

# CULTURAL PATTERNS OF CLASS INEQUALITY IN THE REALM OF PAID DOMESTIC WORK IN RUSSIA. *Summary*

**Elena Zdravomyslova, Olga Tkach**

In Russian cities, hired domestic labor has become a mass phenomenon, with the first modern employment agencies for domestic personnel emerging in the post-Soviet era. In the 2000s, the period of economic growth and a rise in social polarization, the increasing demand for paid domestic work became visible. Since that time, the need for household helpers has remained high, with the market for domestic work reflecting global trends, according to which a significant segment of such work is performed by internal and foreign migrants. Both Russian and international markets of care work are gendered in their structure—they have a female face. The Russian market of care work mainly belongs to the shadow economy, is highly competitive and diversified, and is shaped by different social segments. Researchers identify three categories of domestic workers who compete on the labor market in Russia: local residents, internal migrants from various regions of the Russian Federation, and foreign migrants from former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Workers from Central Asia represent the most precarious segment of the market. Due to the recent economic crisis and increase in competition, local residents and internal migrants have driven foreign incomers out of the market by degrees (however, this process is reversible).

Paid care services are only available for those citizens who can financially afford them. Hence, the use of paid domestic labor performed by women (although not exclusively) can be considered a criterion of socioeconomic inequality. We view employer-employee relationships in the private domestic sphere as a field where cultural patterns of class inequality are created and manifested in modern Russian capitalist society.

This article aims to analyze the cultural models of inequality articulated in the process of class-making in modern Russian society within households that hire domestic workers. Paid domestic work, organized formally or informally, performed on a permanent or temporary basis by Russian citizens or immigrants, is one of the structural conditions of class-making. Class inequality is produced within interactions between employers—homeowners—and household personnel. Our objective is to analyze emergent cultural models of employer-employee relationships. The focus of our analysis is the intersection of class and gender.

## RESEARCH DATA

Our argument is based on a variety of empirical data. Our main data are in-depth focused interviews, collected during two research projects conducted by the Gender Program of the Department of Political Sciences and Sociology at the European University in St. Petersburg in 2005–2009 and 2009–2011. During those projects, we conducted more than 60 in-depth problem-oriented interviews with employers (mostly women) as well as babysitters (10 interviews), domestic cleaners (9 interviews), and nurses (9 interviews). Newer sources that support our research include three interviews with domestic workers and three interviews with employers, conducted in 2014–2016 with updated interview guides. In these newer interviews, we collected materials related to paid domestic work performed by immigrants from countries in Central Asia and the poorer regions of Russia, who work in various households in Saint Petersburg.

Another set of data comprises materials presented on the websites of employment agencies for domestic personnel (15 units of analysis). These websites were selected according to keywords, traffic, accessibility, and resonance. As a result, we focused on websites of agencies located in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Materials from the analyzed websites contain information for potential clients, such as the name and address of the office, advertisements, information about services offered, as well as instructions and educational resources such as housekeeping manuals, lists of reliable domestic workers, and guidelines for interactions between domestic workers and employers.

As complementary sources, we analyzed journalistic materials in audio, video, and printed forms. These include recordings of broadcasts of Ekho Moskvy, a Moscow-based radio station, which provided insight into the organization of the domestic work of babysitters and cleaners in Russia and other countries. We also used documentary films featuring interviews with employers and domestic workers.

Our secondary sources include published studies of paid domestic work. This helped us to reconstruct the context—the scope, structure, and main characteristics of the Russian market of paid domestic labor.

## CLASS-MAKING, CULTURE, AND PAID DOMESTIC WORK: THEORETICAL FRAME

In this article we analyze the cultural dimension of class-making. This theoretical standpoint is based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of classes, which has been further developed by such scholars as Beverley Skeggs and Suvi Salmenniemi, among others. In this article actors of the market of domestic labor—employers and employees, as well as mediators (employment agencies and experts)—are viewed as active participants who enter into relations of exchange, who do cultural work, activating some cultural schemes and problematizing others, while at the same time striving to promote the model of class inequality that they find most appropriate.

We believe that Thorstein Veblen's theory is still a useful heuristic tool for analyzing the cultural aspects of class-making. As a founder of the institutionalist ap-

proach, Veblen studied the role of domestic labor in the leisure classes in the early twentieth century. He highlighted the particular role of *personal* servants in the creation of class boundaries, as they perform both instrumental and symbolic functions creating the class position of the homeowner. The wives of members of the proprietary class demonstrate the status of their households in a gendered way, by withdrawing from “dirty work” and freeing up their leisure time for activities considered prestigious and relevant to their status position. Thus, the lifestyle of the leisure class is characterized by the deliberate delegation of a variety of “nonrelevant” activities that have symbolic meaning in class-making.

Following Anthony Giddens, we look at the mechanisms of class inequality (in the realm of household work) through the prism of three interconnected culturally marked processes—the signification of interaction, hierarchy management, and legitimation. Class inequality is created within employer-employee relationships, where cultural models of signification, legitimation, and hierarchy management manifest themselves. However, cultural models can be problematized or compete with each other for hegemony—which is typical in the context of the fluctuating rules and blurred class boundaries of contemporary Russian society. All the participants of the field are involved in the cultural work of signification and the legitimation of class boundaries in interactions.

## **STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PAID DOMESTIC WORK**

In many aspects, the market of domestic work in Russia conforms to the general trends of modern global capitalism in its neoliberal phase. However, there are some peculiarities related to lack of regulation, persistent informal recruitment, and intensified attention towards everyday manifestations of class inequalities in the realm of consumption and domestic arrangements. Although paid domestic work also existed in Soviet society, the scope of demand and supply was significantly lower, regulation took place mainly in the “shadow” sector (during the late Soviet period), and centripetal migration flows were limited. In modern capitalist societies, including Russia, the commercialization of care is related to processes of economic globalization. The production of cultural patterns against a backdrop of the commercialization of care is characterized by three processes: first, by its professionalization; second, by its largely informal character; and third, by the intersected gender and ethnic characteristics of the market of domestic labor.

The following features can be considered the main characteristics of the Russian market of domestic labor: a cross between professionalization and informalization; the reproduction of intersectional gender, class, and ethnic inequalities in the process of hiring domestic workers; the competitive character of the segmented market of domestic services; and typical chains of care stretched across the former USSR. For migrant domestic workers in Russia, the Soviet imperial heritage, with its consequent “geography of poverty,” has shaped migration flows to Russian cities from former Soviet republics or from economically poor regions of the Russian Federation that are distant from the capital cities. Researchers note that different categories of house-

hold workers possess different capacities to manage social inequality in interactions. Among all the specialties of domestic workers, babysitters and nurses are in highest demand. Among all categories of workers in this sphere, immigrants from Central Asia are the most vulnerable; they are often employed on a live-in basis. Paid domestic work has a distinct gender profile. Cultural stereotypes related to the country of origin contribute to patterns of relations with domestic workers. Studies of the employment conditions of female domestic workers reveal that cleaners, babysitters, and nurses from Central Asia earn less, face discrimination and abuse from their employers more often, and have fewer opportunities to influence the conditions of their employment.

A peculiar feature of the Russian context is the problematization of the culture of unequal relations between employers and hired workers in the realm of domestic services. We consider this to be evidence of the lack of professionalization of domestic labor, as well as a sign that the cultural model of class inequality is fluctuating and unstable. Moreover, in relation to international trends, Russia is obviously lagging behind in terms of hired domestic workers' rights protection. The state and public organizations are barely represented in this realm as arbitrators of labor conflicts. Observance of labor and personal rights on both sides is, in fact, entrusted to market forces as well as to the employees and employers themselves, who maintain a relationship characterized as private, making the observance of rights highly dependent on the personal characteristics of both sides and their biographical experience.

## **MAKING THE CLASS POSITION OF FEMALE EMPLOYERS**

We identify several general features of female householders who employ domestics on a permanent basis. All of them delegate at least some part of domestic chores and personal care to hired help, positioning themselves as homeowners and rational manager-administrators of the household. In the accounts of female employers, home is described as a complex system that needs proper and effective management. This management, like any other, depends on the scale of the household, on investments, and on the number of household members and their needs.

Among the many concerns of household management are personnel selection, training and education, making checklists of tasks, providing tools, and monitoring work progress. The employer has multiple functions: she acts as a mini-employment agency, a contractor, a supervisor, and a coworker. However, in the case of paid domestic labor, one cannot translate all aspects of the interaction into relations of property management, because this is a case of purchasing care.

Discussions about "social inequality culture" are common among householders, who complain that "civilized" patterns of employer-employee relationships in Russian society have been lost. They are also concerned about domestic personnel being "uncivilized," about lacking control over the actions of babysitters and cleaners who could, if they wished, inflict harm on the household or use their knowledge and skills to the employer's disadvantage. The culture of domestic personnel management implies the capacity to find a balance between intimate/personalized and business-like

relations in the context of domestic care, keeping domestic workers close enough but at a reasonable distance.

The issue of inequality management also emerges in interviews with representatives of agencies, who strive to educate market actors—employers as well as employees. Personnel training programs, websites of employment agencies for domestic workers, housekeeping manuals—they all discuss the ethos of the relationship between employers and domestic workers, providing rules of “cultured interaction” and countering abuse on both sides.

We identify two main patterns of emergent cultural models of inequality; below are brief summaries of both.

### **CONSPICUOUS CULTURE OF INEQUALITY: “MASTERS” AND “SERVANTS”**

Positioning domestic workers as servants suggests articulated and reinforced social distance, strictness and minuteness of control, and the importance of “knowing one’s place.” Employers of this type actualize the model of subordinate domestic work, believing that they purchase not the services but the laborers themselves. We argue that this model bears a family resemblance to the “leisure class” described by Veblen. Representatives of this class, due to their status as property owners and higher position in the economic hierarchy, do boundary work that relieves them from “dusty” and “dirty” household work and also, to some extent, from personal care work. In the modern Russian context, the “oligarchs’ wives,” or “Rublevka wives” as they are also known for the oligarchs’ favorite residential location, are well-known media referents of this class position. They can be stay-at-home housewives, successful businesswomen, or representatives of the bureaucratic stratum. By hiring “servants,” these “mistresses” free up their time to demonstrate their status—caring for themselves and reproducing social glamour practices—rather than for paid employment or personal growth. For this segment of the wealthy classes, home is a place of performative consumption and conspicuous idleness that can only be achieved thanks to their subordinate “servants.” These “masters” dictate nonnegotiable employment conditions. Their commanding style of household management is problematized by domestics, who are disgruntled by its inconsistency with a “civilized” model of contractual labor relations.

Ethnization and genderization of class differences is used by such employers to demonstrate and reinforce emerging class boundaries. The prize for the best worker goes to she who shows the most skill at conspicuous subordination. The habit of subordination, the skill of being invisible and meek, is ascribed to female migrants from Central Asia and the Philippines, as they grew up in patriarchal cultures. Personalism in interactions allows employers to increase their distance and create a space for exploitation. In this cultural model the “hosts” strive to objectify domestic workers, and it is the workers’ personality and not their service that is positioned as a commodity.

Live-in workers are the most vulnerable in such relationships: they perceive themselves as isolated and disempowered objects of exploitation, and with good reason. They have no private space, and their autonomy is limited by constant control

and ever-growing demands of the “masters.” Practices of gift giving on the part of employers have been perceived by receivers as a manifestation and symbolic reinforcement of social hierarchy. If a cleaner or babysitter constantly experiences minute strict control on the part of their “masters” and faces mistrust, they also consider themselves objects of class exploitation.

A model of conspicuous inequality is described by all market participants; it is a persistent topic in the narratives of experts and hired workers. However, employers rarely bring this up, unwilling to openly claim an illegitimate model of relationship with their domestic personnel.

The model of conspicuous inequality is problematized by domestics and market mediators—including media representations—that are oriented towards the values of imaginary “civilized relations.” It is viewed as a relic of the past that still maintains its relevance, inasmuch as representatives of the new economically privileged classes lack social and cultural competence. Historically, it refers to the feudal and capitalist relations with domestic workers that were present in the imaginary pre-Soviet past. This model is considered unfair but feasible in modern Russian society, having been revived by modern Russian capitalism.

### **THE EGALITARIAN CULTURE OF INEQUALITY: PROFESSIONALS AND THEIR “HELPERS”**

The egalitarian style of relations between domestic personnel and their employers is at the other end of the spectrum. This model is described by market participants as cultured or civilized. In their everyday life female household employers representing this class bear a triple burden: a paid job, household work, and childrearing. The difficulties of finding a balance between paid work and household obligations in a post-socialist society create an instrumental need—a demand—for paid domestics who can perform tasks that professional women face in the realm of family and household. Paid domestic work is positioned as essential for shaping the urban middle class of businesspeople and professionals.

The signification of relations between employers and their “helpers” in this model varies from very close (friendship/quasi-kinship) to purely business-like (depersonalized). The actors highlight shared tasks and the division of household labor between employers and employees. Self-respect, an orientation towards fairness and negotiability in the relationship, and coordinated efforts to build a good household are key features of the egalitarian style of social inequality management.

To describe a hired domestic worker market actors either use the term “helper” or directly indicate the specialization of domestic work—babysitter, cleaning lady, nanny, or nurse. In such a relationship, domestic workers are positioned as indispensable helpers, with an emphasis on their irreplaceability for creating a balance between all the roles of the professional working woman (employer) with family and household duties. Employers try to level status and economic inequalities in their interactions with employees. This leveling effect is achieved through practices of negotiating working conditions, providing autonomy in work and leisure, integrating the domestic worker into the home space as a quasi-member of the family, having

meals together, and displaying trust and gratitude. Conditions of the labor contract, such as working hours, tasks, rates, and rewards, also become subject of negotiation and agreement for both sides.

Employers, using their own resources, often informally provide babysitters with some benefits, which is how the mechanism of compensation and leveling works. Babysitters can receive a year-long residence registration in the employers' household, "almost new" clothes, help with legal paperwork, access to a reliable doctor, teachers for their children or grandchildren, and the like. Both sides view all of the above as a display of the responsible attitude of employers towards hired workers, who are deprived of any social safety net due to their off-the-books employment. Hired workers also experience feelings of responsibility and express their understanding of the fact that family members depend on them; the scope of their autonomy is rather wide, and the monitoring of their activity is not intrusive, which makes them feel satisfied.

## CONCLUSION

Interactions between employers and paid workers in the domestic realm represent an arena for creating class inequalities on the everyday level (of household life) within the gender structure. The interpersonal relations that form in the process of hiring domestic workers are built upon dialectics of control, autonomy, and dependence within the structure of inequality. This understanding of inequality-in-the-making suggests that domestic workers possess resources of control and influence over their working conditions. Class, gendered, and sometimes ethnicized (racialized) inequality is created in the course of employer-employee relationships.

We distinguish two models of inequality culture. First, there is the model of conspicuous inequality, which typifies the relationship between "masters" and "servants." Here we can observe clear-cut subordination. The proprietors emphasize their place in complex, intersected social hierarchies and reinforce social distance using commanding style, minute control, and an arrogant attitude towards domestic workers. The latter are treated as "personal servants" and demanded to display their subordinate position. For "house mistresses" the most important function of hiring domestic personnel is demonstrating their status in the social hierarchy, reproducing a class position that involves having "servants." This model has low legitimacy; it is associated with glamorous consumption, exploitation potential, contempt towards labor, and disrespect of workers' personal dignity. Critics see its historical roots in the relations between nobles and serfs in Russian feudal society.

Second, there is the model of egalitarian inequality. Here, paid domestic work is positioned as a pressing need of the new middle class of professionals and managers. Career-oriented working women face the challenges of balancing full-time employment and intensive family cares. In contrast with the first model, in this model hiring domestic personnel is essential for reproducing the household realm, the family, and the gender emancipation of the female homeowner. The woman needs help so as not to quit her job, and the family as a whole needs help in order to function properly.

Thus, female employers are acutely aware of their dependence on hired workers and feel gender solidarity with their “helpers.” They problematize inequality and strive to close the social gap in their relationships with household workers, to level out the hierarchy. Reflecting on the potential for exploitation and their dependency on household workers, they try to balance out this inequality with informal support and provide a high degree of autonomy to their hired workers. The relations between them alternate between deeply personal and detachedly formal. However, both sides of the contract strive for mutual understanding based on personal trust and even women’s solidarity. The signification of this relationship emphasizes the independence of the hired worker, who is positioned as the “domestic helper” of the “working mother” and as a professional in her realm. Our interviewees describe this relationship as cultured and civilized; their points of reference are employer-employee interactions in developed countries where employment relations are more institutionalized and formalized than they are in Russia.

Unfortunately, our research data cannot give an answer to the question of how these models of inequality relate to the objective characteristics of the employers’ social positions or the employees’ social status characteristics. In interviews and other sources domestic workers often voice the opinion that the rich who acquired their wealth quickly have a propensity for the hierarchical conspicuous model of class inequality. However, we cannot draw such a conclusion too quickly. People of different levels of income, who are engaged in different professional realms, rely on different cultural patterns. Migrants from the former USSR more often suffer from discrimination and disrespectful attitudes; here, the hierarchy is reinforced by anti-migrant and racist ideologies. What are the future trends of the development of inequality models? In our opinion, in the Russian context both models are reproduced in parallel, creating different social milieus that will pass on from generation to generation. Nevertheless, there are prospects that the model of conspicuous inequality will be weakened, as domestic work is becoming increasingly professionalized and formalized, the consciousness of domestic workers is rising, and the quality of their social protection advances.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Asja Voronkova*