at the other. Moreover, levels of labour control and exploitation differ across the various marginalised intersectional identities of domestic workers with some identities, such as indigenous rural migrants and older domestic workers, experiencing particularly severe forms of control and exploitation.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it contributes to the existing literature on domestic work in the global South (Acciari, 2021; Anbesse et al., 2009; Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Blofield, 2012; Fu et al., 2018; Gorbán, 2012) by providing empirical evidence illustrating the multifaceted exploitation experienced by non-migrant domestic workers. Concurrently, it applies the conceptual framework of the labour exploitation continuum approach (Scott, 2017; Skřivánková, 2010), which enables an understanding of the complex interplay between control and exploitation in the sector. This article proposes that exploitative practices should be understood as part of a continuous spectrum in which control mechanisms act as central catalysts for exploitation, thus offering a comprehensive understanding of the variable nature of exploitative work, drawn from the lived experiences of domestic workers. This article introduces the concept of hyper-exploitation in domestic work, highlighting how the absence of formal contracts, inadequate social protection and weak enforcement of labour rights exacerbate interrelated forms of exploitation. This framework offers a more nuanced understanding of exploitation in the sector, emphasising the cumulative impact of different exploitative practices that go beyond any single act of abuse. Secondly, this article contributes to the growing body of research that applies the labour exploitation continuum framework to examine the control and exploitation of marginalised workers. In contrast to the prevailing trend in academic scholarship, which has adopted a labour exploitation continuum lens to examine the migration status of workers as the central axis of exploitation (Davies, 2019b; Fernández García et al., 2023; Hopfgartner et al., 2022; Strauss & McGrath, 2017), this study draws attention to an often overlooked facet of labour dynamics: the multiple, intertwined forms of control and exploitation faced by non-migrant marginalised workers within the borders of their home countries.

The following section provides an overview of the labour exploitation continuum approach, outlining the interrelated nature of control and exploitation that ranges from decent work to egregious criminal exploitation. It then contextualises the heightened vulnerability of domestic workers due to the isolated and private nature of their work settings, their exclusion from labour and social protections and the intersecting factors of oppression they face. Section three focuses on the challenges faced by domestic workers in Mexico, emphasising the intricate interplay of gender, race/ethnicity, and social class oppressions that underpin the systemic inequalities endured by these workers. It underscores how these inequalities intersect with and exacerbate exploitative working conditions and how, despite recent labour reforms, domestic workers in Mexico continue to face significant gaps in their rights. This is followed by the methodology in section four, outlining how interviews were conducted with participants from different ethnic backgrounds and employment arrangements to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences of labour control and exploitation. The article then reports domestic workers' experiences of control and exploitation across five dimensions: workload and working hours; employment (in)security; compensation and benefits; occupational health and safety; and discrimination, violence and harassment. The discussion considers the complex interweaving of control and exploitation in domestic workers' experiences, revealing how (more)

marginalised intersecting identities experience more intense forms of control and exploitation. The conclusion comments on areas of future research.

Redefining labour control and exploitation: a continuum approach

The concepts of labour 'exploitation' and 'control' have sparked considerable debate (Scott, 2017; Thompson & van den Broek, 2010) and need to be unpacked for the purposes of this study. Prominent theoretical approaches address these dynamics, with Marxist-inspired critical frameworks being particularly influential. Labour Process Theory, for instance, has traditionally been used to explore the interplay between control, consent, and resistance in production processes (Thompson & Smith, 2009). Although there is no universally accepted definition of labour control and labour exploitation, in legal frameworks exploitation is often associated with 'severe exploitation', particularly modern slavery, human trafficking, forced labour and other forms of illegal labour-related practices (FRA, 2015; Lewis et al., 2014). Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that various practices falling below these rigorous standards may still be exploitative to some degree. Indeed, several forms of exploitation are not criminalised but may fall under regulatory or civil law, such as inadequate compensation or unfair dismissal, which are often recognised as forms of 'labour abuse' or routine exploitation (Davies, 2019a; Scott, 2017). In addition, the definition of exploitation becomes more complex when workers 'consent' to exploitative practices. The idea that consent alone can justify such arrangements is problematic, particularly given the inherent power imbalances between employers and workers. This is particularly relevant for undocumented migrants or those facing economic hardship, who may feel pressured to accept exploitative conditions due to limited alternatives (Niezna, 2024).

Similar to the contentious issue of labour exploitation, the examination of labour-based control mechanisms has been the subject of intense ongoing debates. Notably, labour process theorists have emerged as prominent figures in the debates, maintaining that control constitutes the prevailing driving force within the capitalist labour process. According to this perspective, control mechanisms have a significant impact on the dynamics of work within capitalist systems and profoundly shape workers' experiences (Thompson & van den Broek, 2010).

Building on these perspectives, an alternative theoretical lens on labour exploitation and control has emerged, framing them as interconnected elements along a continuum. This continuum ranges from ideal working conditions, often referred to as 'decent work', to extreme and sometimes criminalised forms of exploitation, such as forced labour, slavery and human trafficking, which can be described as 'undecent work' or severe exploitation (Scott, 2017; Skřivánková, 2010). As we move along this continuum, we encounter forms of exploitation that are subtle, routine and less conspicuous, constituting a 'grey area'. While these forms may be considered less 'serious', they still have a significant negative impact on workers (Davies, 2019a; Scott, 2017). Examples include wage theft, excessive working hours, hazardous working conditions and job insecurity (see Fig. 1).

According to this approach, exploitation and control are inextricably linked, with exploitation often facilitated by various forms of extreme control exercised by employers or other actors in the labour market. While not all forms of control are exploitative, when excessive, control can lead to labour exploitation with harmful consequences for workers. For example, excessive monitoring of rest breaks may prevent workers from taking breaks at all (Davies, 2019a; Scott, 2017). In addition to direct control at the micro level, workers are also subject to both indirect (meso-level) and exogenous (macro-level) controls, broadly defined as organisational processes and societal systems that occur outside the workplace, but have an impact on it (e.g. employment regulations, labour intermediaries, immigration regimes) (Scott, 2017). These

³ According to the ILO, decent work should provide fair income, employment security, social protection, fundamental labour rights, equal opportunities and treatment, and opportunities for personal development and social dialogue (Seiffarth et al., 2023).

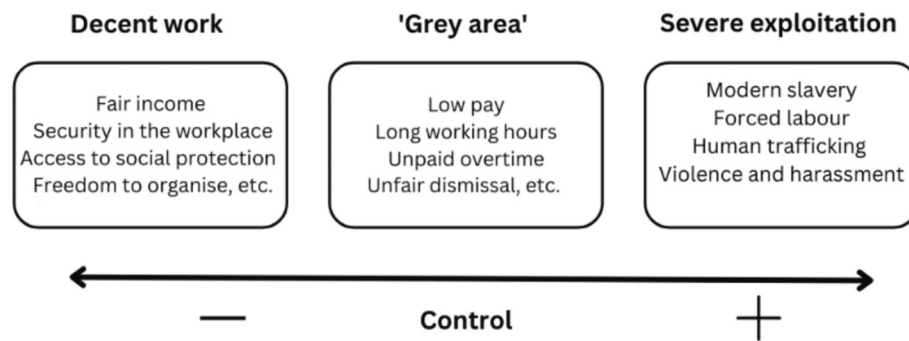


Fig. 1. Labour control and exploitation continuum.

different types of controls symbolise multiple resources that employers and other actors in the labour market can use to control workers, sometimes premised on the view of reproducing so-called 'good' and 'better' workers (Scott, 2017).

The following section builds on the above control-exploitation continuum by understanding the realities faced by domestic workers in terms of intersecting factors and identities of inequality they face both within their workplace and in the wider social context.

Intersecting control and exploitation in domestic work

Domestic work has been identified as one of the most vulnerable occupations with regard to labour exploitation (ILO, 2021). A large body of research has highlighted how the nature of this occupation places workers in a marginalised and vulnerable position that fosters conditions of exploitation (Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Rollins, 1985). One of the main reasons for this lies in the unique circumstances of their workplaces, i.e., private homes, where workers are often isolated, working without colleagues and out of the public eye. Furthermore, because domestic workers are based in employers' homes, employers tend not to consider their private space as workplaces, nor do they see themselves as employers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). As feminist researchers have consistently argued, the result is that employers often portray domestic workers as 'family members', a narrative that serves to rationalise exploitative practices such as unpaid labour (Cohen, 2000; Romero, 1992). In addition, the isolation of domestic work has been associated not only with a worker's greater likelihood of enduring exploitative working conditions, but also with a lower likelihood of asking for help when needed (Anbesse et al., 2009). This is exacerbated by the fact that domestic work often falls outside the scope of labour legislation and is not covered by employment protections such as minimum wages, overtime pay, health and safety at work, anti-discrimination measures and the right to organising and collective bargaining (Blofield & Jokela, 2018).

Studies have shown that the exploitation of domestic workers manifests in numerous ways (Awumbila et al., 2019; Jiang, 2023). These include low wages, excessive working hours, inadequate breaks, wage theft, lack of social protection and instances of verbal, physical and sexual violence and harassment. Research has pointed out that systems of inequality based on intersecting markers of identity, such as race, gender, class, age, migration status, and others, compound the vulnerability of domestic workers and exacerbate their already exploitative situations (Acciari, 2021; Bernardino-Costa, 2014). Women from marginalised backgrounds, such as indigenous and black women, often bear the brunt of these intersecting forms of oppression, making them particularly vulnerable to extreme exploitation (Blofield, 2012; Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b). In particular, the complex relationship between exploitation and migration status has been highlighted by research on international migration for domestic work (Fernández García et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2019; Jiang, 2023). These studies have shown that those with insecure or irregular immigration status are

particularly vulnerable to various forms of severe labour exploitation, including slavery-like practices such as 'contract slavery', 'debt bondage' and human trafficking (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Parreñas & Silvey, 2021). However, while much emphasis has been placed on the experiences of 'super-exploited' migrant domestic workers, there is comparatively less empirical research on the exploitative experiences of domestic workers in their country of origin (including those who may have to migrate from rural areas to urban centres). Moreover, missing from current discussions are the complex ways in which exploitation interplays with labour control in the context of domestic work.

The scant academic literature focusing specifically on labour control in domestic work defines control as 'employers' ability to obtain desired work performance from their domestic workers' (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007, p. 137) in order to extract labour and maximise returns. Typical control mechanisms used by employers include strict surveillance through video cameras or listening devices; restrictions on domestic workers' freedom within the workplace, often through the confiscation of personal documents; and the use of coercive tactics such as threats, intimidation, manipulation or even the use of physical violence and other forms of aggression. Many of these control mechanisms often go undetected or are accepted as an inevitable aspect of domestic work (Jiang, 2023; Kandilige et al., 2023; Parreñas & Silvey, 2021).

In addition, control tactics by employers reinforce hierarchical power structures within the workplace. Research on domestic work has shown that several practices of direct control can be associated with the master-servant power dynamic that characterises the employment relationships within this sector (Fu et al., 2018; Parreñas et al., 2020). In the global South, under a logic of servitude - deeply rooted in the colonial and slavery past, which dictates that some marginalised identities should serve privileged ones - domestic workers are expected to submit to hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination, accepting the authority of their employers (Blofield, 2012; Fu et al., 2018). In this regard, control can be associated with what scholars have termed 'demarcation repertoires' (Gorbán, 2012) or 'distancing practices' (Blofield, 2012); that is, a set of practices that employers use in their relationships with workers to establish clear boundaries and distinctions between workers and household members. Employers adopt these types of control measures to emphasise the perceived 'inferior' position of domestic workers within the worker-employer dynamic. One such method is the imposition of strict regulations, including prohibiting domestic workers from using certain facilities such as toilets, preventing them from using the same crockery and cutlery as the family members, providing them with inferior quality food and restricting them to eating only leftovers (Blofield, 2012; Gorbán, 2012; Rollins, 1985). These practices of differentiation are particularly prevalent in societies characterised by racialised class hierarchies, where domestic workers have different ethnic or racial backgrounds from their employers (Blofield, 2012).

Case background

Domestic workers in Mexico face a complex web of inequalities which intersect with their marginalised identities. Their experiences are shaped by the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity and class oppressions that underpin systemic discrimination rooted in social and institutional frameworks. Gender inequality is particularly pronounced in the sector. While women make up the majority of the workforce (94 % of the 2.2 million workers), men in domestic work tend to work in higher-paid jobs such as drivers and cooks, earning around a third more than their female counterparts and enjoying better employment benefits (Bensusán, 2019). This wage and benefit gap is exacerbated for certain more marginalised groups, particularly indigenous women - typically internal migrants from economically deprived rural areas seeking opportunities as a live-in⁴ in urban centres - who often receive minimal compensation. Discriminatory social norms unfairly portray them as the target of good deeds by employers who provide housing and domestic training (Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b; Tilly et al., 2019).

Any discussion of the marginalisation of domestic workers in Mexico must take into account the historical and social construction of racial categories and how the concept of *mestizaje*, or racial and cultural mixing, has played a complex role in both the maintenance and the challenge of racial hierarchies in Mexico. Although *mestizaje* is frequently lauded as a unifying national identity, it has also been employed to obscure and perpetuate racial discrimination against indigenous and Afro-Mexican populations (Figueroa, 2010; Wade, 2020). In the context of domestic work, the concept of *mestizaje* can contribute to the vulnerability of certain groups by normalising racial inequalities and devaluing the labour performed by racialised workers (Wade, 2013). For indigenous women, who make up a disproportionate number of those employed in domestic work, it is crucial to distinguish between racialisation and ethnicisation, as they are subjected to discrimination on the grounds of both their phenotype (racialisation) - which differs from that of the white population of European origin - and their cultural practices and languages (ethnicization), which are marginalised and considered inferior to other (white) dominant cultural norms (Montenegro, 2018).

In addition to gender and race/ethnicity inequalities, Mexican society remains stratified along class lines. The employment of domestic workers is a symbol of social status for the employer, a cultural institution that indicates an employer's middle or upper-class position (Blofield, 2012; Tilly et al., 2019). Paradoxically, despite the central role of domestic workers in the social reproduction of middle and upper-class families, domestic workers are socio-economically undervalued. An illustrative example of this is their exceptionally low wages. On average, domestic workers are among the lowest-paid workers in the country, earning around 20 % less than other workers holding informal employment arrangements in other sectors (Bensusán, 2019). Despite the national government's introduction of a minimum wage for domestic workers in 2021, there is little evidence that this measure will significantly improve their financial situation. The government's proposed daily rate of 154 Mexican pesos (equivalent to \$7.61) falls well short of the 300 pesos per day (\$14.83) considered fair by the organised labour movement (Hernández, 2020).

While labour law reforms between 2019 and 2021⁵ have extended various rights to domestic workers comparable to those enjoyed by formal workers in other sectors, such as mandatory social insurance -

including access to health care and employment benefits - as well as mandatory written contracts and paid bonuses, significant gaps in labour rights remain. For example, there are no regulations setting maximum daily working hours and rest periods for domestic workers, although a significant proportion (46 %) work more than 40 h a week and a third are denied any opportunity to rest during their working hours (INEGI, 2023). The prevalence of informal employment arrangements exacerbates these problems, with 97.5 % of workers lacking written contracts (INEGI, 2023). Consequently, most workers have no clear definition of their duties, working hours, benefits or leave entitlements. Under these arrangements, abrupt dismissals without notice are common and are aggravated by the lack of unemployment benefits, leaving domestic workers highly vulnerable to sudden loss of income.

Furthermore, social insurance coverage for domestic workers is severely inadequate, with only 2.4 % of them enrolled in the social insurance programme administered by the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) (Juárez, 2023). This is compounded by the fact that the vast majority of domestic workers work part-time (around 80 % according to the domestic workers' union, SINACTRAHO)⁶ and therefore do not meet the minimum working hours and minimum wage requirements to qualify for enrolment. Even among those who are registered, access to employment benefits such as health care is limited to days when they are actively working (Juárez, 2023). This systemic exclusion deepens the vulnerability of domestic workers, hinders their access to basic social protection and perpetuates the cycle of exploitation within this marginalised workforce.

Methods

This study explores the experiences and perspectives of domestic workers in relation to labour control and exploitation in their workplaces. Using a qualitative methodology, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' work experiences in Mexico. Mexico was selected for this study due to its distinctive combination of factors that contribute to the heightened vulnerability of domestic workers to exploitation. Mexico is characterised by a notably high prevalence of informal domestic work. This leaves them with minimal legal protections and limited recourse in cases of abuse (Bensusán, 2019; Blofield & Jokela, 2018; Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b; Tilly et al., 2019). The situation of domestic workers in Mexico, which mirrors the situation of domestic workers in several other Latin American countries and indeed throughout the global South, is of great interest as it serves as a 'key case' (Thomas, 2020) of the prevailing challenges associated with this occupation. Despite recent reforms, significant gaps in labour rights persist, such as the absence of regulations on maximum working hours or rest periods (Torres, 2020). Furthermore, Mexico's social and institutional frameworks perpetuate gender, race/ethnicity, and class-based inequalities, which intersect to exacerbate the exploitation of domestic workers, particularly indigenous women migrating from rural areas (Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b). These intersecting factors render Mexico an ideal context for examining the complex dynamics of control and exploitation in domestic work.

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with domestic workers between March and May 2022. Interviewees were recruited via social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), with multiple advertisements posted across platforms over two months. All individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the study and who met the criteria (i.e., had work experience as a domestic worker in Mexico and were aged 18 or older) were invited for interviews; of the 20 individuals who agreed to be interviewed, only 15 attended the

⁴ A live-in domestic worker resides within the employer's home, in contrast to a live-out worker who does not.

⁵ During this period, in December 2019, Mexico ratified ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Work, a decision that help to protect the rights granted to domestic workers from possible future changes in the political scenario (Torres, 2020). In addition, in 2022, Mexico ratified the ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.

⁶ Most domestic workers are employed on a part-time basis as live-out workers. They typically work for different households during the week, and in some cases may work for more than one household on the same day (Tilly et al., 2019).

interviews. As the interviews took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were offered either online (Zoom) or face-to-face interviews, as the pandemic restrictions were relaxed at the time. Five participants opted for face-to-face interviews, which were conducted in a neutral space (a business centre in central Mexico City). Prior to the interviews, participants completed a questionnaire that provided information about their intersectional identities (gender, race, indigenous language proficiency) as well as details about their family composition, daily tasks, working hours, etc. The purpose of this supplementary data collection method was to provide a more complete picture of the participants' personal and professional contexts, and ultimately inform the subsequent interview analysis. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted between one and two hours, following a guide designed to gather comprehensive information about each participant's current and past experiences as a domestic worker. The interviews focused on various work-related aspects, including worker-employer relations, perceptions of labour rights, and other relevant topics. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants received a voucher worth 300 Mexican pesos (approximately USD 15).⁷ Participants were given the autonomy to choose their preferred pseudonyms.

All the participants were women and ranged in age from 18 to 60. The sample encompassed a diverse demographic, with 11 individuals identifying as having a mixed ethnic background, three identifying as indigenous and one individual choosing not to disclose her ethnicity. Notably, only one indigenous participant reported fluency in an indigenous language.⁸ The majority of interviewees, all but three, were mothers. Of these, eight were either supporting their families as solo parents or as the main breadwinners in their households, living with their children or alone. The participants had a range of formal education levels, reflecting different backgrounds. Their length of employment as domestic workers ranged from one year to over 20 years. In terms of living arrangements, at the time of the interviews, five participants were employed as live-in domestic workers and eight were employed as live-out. In addition, two participants were actively seeking employment opportunities in domestic work (Table 1).

Data analysis was carried out using NVivo through thematic analysis. First-order codes were generated encompassing broad and descriptive areas of discussion present in the interview data, such as 'too many responsibilities' and 'accusations of stealing', whereas second-order codes were more focused, honing in on specific concepts or ideas. For example, the code 'too many responsibilities' was merged with similar codes to form the overarching theme of 'intensification of work'. Once the coding was complete, key themes emerged and were grouped under the five dimensions explored in detail in this article. Relevant quotes were translated into English. Ethical approval for this study, and written consent was secured from all participants.

Dimensions of control and exploitation

This section reports evidence in relation to the five key dimensions of domestic workers' experiences of control and exploitation: employment security (or lack thereof), workload and working hours, compensation and benefits, occupational health and safety, and discrimination, violence and harassment. The intricate nexus of control and exploitation in domestic work makes the demarcation between these phenomena a complex endeavour, as domestic workers' narratives highlight the inherent symbiosis between mechanisms of control and exploitation

embedded in their daily work experiences. Furthermore, their shared experiences reveal the intersection of their marginalised status and the systematic undervaluation of their labour, which perpetuates exploitative work and employment conditions. Within this context, certain intersecting identities which endure even greater degrees of marginalisation, confront more pronounced and egregious forms of control and exploitation.

Employment (in)security

Employers strategically use threats of job loss to regulate the behaviour of domestic workers. These tactics contribute to continued exploitation, as domestic workers feel compelled to endure exploitative working conditions in order to maintain their positions. Importantly, employers manipulate workers into thinking that finding other jobs, whether within the domestic work sector or elsewhere, will be a significant challenge. This is particularly experienced by individuals who face increased discrimination in the labour market. For instance, as domestic workers age, they may encounter health issues or a decline in physical capabilities, increasing their likelihood of dismissal. Many workers, particularly those with limited formal education or who have been out of the workforce for extended periods, may feel compelled to rely on domestic work due to the scarcity of other employment options (Howell, 2017). Montserrat, a 58-year-old worker, described how she felt that her employer used her age to suggest that alternative employment opportunities would be scarce: "I know that I'm 58 years old, so it's not easy for me to find work. I think she [employer] also takes advantage of that, of knowing that maybe I can't find work elsewhere because of my age. Well, I don't know, but she has said to us, 'You are replaceable. I'll just call the agency, and they will send me people.'"

Other interviewees reported that employers would express ideas that domestic workers can be easily replaced. This perceived fungibility of workers plays a crucial role in perpetuating an imbalanced power dynamic in the workplace, allowing employers to exercise control over workers, many of whom are constantly fearful for their jobs. As Sara highlighted, the perception of domestic workers as expendable adds to the exploitative character of the work milieu: "At the place where I work, I've told them [employers], 'your money is as valuable as my work'. I mean, 'I need your money, and you need my work' ... We're seen as something disposable. If you don't want to do it, there will always be someone who will do it for cheaper, out of necessity ... My colleagues say [to potential employers], 'Hey, I'll help you with your chores for 100 pesos.' And I'm like, 'only 100 pesos?' It's really heavy work, who knows how needy they might be?"

As Sara further explained, the plight is exacerbated for those in extreme need, such as rural migrant women, who are targeted by some employers who anticipate that they will be prepared to accept lower wages and in-kind benefits in the form of live-in arrangements. As scholars have observed, employers may exploit rural migrants' lack of familiarity with urban environments and their limited understanding of their legal rights as workers (Fuentes Valle & Echeverría Echeverría, 2019). As Sara pointed out, employers justify exploitative working conditions by claiming that they are doing workers a favour by providing food and shelter: "They [employers] see it as if, just because of necessity, we'll endure a lot. I've seen it with other colleagues ... [workers] from a small town, and they might like working in houses, but sometimes they are taken advantage of, or exploited. I look at the ads, 'Looking for a girl from the countryside for live-in work'. And it's like, they want to exploit them, right? ... There are employers who say, 'Well, don't you have a relative from the countryside? I'll feed them here, and they won't get that anywhere else. They should just stay here'. But it's because they want to pay them less, and then they say, 'Well, I'm doing you a favour'. It's not really a favour. But many come out of necessity, wanting to leave the small towns where there's hunger."

The interchangeability of workers by employers leads to unfair and arbitrary dismissals - often based on discriminatory grounds, such as

⁷ The amount of compensation was based on the average daily earnings of domestic workers in Mexico City, ensuring that payment levels were contextually appropriate and aimed to avoid placing an undue burden of unpaid work on the most vulnerable (Warnock et al., 2022).

⁸ Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) considers the knowledge of an indigenous language as one of the parameters for the census of indigenous peoples.

Table 1
Participant composition.

Participant	Type of work	Work experience (in years)	Age range	Race/ethnicity	Indigenous language	Number of children	Civil status	Household composition
Arte Sana	Live-out	5–10	31–35	Mestiza	No	Two	Single	Children
Candi	Live-in	11–20	36–40	Mestiza	No	Three	Cohabitation	Children and partner
Ely	Live-out	More than 20 years	56–60	Mestiza	No	Two	Single	Single occupant
Josefina	Live-in	11–20	56–60	Mestiza	No	One	Widow	Single occupant
Joss	Unemployed/job seeker	1–4	18–25	Mestiza	No	None	Single	Parents
Lili	Live-in	5–10	36–40	Mestiza	No	Three	Separated	Children
Luci	Live-out	5–10	41–45	Mestiza	No	One	Separated	Not specified
Luz	Live-out	11–20	36–40	Not specified	No	Three	Cohabitation	Children and partner
Mari	Live-out	More than 20 years	46–50	Indigenous	No	One	Cohabitation	Children and partner
Mildrec	Live-in	11–20	31–35	Indigenous	Yes	None	Single	Single occupant
Montserrat	Live-in	11–20	56–60	Mestiza	No	Three	Widow	Children
Pati	Live-out	5–10	26–30	Mestiza	No	None	Single	Parents
Regina	Live-out	11–20	56–60	Mestiza	No	Three	Widow	Children
Rosa	Unemployed/job seeker	1–4	18–25	Mestiza	No	Two	Cohabitation	Children and partner
Sara	Live-out	11–20	41–45	Indigenous	No	Three	Single	Children

pregnancy - highlighting the ease with which undocumented work arrangements are terminated. In a physically demanding occupation like domestic work, pregnancy is seen as a point of vulnerability, as employers presume that expecting domestic workers are incapable of effectively performing household chores. Moreover, the absence of social protection frequently results in employers' inclination to dismiss pregnant employees rather than bear the expenses associated with maternity leave or healthcare. A poignant instance of this is Sara's experience, whose revelation of her two-month pregnancy resulted in her immediate dismissal from a previous job. The negative attitude of her employer towards her pregnancy became evident when Sara was informed that 'they couldn't keep [her] like that'.

The data shows the ease with which domestic workers can be dismissed on discriminatory grounds, with minimal consequences for the employer, particularly if the employment relationship is not formalised in a contract. According to Paty's observations, and echoed by many participants, the lack of such a written agreement limits domestic workers' options in cases of unfair dismissal, creating a sense of instability and insecurity in the employment relationship aggravated by a lack of access to legal resources: 'What do you do if you fall, if they don't pay you, if you're unfairly dismissed? ... at the end of the day, legally, there's nothing you can do because there's no contract, no breach of contract because there's no contract'.

Workload and working hours

Control and exploitation within the domestic work sector take various forms but are particularly evident in the regulation of working hours. As scholars have argued and as noted above, Mexican labour laws have historically allowed domestic workers to work longer hours than workers in other sectors. This discrepancy in legal working hours is a form of exploitation that is often linked to wider inequalities and abuses, such as low wages, lack of benefits and verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Blofield, 2012; Saldana-Tejeda, 2014). As the participants point out, employers frequently use a high degree of control to enforce long working hours, without regard for the principles of fair pay and adequate rest. As a result, domestic workers often find themselves working extended hours beyond those originally agreed upon without receiving overtime pay as compensation. The prevalence of long working hours among domestic workers is often attributed to employers underestimating workloads and setting unreasonable expectations, resulting in workers feeling pressured to achieve levels of productivity that go beyond what can be achieved during their designated shifts. As Sara explained, employers expect her to complete an excessive amount of tasks within an eight-hour shift, a demand she finds particularly challenging: "The eight hours don't allow you to do everything. No,

there wasn't enough time to do everything employers asked for ... It really takes a lot of time when you're cleaning ... There have been kitchens that took me four or five hours. Imagine that. So I tell them, 'do you want your cleaning well done, or do you want me to rush through it?'"

Unsurprisingly, prioritising the maximisation of work output often comes at the expense of workers' rest periods. As Sara later explained, stringent expectations of work productivity are associated with expectations of an uninterrupted, eight-hour workday without any breaks during the shift: "The lady [employer] was telling me, 'this job is an eight-hour job without resting for even a minute, with an extra one-hour lunch break, because that's your own time' ... so it adds up to nine hours. In other words, it's no longer an eight-hour workday. [The employer said:] 'So, if you want to eat, it's already deducted from your working hours because you work for me for eight hours'. In other words, it's relentless."

For live-in workers, the pace of work can be even more intense, as employers often ignore the boundaries between working time and leisure time. The intersection of live-ins 'working' and 'social/living' spaces encourages temporal porosity, which is reflected in employer demands that workers are always available and willing to work. Josefina, a live-in domestic worker, expressed difficulty in enjoying any real time off. Even when she can take a break, her employer frequently assigns her tasks. As her living space and workplace are the same, she feels her only option is to leave the house to avoid being requested to work on her days off: "So when I came here I felt like a slave because I only left on Sundays ... on Sundays, I noticed that she [the employer] would wake up and ask me to prepare some fruit before I left. On my day off, she would ask me to do things, so if I don't go out, I'd end up working."

Importantly, working long hours is detrimental to workers' physical and mental health. Studies from Mexico suggest that extended workdays, particularly when combined with long commutes and the physically demanding nature of domestic work, severely limit domestic workers' ability to rest and recover, further undermining their health and well-being (Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b; Yáñez, 2016). These lengthy journeys cut into their already scarce time for rest and family, contributing to physical and emotional exhaustion. The constant pressure to meet demands imposed by employers, exacerbated by the lack of adequate rest, keeps workers in a state of constant stress and physical strain, depriving them of the opportunity to recover properly, both physically and mentally, as Ely experienced: "That was really unfair. They gave you very little [free] time, maybe 10 minutes, and just to eat. And let me tell you, even in the last two or three minutes [of the working day, employers say] 'do this for me and then do this other thing'. Well, it stressed me out a lot, to be honest. I felt a certain exhaustion because there was so much, so much [work] that my

shoulders, arms and parts of my back started to hurt.”

Compensation and benefits

Economic exploitation emerged as a major theme among interviewees. Cases included a range of issues such as inadequate wages and unpaid labour, including non-payment of overtime and being assigned tasks beyond their designated responsibilities. Workers also raised concerns about being denied their right to social protection, particularly social insurance benefits. The absence of adequate coverage can render workers dependent on their employers for financial aid during emergencies, such as health crises, and exacerbate their susceptibility to falling prey to exploitative contexts (Seiffarth et al., 2023).

Interviewees reported receiving payments that fall considerably short of the national minimum wage or pay levels that the domestic workers' organised labour movement considers decent compensation. This not only violates their right to a fair wage, but also limits their ability to break out of the relentless cycle of exploitation, as they are unable to save and plan for their financial future. The situation is particularly dire for domestic workers who are the primary breadwinners for their families. A considerable number of them find themselves enduring unfavourable working conditions, including low wages, in order to fulfil their family obligations. According to some interviewees, the burden of financially supporting family members creates a deep sense of duty that makes domestic workers more vulnerable to control and exploitation by their employers. Arte Sana exemplifies this, having shared her experience of starting as a live-in domestic worker with insufficient earnings to cater for her and her children's basic needs: “At that moment, I didn't feel the mistreatment yet, I didn't sense the exploitation, I didn't realise it, because I thought it was too much [money]. Even though they paid me 250 a day, I couldn't buy food, pay for my transportation, or save up. I sent that amount to my mom, where my children were during those years. My daughter told me, ‘Mom's job is to send money.’”

Later in the interview, she explained that her situation did not improve when she moved to a live-out arrangement, as she found herself juggling up to four jobs a day and enduring what she described as ‘total exploitation for the sake of having more money’.

It was found that domestic workers interviewed were neither consulted nor did they have any access to salary discussions concerning pay and rewards, which signals a further degree of continuous economic exploitation. As noted by Rojas-García, Toledo González (2018a) domestic workers have limited room to negotiate with their employers. The surplus of unskilled labour in the Mexican job market means that the conditions under which domestic workers are employed are largely dictated by the employers. As some interviewees reported, it is common for employers to undervalue domestic workers' efforts by unilaterally determining the value of their work and setting extremely low wages. Sara expressed her frustration at this widespread practice, highlighting how employers consistently try to set her wage without taking into account the true value of her work: “When a construction worker comes and gives a quote, he says, ‘I'm going to charge you this much’. So, I wonder, why do they put a price on my work?”

The lack of bargaining power that domestic workers face in relation to wage setting is also reflected in their limited control over the tasks assigned to them. For example, domestic workers are often assigned unpaid tasks that fall outside the scope of their job description, or burdened with duties that go beyond their primary role. Participants reported feelings of frustration and helplessness when facing expectations of unpaid extra work. Montserrat recounted an experience that exemplify this issue. When she initially started her current job, there was a team of four domestic staff, including a full-time cook. However, the situation has since changed, and now there are only two members on the team - Montserrat and a part-time worker. Throughout the interview, Montserrat's frustration at this situation was evident, as she has taken on not only her own responsibilities but also those of the absent cook,

without any sufficient added compensation: “I'm the one who's left with more work, and I'm the one who's getting paid less, they're overloading me. And I'm taking care of the kitchen plus what's supposed to be my share. For example, one day I asked when he [employer] was going to pay me, I said, ‘Aren't you going to give me anything [extra]? [the employer replied] ‘Oh, calm down, calm down, yes,’ and he gave me an extra 500 pesos. ... He's saving two salaries and he wasn't paying the chef 500 pesos a week. Well, it was like 4,000 pesos, I think. I know he's not going to give me 4,000 pesos, but I'm doing at least half of the chef's work. Right? So yeah, it's frustrating. I told my colleague, she's 38 years old, and I told her, ‘You should look for something else, you should find something else.’”

Moreover, Montserrat recalls that on many occasions she and her colleagues were expected to carry out maintenance work around the house in addition to their regular duties; however, as she noted, ‘(she is) not a plumber, not an electrician, not a porter ... none of those things’. Similarly, in a previous job, Mildred experienced a change in her duties compared to what was originally agreed. Shortly after starting work for a single elderly man, she discovered that she was expected to prepare meals not only for her employer, but often for his children and grandchildren as well: “I was in another job with an elderly person, a doctor. He lived alone ... During the job interview, his daughter tells me, ‘Look, it's only my dad [at the house]. You're going to take care of him, help him out, do the cleaning around the house.’ Well, it all sounds great, right? So when I start working at that place, on a weekend, all the children and grandchildren who hadn't come before suddenly show up. So the gentleman tells me, ‘Well, I want you to cook.’ ... So I'd end up cooking for like 10 people. ... But as time goes by, they start showing up like every week.”

The situation of burdening domestic workers with additional tasks is further exacerbated by the absence of formal contracts, which leaves them without clear stipulations regarding their terms of work, wages, and benefits. In Mexico, paid domestic work is primarily structured around a wage relationship - typically established through a face-to-face verbal contract - which inherently implies the subordination of the worker to the employer (Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b). As a result, the absence of contracts creates a sense of entrapment for domestic workers, who often find themselves with limited legal recourse to demand fair compensation and access to labour rights, including social protection. This issue is exemplified by Paty's experience: “People are very exploitative, that's why I don't like it. For example, by law, you should have a contract that includes benefits like Christmas bonuses, health insurance, a decent salary, and respect for your working hours. But in reality, most people don't offer a contract, and obviously, since there's no contract, there's no social insurance. The money they pay you is really, to put it mildly, ridiculous. I know people, and it has even happened to me, who are paid a maximum of 600 pesos a week, sometimes for up to 10 hours a day. It's truly exploitative.”

Occupational health and safety

Nearly all participants reported having experienced at least one occupational accident. The prevalence of such incidents among domestic workers has been closely associated with the very nature of their work, which frequently entails physically demanding tasks. Performing hazardous duties, like cleaning exterior windows or using dangerous cleaning chemicals, exposes workers to avoidable risks that are compounded by the lack of necessary personal protective equipment (Hill et al., 2019; Jiang, 2023). This was echoed by participants who emphasised that employers frequently demand hazardous tasks without ensuring proper precautions. Luz expressed significant concerns about the safety of the cleaning chemicals her employers require her to use, stating that she frequently encounters harmful chemicals that cause severe discomfort: “And these products I use, well, they're products that you think are dangerous for your health, and some bathroom products, when you pour them into the toilet, they smell, and it's like you're

absorbing it, and it's like you can't breathe, and then you feel like everything is so intense. There are products that are indeed very strong, or when they tell you to mix muriatic acid for cleaning tiles, or when you're on the floor and you mix vinegar with bleach, it releases a horrible gas, and your eyes start burning. It's awful, these things."

In Luci's workplace, the main threat she faces is physical, stemming from her responsibility to fetch water from a cistern during water shortages. The prospect of accidentally falling into the cistern is a major concern for her: "Well, water is also something that bothers me. I have to draw water from a cistern as it doesn't come from the tap ... there should be, I don't know, a faucet where I can fill the containers, so I don't have to bend over the cistern. Because, well, there's a risk of falling in there, and in this job, I don't have health insurance."

Common to all interviewees is the lack of health insurance, which puts them in an extremely precarious situation if they are injured at work, leaving them vulnerable to medical costs that are often beyond their financial means. This reality is echoed in other studies, which indicate that such circumstances often force workers to make difficult choices between prioritising their health and maintaining financial stability (Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b). This issue is vividly illustrated by Arte Sana's experience who suffered a hip injury from falling down the stairs while working at her previous job. She was initially grateful for the day off she was granted and the supplementary compensation provided by her employers for purchasing items to alleviate her back pain. However, later she came to realise that the severity of her injury demanded proper medical care which was not available due to her lack of health insurance: "I fell down the stairs and injured my hip. At that moment, it seemed excellent that they allowed me to rest for a whole day and gave me 400 pesos to buy things for my back pain. I felt it was fair at that time, considering that I had hurt myself badly, was experiencing significant pain, and [now] I think I should have at least checked with a doctor or gotten an X-ray or something. But I didn't have insurance, and it hadn't crossed my mind."

Discrimination, violence and harassment

While many of the control mechanisms exercised by employers are ostensibly driven by practical considerations aimed at optimising work performance, some forms of control transcend economic rationality; instead, they serve as a means of asserting dominance and maintaining the unbalanced master-servant power dynamic in the workplace. Significantly, these control mechanisms are not limited to regulating workers' behaviour for the sole purpose of maximising productivity, but serve as a means for employers to assert their dominance highlighting the perceived 'inferior', subordinate status of domestic workers within the employment relationship. Forms of 'control for the sake of controlling' manifest themselves in a variety of ways, with food-related 'demarcation repertoires' (Gorbán, 2012) emerging as one of the most frequently reported strategies encountered by participants. This includes providing poor-quality food and restricting both the amount and type of food that domestic workers can consume. As Saldana-Tejeda (2012) argues, food and eating practices are powerful markers of social class in Mexico, shaping the dynamics between employers and domestic workers. This link between food and class is particularly evident in the realm of paid domestic work, where employers can use food to assert their social superiority and reinforce the subordinate status of their workers. For example, the practice of reserving certain foods for family members while providing domestic workers with less desirable options underscores the power dynamics embedded in the employer-employee relationship, with food serving as a concrete symbol of inequality. Josefina's experience illustrates this scenario, where the employer consumed high-quality products for herself and her family, but provided lower-quality products for her worker. This discrepancy in food quality is a stark illustration of the power imbalances inherent in these domestic work relationships: "When there was some food left, like a piece of salmon, she would keep an eye on it to ask for it later. 'Oh, but there's a

piece of salmon left', she'd say. And I would tell her, 'Well, I ate it because I hadn't had lunch, dinner, or anything to eat'. So, she would get angry that I was too greedy with food because she didn't want me to have any. I had to buy my coffee because she would buy the worst, cheapest coffee. Yes, everything was like that, she would buy something of quality for herself but of worse quality for others."

Controlling access to food and forcing the worker to consume leftovers from the family's meals is another practice utilised by employers, as illustrated by Sara's experience: "The pantry cupboard was locked, and she [employer] didn't like it when someone rummaged through the refrigerator. In recent times, she only bought what she needed for herself. I mean, nothing was available unless she told me ... the kids would have fish, and I would have the chicken left over from the weekend because they didn't eat it."

In certain situations, monitoring workers' food intake extends as far as monitoring the timing and content of their meals using cameras. Montserrat recounted her experience at work where employers installed cameras in the kitchen to monitor her and her co-workers' eating habits: "They have cameras everywhere, obviously. But for example, they have a camera in the kitchen to see what we're doing, what we eat, what we don't eat, how many times we eat".

While some control tactics are blatant, such as restricting access to basic necessities like food, others are more covert and subtle, often manifesting as verbal discrimination. In Mexico, derogatory terms such as 'muchacha' (girl), 'gata' (cat), 'changa' (young servant) and 'sirvienta' (maid) are often used to undermine domestic workers, particularly women from indigenous or rural backgrounds with little formal education (Rojas-García, Toledo González, 2018b). These terms extend beyond the workplace and reflect the wider issue of discrimination and undervaluation associated with the occupation, as illustrated by Sara's experiences: "At first, I felt embarrassed because there was a lot of discrimination we endure. They see us as a *sirvienta*. I remember that lady that I was telling you about, I saw her sarcasm once. ... when she was talking to her daughter, she said, 'Yes, the *changa* got insolent now'. So, they see you as if you are worth less, but well, with [my] kid's father too, he started saying, 'You're a *gata*, you're a *sirvienta*.'"

Certain identities are disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace. When discussing this, Arte Sana illustrated the complexity of her experience of unfounded accusations of theft, which she attributes to prejudice related to her sexual identity, appearance and background: "I have short hair and it's noticeable that I'm a lesbian, yes, there are prejudices because of how you dress or where you come from. So this [discrimination] has happened to me, they have accused me [of stealing] but it's really for something that doesn't make sense. I didn't steal ... they [employers] don't know what they have. I mean, they leave things lying around."

In addition, violence and harassment, particularly of a sexual nature, are disturbingly prevalent in the domestic work sector (Ribeiro Corossacz, 2019; Saldana-Tejeda, 2014). Some employers expect sexual favours as an implicit part of the worker-employer dynamic and use their position of hierarchy and authority to exploit vulnerable domestic workers, creating a situation where the victim feels trapped and forced to endure the abuse for fear of losing their job (Ribeiro Corossacz, 2019). Mildred recounted a distressing incident of unwanted sexual advances from her male employer. When she raised the issue with her employer's daughter, her account was met with scepticism and the accusation that she was to blame for dressing provocatively: "So one day, while I was there arranging things for dinner, the gentleman [employer] grabbed me, and I almost slapped him, obviously. Then his daughter said, 'Well, I don't believe he has done it ... one shouldn't wear provocative clothing for work, you know?' ... I used to wear sweatpants and a sweatshirt there, you see. So, I quit the job because it started getting too uncomfortable ... I thought, 'Enough is enough.'"

Discussion

A central argument emerging from this research is that exploitation of domestic workers should not be seen as a dichotomy (i.e., exploited vs non-exploited). Instead, exploitation exists on a continuum: non-criminalised, subtle, everyday forms of exploitation (e.g. low wages, lack of social protection) coexist with extreme forms of exploitation (e.g. sexual violence). These are not isolated episodes of 'soft' versus 'hard', or 'minor' versus 'severe' types of exploitation, but in aggregate they epitomise a deeply ingrained and embedded system of exploitation. Some forms of exploitation are inherently difficult to categorise. For example, the line between normal and excessive working hours can be blurred. However, when employers' expectations force workers to work around the clock, this often crosses the line into exploitation. This situation not only undermines workers' rights, but also has a detrimental effect on their overall well-being and job performance. Exploitation here goes beyond what is conventionally referred to as 'precarious work' encompassing not only issues such as low pay, lack of social protection and job instability, but also a wider range of issues such as discrimination, violence and harassment. These forms of exploitation, while not necessarily designed to extract maximum performance, highlight the complex power dynamics at play, with perpetrators holding authoritative and dominant positions within the household (workplace).

The analysis of workers' experiences demonstrates the substantial influence of pervasive employer control in enabling exploitative practices in the workplace, a link has been insufficiently addressed in some previous research. A key contribution is how control serves not only as a means of regulating worker productivity to extract labour but also as a tool to emphasise the perceived 'inferior' position of domestic workers. Domestic workers' narratives highlight the inherent symbiosis between control and exploitation, and the challenge of distinguishing between the two. Nevertheless, [Table 2](#) provides specific examples to help clarify

Table 2
Control and exploitation across the dimensions of work.

Dimension	Control	Exploitation
Employment (in) security	- Threatening workers with job loss - Reinforcing fungibility of workers	- Unjust and arbitrary terminations
Workload and working hours	- Setting unrealistic expectations for worker productivity - Demanding a fast and incessant pace of work - Imposing heavy workloads - Blurring the boundaries between personal and professional realms (for live-ins)	- Long working hours without proper compensation and rest
Compensation and benefits	- Reinforcing workers' economic dependence through the payment of low wages - Evading wage negotiations - Assigning unpaid tasks - Non-payment of social insurance contributions	- Inadequate wages - Non-payment of overtime - Unpaid tasks beyond their designated responsibilities - Lack of social insurance benefits (including healthcare)
Occupational health and safety	- Demanding physically hazardous tasks without adequate protection	- Occupational accidents aggravated by the lack of access to healthcare and injury benefits
Discrimination, violence and harassment	- Monitoring workers' food intake - Demanding sexual favours - Creating a hostile work environment through verbal abuse	- Subjecting workers to violence and harassment

the nuances between control and exploitation.

A further contribution concerns how control and exploitation in the domestic work sector are exacerbated by the lack of formal contracts, inadequate social insurance and the lack of enforceable labour rights. The absence of legal protections covering essential aspects of work such as working hours, rest periods, and unemployment benefits, among others, results in a significant deficit of decent working conditions in the sector. This situation, coupled with the lack of legally binding agreements between employers and domestic workers, leaves workers vulnerable to *hyper-exploitation* as a characteristic feature of their labour process. The introduction of the term "hyper-exploitation" may prove valuable in providing a more comprehensive framework to capture the systemic and interconnected nature of various forms of exploitation. Hyper-exploitation in domestic work is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond any single act of exploitation, reflecting the cumulative impact of various interrelated exploitative practices. Rather than viewing exploitation as a binary of exploited versus non-exploited, hyper-exploitation acknowledges a continuum ranging from 'decent work' to 'undecent work' with a significant grey area in between. Domestic workers often experience a combination of subtle and overt forms of exploitation, including low wages, unpaid labour, excessively long hours, unsafe working conditions, and a lack of social protection. This systemic exploitation is perpetuated by factors such as the absence of formal contracts, inadequate social insurance, and weak enforcement of labour laws, which leave workers vulnerable to both everyday abuses and extreme mistreatment. Control mechanisms employed by employers—ranging from intimidation and threats to manipulation of workers' immigration status—further reinforce these exploitative conditions. Thus, hyper-exploitation in domestic work is defined by the interconnected effects of multiple exploitative practices, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding that addresses both the overt and subtle dimensions of exploitation. As a result, domestic workers are highly vulnerable to the negative consequences of single acts of exploitation, with far-reaching implications for their physical and emotional health, livelihoods and, in some cases, their lives, particularly in the case of occupational accidents.

The research also adds insight by showing that control and exploitation are not evenly distributed among domestic workers. Certain groups of domestic workers are more marginalised than others, such as internal migrants moving from remote or rural communities to urban centres, pregnant women and older women. While a large part of previous research has predominantly focused on the extreme manifestations of exploitation among migrant workers in the global North, this study focuses on domestic workers in the global South, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive and nuanced approach that takes into account the diversity of workers' experiences and intersecting identities that transcend immigration status. Moreover, more research is needed on how workers' experiences are influenced by subtle but equally concerning forms of control and exploitation. These everyday practices not only risk becoming normalised, but also enable the existence of more serious exploitative practices ([Skřivánková, 2010](#)). Yet, it is important to avoid any misinterpretation that highlighting routine exploitation aims to diminish the significance of current research on severe exploitation or to establish a rigid division between routine and severe practices. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on the most severe forms of exploitation may overshadow attention to the significant amount of exploitation that workers undergo on a regular basis ([Davies, 2019a, 2019b](#)).

Conclusion

This article examined the complex nexus of control and exploitation in the domestic work sector. By employing a labour exploitation continuum framework informed by an intersectional lens, the experiences of 15 non-immigrant domestic workers in Mexico were analysed in relation to five critical dimensions of domestic work: workload and working hours; employment (in)security; compensation and benefits;

occupational health and safety; and discrimination, violence and harassment. This article contributes to addressing the notable imbalance in research, by providing empirical evidence on the exploitation of non-migrant domestic workers in the global South. While most studies focus on domestic workers who migrate to the global North (de Casanova, 2019), this work shifts the focus to those who remain in their home countries.

In light of the findings of this study, a promising direction for future research is the analysis of the remarkable resourcefulness and agency that domestic workers have demonstrated through a variety of individual and collective strategies of resilience, reworking and resistance (Katz, 2004). These strategies include the ability to recover from adverse conditions and trauma (resilience), proactive initiatives to reshape one's environment (rework), and collective agency - particularly through organised labour movements - to challenge the structures that perpetuate control and exploitation in the sector (resistance). These facets of domestic workers' experiences underline the importance of a more in-depth exploration of their response mechanisms in future research, especially as the presence of agency and consent does not preclude the presence of exploitation (Niezna, 2024).

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Fernanda Teixeira: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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