



DOSSIÊ CRISES, DESIGUALDADES E CUIDADOS: EXPLORANDO EXPERIÊNCIAS NACIONAIS

Submitted on 30/06/2025

Accepted for publication on 09/10/2025

doi: 10.11606/0103-2070.ts.2025.238437

How exceptional is the USA? Carework and inequality¹

Ruth Milkman

City University of New York Graduate Center, New York, EUA
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8859-4541>

Demand for paid domestic workers employed in private households, and especially for home health and personal care aides who care for the elderly and disabled in their own homes, is rising across the wealthy world². In the USA, demand for paid domestic workers and in-home carers has expanded rapidly in recent decades, driven not only by the aging of the population but also by the growing preference for “aging in place” and the resulting decline in nursing home enrollment. Even before the covid-19 pandemic, the high cost and poor quality of care in many of the nation’s nursing homes had led to rising popular rejection of institutional forms of eldercare, and that trend accelerated in the 2020s³.

1. This paper is based on research supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant n. 2215780. All opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. A version of the paper was presented at the International Sociological Association’s XX World Congress of Sociology in Melbourne, Australia on June 26, 2023. Special thanks to Heidi Gottfried, Peter Evans, and an anonymous reviewer for detailed comments on an earlier draft.
2. By “paid domestic workers” I mean: house cleaners, nannies, and those who care for elderly and disabled clients in private households, whether they live in or out of the home in which they work, and whether they are employed directly by the household(s) or by an employment agency or government authority who assigns them to those household(s).
3. Despite the growth in the number of older adults, the absolute number of nursing home beds in the USA

This article explores the labor market dynamics of paid domestic work and in-home care in the USA as compared to those in other wealthy countries, specifically Western Europe, Canada, and Japan. It highlights several ways in which the USA is an international outlier and then proceeds to examine the reasons for that exceptional status. I argue that two key factors distinguish the USA from other wealthy countries: (a) its underdeveloped welfare state with its famously minimal public provision for parental leave, health care, and other human needs; and (b) its extremely high level of economic inequality (one aspect of which is its relatively large and often disadvantaged population of color). As I explain below, the USA's outsized level of inequality increases both the demand for and supply of paid domestic labor. Finally, the article briefly discusses the internal stratification of paid domestic work in the USA, sketching the extensive variations in pay and working conditions within this labor market sector. Such stratification is not unique to the USA but appears to be more acute there, reflecting the higher level of overall economic inequality.

Rising demand for paid domestic labor and in-home care in the wealthy world

In several European countries a growing share of in-home eldercare has been publicly funded in recent years, in part reflecting the fact that the preference for “aging in place” mentioned previously is not limited to the USA but has diffused across the wealthy world. These developments have sparked growing demand for paid domestic workers and in-home care in many countries, leading to chronic labor shortages in this physically and emotionally challenging, precarious, and poorly paid field. The rise in demand for eldercare workers is most striking, although comparable cross-national data are scarce⁴.

In the USA today, more than half of all paid domestic workers are direct-care aides for older and/or disabled people. Employment in that segment of in-home care more than doubled from 2014 to 2023, from 1.4 million to more than 2.9 million workers. That growth is projected to continue, with nearly 750,000 jobs expected to be added from 2022 to 2032, more than is projected for any other occupation in

has declined in recent years, a trend that antedates the covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, a greater share of the beds that remain are in “lower quality” homes. See Miller *et al.*, 2023.

4. The most comprehensive international data on paid domestic workers is compiled by the ILO. See Appendix II of International Labour Organization, 2013, as well as the update in Annex 5 of International Labour Organization, 2021. These data reflect distinct methodologies used by individual countries, so must be interpreted with caution.

the United States (PHI, 2024, pp. 8, 11). Demand for other types of paid domestic labor, like house cleaning and childcare, has also grown in the USA, but much less rapidly than in-home care for the elderly and disabled.

Another factor fueling demand for paid domestic workers across the wealthy world is the rising rate of female labor force participation among married women and mothers. In the USA maternal labor force participation grew rapidly starting in the 1970s, sharply reducing the availability of *unpaid* care by women in the home for children as well as sick, disabled and elderly family members. By the late 20th century, the USA had become an international leader in female labor force participation: in 1990, it had the sixth highest rate of female labor participation among 22 OECD countries (Blau and Kahn, 2013).

On the other hand, as many commentators have noted, the share of the total population over age 65 is substantially lower in the USA than in many other rich countries. In 2021, that share was 17.4 percent in the USA, compared to 29.6 percent in Japan, 24.2 percent in Italy, 21.8 in France, 19.2 in the UK – to name just a few examples; the USA ranked 44th among the world's countries on this metric that year⁵. In part this reflects the fact that U.S. life expectancy has fallen in recent years: in 2023 it was 6 years lower than in Japan (which has the world's highest life expectancy) and 3-5 years below the level in most other rich countries⁶. The USA also has a relatively low “old age dependency ratio” (OADR), defined as the number of individuals aged 65 or above per 100 individuals of “working age” (20-64 years) compared to other wealthy countries, as Table 1 shows. In 2022 the OADR stood at 29.4 percent in the USA, compared to an average of 34.0 percent in the European Union, and 55.4 percent in Japan⁷.

Is immigration the driver of the U.S. low OADR?

This disparity in OADRs is often attributed to the USA's large and relatively young foreign-born population, amplified by higher fertility rates among immigrants. In absolute numbers, the USA is indeed home to more immigrants than any other country in the world; but as Table 1 shows, in several other wealthy countries –

5. Data from the UN Population Division: “Population ages 65 and above – Country rankings”. *The Global Economy*. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/elderly_population/, consulted 07/10/2025.

6. “Life expectancy at birth, total (years)”. *World Bank Open Data*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?end=2020>, consulted 07/10/2025.

7. “Old-age dependency ratio”. *OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*. <https://data.oecd.org/pop/old-age-dependency-ratio.htm>, consulted 07/10/2025.

including Germany, Sweden, Canada, and Switzerland – the foreign-born share of the population is substantially higher.

TABLE 1
Foreign-born Share of Population (2024) and Old-Age Dependency Ratio (2022), Selected Countries

COUNTRY	FOREIGN-BORN SHARE OF POPULATION	OLD-AGE DEPENDENCY RATIO
	2024	2022
United States	15.2%	29.4
Canada	22.2%	31.7
Switzerland	31.1%	31.8
United Kingdom	17.1%	33.2
Sweden	21.4%	35.9
Germany	19.8%	38.0
France	13.8%	39.3
Italy	11.0%	41.0
Japan	2.8%	55.4

Sources: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> and <https://data.oecd.org/pop/old-age-dependency-ratio.htm>.

Indeed, these data suggest that there is no apparent correlation between the foreign-born share of a nation’s population and its OADR.

What does distinguish the USA from those other wealthy countries, however, is the share of *unauthorized* immigrants as a share of total population, which in the USA is roughly triple the level in Western Europe. The available data are limited, but a Pew Research Center study found that in 2017, less than 1 percent of Europe’s population of about 500 million was made up of unauthorized immigrants, compared with about 3 percent of the USA’s 325 million population (Connor, Passel and Krogstad, 2019). (Those figures predate the spike in unauthorized migration to the USA in the 2020s, but that increase seems likely, at this writing, to be reversed by the deportation surge the Trump administration launched in 2025.) In any case, the USA remains an outlier relative to other wealthy nations in this regard. Undocumented immigrants everywhere are economically precarious and overrepresented in the low-wage labor market, and in many countries unauthorized female migrants make up a large share of the paid domestic work labor force⁸.

8. One recent study estimated that in 2017, unauthorized immigrants (3.6 percent of the U.S. population) accounted for 4.3 percent of direct care workers (including both home health aides and nursing home workers), it is likely that unauthorized female immigrants are even more overrepresented in this field. See Zallman *et al.*, 2019.

The USA also has a far larger native-born Bipoc (Black, indigenous and people of color) population than any other rich nation. That group includes not only second- and third-generation immigrants from the global South since 1965 – for which there are parallels in Western Europe – but also descendants of enslaved Africans, native (indigenous) Americans, as well as descendants of inhabitants of the vast Southwestern territories that were ceded to the USA in 1848 after the Mexican-American War. Like the female unauthorized immigrant population, the female Bipoc population is overrepresented among paid domestic workers.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, 38 percent of the nation's 2020 population was “non-white”, up from 28 percent in 2010⁹. Although strictly comparable data are difficult to find (some European countries do not collect such data at all), the available evidence suggests that the USA is an outlier in this regard as well, despite rising immigration from the global South to the global North. Statistics Canada reported that one in four people in that nation were part of a “racialized group” in 2021¹⁰. That is far lower than in the USA, albeit higher than elsewhere in the rich world. In 2021, according to the UK Census, 74.4 percent of the population of England and Wales was made up of “white British” persons, with another 6.2% categorized as “white other”¹¹. According to official statistics (which likely overestimate racial homogeneity), 86.3 percent of Germany's 2020 population was “German”¹², and in 2021, 97.9 percent of Japan's was “Japanese”¹³.

The USA's underdeveloped welfare state

The share of the population disadvantaged by race, ethnicity or citizenship status, then, is an important dimension of the USA's distinctiveness relative to other rich

9. Jones *et al.*, 2021. See also: Frey, 2020.

10. “The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country's religious and ethnocultural diversity”. *Statistics Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>, consulted 07/10/2025.

11. “Population of England and Wales”. (22 dez. 2022), *Ethnicity Facts and Figures, Gov. UK*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>, consulted 07/10/2025.

12. “Migration information source”, *Migration Policy Institute*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/migration-information-source>, consulted 07/10/2025.

13. “Japan demographics profile”. *Index Mundi*. [https://www.indexmundi.com/japan/demographics_profile.html#:~:text=124%2C687%2C293%20\(July%202021%20est.\)&text=Japanese%2097.9%25%2C%20Chinese%200.6%25,Brazilian\)%20\(2017%20est.\)&text=The%20World%20Factbook%2C%20the%20indispensable%20source%20for%20basic%20information.&text=Shintoism%2069%25%2C%20Buddhism%2066.7%25,6.2%25%20\(2018%20est\)](https://www.indexmundi.com/japan/demographics_profile.html#:~:text=124%2C687%2C293%20(July%202021%20est.)&text=Japanese%2097.9%25%2C%20Chinese%200.6%25,Brazilian)%20(2017%20est.)&text=The%20World%20Factbook%2C%20the%20indispensable%20source%20for%20basic%20information.&text=Shintoism%2069%25%2C%20Buddhism%2066.7%25,6.2%25%20(2018%20est)), consulted 07/10/2025.

countries. But a more consequential feature of U.S. exceptionalism in regard to carework (and paid domestic work more broadly) is the nation's famously minimal system of social provision. Not only is there no national health insurance system, but the overall social safety net is far more meager than in any other wealthy nation. There is no universal guarantee of paid family and medical leave, and public provision for childcare and eldercare is also extremely restricted. Medicare (which covers all U.S. citizens and permanent residents aged 65 or more) provides eldercare only under strictly limited circumstances. The nation's (means-tested) Medicaid program does provide in-home care for a substantial group of disabled and older people, but a large share of in-home eldercare is paid for by families directly; for all but the poorest clients, Medicaid-funded eldercare is provided only after families exhaust all their other assets (Belbase *et al.*, 2021).

As noted above, in the late 20th century the USA was a leader in female labor force participation, ranking sixth among 22 OECD countries in 1990. By 2010, however, its rank had plummeted to seventeenth. That was partly because in the two intervening decades several European countries had launched public policy initiatives designed to facilitate maternal employment. It remains the case that part-time employment for women is less prevalent in the USA than in most other wealthy countries. However, as Blau and Kahn's (2013) definitive study found, the key driver of the USA's failure to maintain its previously high level of female labor force participation was the lack of paid parental leave for most U.S. workers and other deficiencies in social provision.

Economic inequality: The key driver of u.s. exceptionalism

Arguably, its meager social provision is a feature of the broader pattern of social and economic inequality that marks the USA as exceptional among the world's wealthy countries. But even more consequential is the extreme and widening gap between the "1 percent" and the bulk of the population shown in Figure 1 below. For understanding the dynamics of paid domestic labor, and in-home care in particular, this is the most salient feature of the USA's status as an international outlier. Although inequality also has grown in other rich countries since the 1980s, the rate of increase has been much slower.

Accompanying the skyrocketing growth of income inequality in the USA overall has been growth in inequality *among* women. Professional opportunities for highly educated women have expanded since the 1970s, while occupational segregation by gender and low pay have remained largely intact for working-class women (among whom Bipoc women are overrepresented). The real hourly earnings of white women

at the 90th percentage of the income distribution rose 59 percent between 1979 and 2017, while real hourly earnings of Black and Latina women at the 10th percentile *fell* by 3 percent and 8 percent, respectively, over that period¹⁴. Inequality among women has been further compounded by the continual intensification of class endogamy since the 1970s, along with the lower separation and divorce rates among affluent couples and the greater prevalence of single parenthood among working class and poor women. The relationship between domestic workers and their (typically female) employers is a microcosm of this larger pattern of inequality among women, as ethnographic studies have documented.

On the macro level, as I and several other commentators have argued elsewhere, the rising level of class inequality is a key driver of the growing share of the labor force employed in paid domestic labor (Milkman *et al.*, 1998; Jokela, 2015; Milkman, 2020, ch. 4). All else being equal, the wider the gap between rich and poor, the more affordable paid domestic services become for richer households. U.S. employment in paid domestic labor (as a share of the total labor force) fell sharply during the “Great Compression”, the period of declining inequality from the New Deal era of the 1930s to the mid-1970s – so much so that by the end of that period some commentators claimed that domestic service was becoming an “obsolescent” occupation (e.g. Coser, 1973). Such obituaries were soon proven premature, however, as paid domestic labor began to rebound in the 1980s. From 1980 to 2012 alone, domestic workers’ share of total female employment in the USA doubled (Shierholz, 2013; Milkman, 2020, pp. 113-14). More recently, even in wealthy American households with *non-employed* wives, consumption of paid domestic services has become increasingly routine (Sherman, 2017).

A recent study by Merita Jokela (2015, pp. 386, 396) concluded that “in a global comparison, paid domestic labor is connected to the larger development of economic inequalities... with more wealthy households being able to afford hired help, and more workers willing to accept working in domestic services”. Her analysis of 74 countries, drawing on ILO data, found that income inequality (as measured by the Gini index) was the strongest determinant of the prevalence of paid domestic labor (as a share of the total labor force), controlling for a variety of other factors. The proportion of migrants in each country’s population was significantly associated with the prevalence of paid domestic labor as well, although this was a weaker predictor than income inequality. Moreover, as Jokela notes, “migration is not only a supply factor, but may also be influenced by the demand for care workers in the receiving

14. “Real Wage Trends, 1979 to 2019”. *Congress.Gov*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R45090>, consulted 07/10/2025.

countries”. She also found that a nation’s population share made up of older people was insignificant when controlling for other factors, suggesting that OADR data may need further investigation.

Jokela’s analysis suggests that the extremely high inequality characteristic of the USA is the most critical factor distinguishing its paid domestic employment patterns from those of other rich countries. Ironically the public subsidies that became available starting in the 1990s to employers of care workers in northern Europe (as well as England and Australia) often via subcontracting to for-profit agencies, also expose the salience of inequality (Brennan *et al.*, 2012). Such policies have typically generated low-wage in-home care jobs with limited social entitlements, exemplified by domestic “mini-jobs” in Germany; moreover, across Europe union coverage in these occupations is the exception rather than the rule. As Clement Carbonnier, Nathalie Morel and their collaborators (2015, p. 26f) have noted, in Europe “the main beneficiaries of these schemes are wealthier households”, who disproportionately take up the public subsidies; indeed, many of them receive a windfall, since they would have hired in-home caregivers even in the absence of the schemes (see also Leduox *et al.*, 2021).

Stratification among paid domestic workers

Within the USA, along with its extreme level of inequality and comparatively limited public provision for care, stratification *among* paid domestic and in-home care workers is also striking, and it appears to be more extensive than in other rich countries (although without a careful analysis and in the absence of easily available, strictly comparable data this cannot be confirmed). On the average, in the USA as in other wealthy countries, private household jobs are concentrated at the bottom of the labor market. As one recent analysis has shown, in the USA domestic workers’ median hourly wages averaged 25% lower than those of similar workers in other occupations, when controlling for demographic composition and education levels. Further amplifying this inequality is that fact that most U.S. domestic workers lack access to unemployment or disability insurance; employer-provided health and pension benefits are rare, and the prevalence of wage theft is well above average (Wolfe *et al.*, 2020).

Perhaps because of the bleak situation of the paid domestic workforce as a whole, few commentators have explored the heterogeneity *within* this set of occupations in detail¹⁵. One key dimension of that heterogeneity involves race and nativity: U.S.-

15. The next few paragraphs draw on Milkman 2023.

born paid domestic workers, especially those who are white, generally fare better than immigrants in the same occupations; at the other extreme, unauthorized immigrants are highly concentrated in the least desirable jobs, such as live-in caregiving. About one third of all domestic workers in the USA are foreign-born and about 60 percent are Bipoc, although those figures vary regionally and are far higher in most major cities. In addition, the specific occupations that comprise paid domestic labor vary in their composition by race/ethnicity and nativity: nannies and home health aides are far more likely than house cleaners to be white and U.S.-born (Zundl and Rodgers, 2021).

More generally, there is a broad spectrum of pay and working conditions within the USA's domestic work sector. At one extreme are the growing (if still relatively modest) ranks of private servants to the super-rich. These employees tend to be overwhelmingly white and U.S.-born, although European immigrants and those from other rich countries are also present in this elite stratum. In cities like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, where many of the wealthiest Americans reside, several employment agencies specialize in this niche market, supplying not only nannies and eldercare attendants but housekeepers, butlers, chauffeurs, chefs, and personal assistants to wealthy households as well. Although no systematic data are available for these workers, by all accounts they are relatively well paid and provided with superior accommodations and working conditions. To be sure, some are required to sacrifice their personal freedom as they accompany their employers to various distant destinations, and many are "on call" 24/7 even when not traversing the globe, but their pay and conditions appear to be far superior to those other paid domestic workers.

At the other end of the spectrum are workers who become victims of labor trafficking, held in slave-like conditions in their employers' homes. One recent study found that of the approximately 8,000 labor trafficking cases identified in the USA in the decade ending in December 2017, almost 23 percent involved domestic workers – a larger share than for any other occupational group. Given that most trafficking cases are never reported, this is a highly conservative estimate (Polaris and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2019).

While these examples represent the extremes, substantial heterogeneity exists among more typical domestic workers as well. For home care workers, for example, a primary axis of variation is geographical: the fifty U.S. states vary widely both in the extent of public provision (including levels of Medicaid funding), in minimum wage rates, and in the extent of unionization. Yet even in the nine states where home care workers are partially unionized (a phenomenon limited to those paid with Medicaid funds), their hourly earnings are far below those of other unionized service-sector

workers¹⁶. And in the 41 states where home-care unions are absent, where the legal minimum wage also tends to be relatively low, Medicaid-funded home care aides earn even less (Schulte and Robertson, 2021). Moreover, because this segment of the home care workforce is often employed part-time (despite the preference of many for full-time hours), the annual earnings shortfall is still greater (Kim, 2020).

Most Americans who want or need assistance do not qualify for Medicaid, which is strictly means-tested (with eligibility criteria varying widely among states), while Medicare (which is available to nearly everyone 65 years old or older) only covers short-term care after a hospital stay. As a result, most employers of home care workers for elderly and disabled people must either rely on unpaid caregivers or hire providers privately (Belbase *et al.*, 2021). Some turn to for-profit employment agencies, which charge considerable fees for their services, costing consumers more and simultaneously reducing the wages the aides themselves receive (Schweid, 2021, p. 63). Others (a smaller but growing group) rely on platforms like *Care.com*. The majority, however, recruit home care aides informally, typically through social networks. Such providers are nominally self-employed, but most are part of the “gray market”, paid in cash “under the table”, in which the employment relationship itself is informal and almost entirely unregulated.

Although evidence is limited, the available data suggest that the pay and conditions for gray-market home care providers are typically superior to those of their formally employed counterparts, as well to those in the unionized Medicaid-funded sector – reflecting the absence of agency fees on the one hand and the greater likelihood of full-time work on the other. But nearly all gray market workers lack employment security, fringe benefits, and union protection. Earnings vary widely in both the gray market and in privately paid home care brokered through employment agencies. The most affluent employers can afford to pay far more than the working- and middle-class majority, who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but nevertheless have limited resources and struggle to pay for the care they need (Kim, 2020). A 2022 survey of home care consumers in California, some reliant on employment agencies and others hiring caregivers through informal networks, found costs ranging from \$200 to \$730 per day for 24-hour round-the-clock care. Although it was based on a convenience sample, this survey suggests the large-scale variation in pay among home care workers, once again reflecting the extreme level of inequality in the USA as a whole (Ucla Labor Center, 2022).

16. In 2018, average hourly earnings for unionized “personal care aides” were \$13.48, compared with \$24.18 for unionized workers in service occupations overall. See Hirsch and MacPherson, 2019, pp. 61-63.

Stratification among paid domestic workers is not limited to the case of the USA, of course, and comparable data are not available elsewhere, but it seems to be particularly extreme there, in keeping with the nation's more acute economic inequality overall. That may change as European countries increasingly adopt USA-style approaches, for example through the recent outsourcing of eldercare to private employment agencies that provide live-in care workers (often migrants) to middle- and upper-class households (Aulenbacher *et al.*, 2024; Gottfried *et al.*, forthcoming). Across the wealthy world, care is in the process of being increasingly marketized and commodified as part of post-industrial capitalism more broadly, although to date nowhere is this trend more pronounced than in the USA (Nadasen, 2023).

Conclusion

It is not the USA's relatively large immigrant population that differentiates it from other rich countries in regard to the labor market dynamics of paid domestic labor and in-home carework. Instead, the critical factors making the USA an outlier in this regard are its minimal system of social provision and its extreme level of economic inequality (including inequality among women). Rising inequality drives up both the supply of and the demand for paid domestic workers. In addition, in the USA the paid domestic work sector is highly stratified internally, with extensive variation in pay and working conditions – reflecting and largely driven by the broader pattern of acute economic inequality. In all these respects the USA more closely resembles Brazil and other countries in the global South than its counterparts in the wealthy world¹⁷.

17. For data on domestic labor in Brazil, see Brites and Picanço, 2014.

References

- AULENBACHER, Brigitte; LUTZ, Helma; PALENGA-MOLLENBECK, Ewa & SCHWITER, Karin (eds.). (2024), *Home care for sale: The transnational brokering of senior care in Europe*. Londres, Sage Studies in International Sociology.
- BELBASE, Anek; CHIEN, Anqi & MUNNELL, Alicia H. (2021), "What resources do retirees have for long-term services and supports?". *Boston College Center for Retirement Research*, 21 (16): 1-12. Available at https://crr.bc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IB_21-16-3.pdf, consulted 07/10/2025.
- BLAU, Francine D. & KAHN, Lawrence M. (2013), "Female labor supply: Why is the U.S. falling behind?". *American Economic Review*, 103: 251-56.
- BRENNAN, Deborah; CASS, Bettina; HIMMELWEIT, Susan & SZEBEHELY, Marta. (2012), "The marketisation of care: Rationales and consequences in Nordic and liberal care regimes". *Journal of European Social Policy*, 22 (4): 377-391.
- BRITES, Jurema & PICANÇO, Felícia. (2014), "O emprego doméstico no Brasil em números, tensões e contradições: alguns achados de pesquisas". *Revista Latino-americana de Estudos do Trabalho*, 19: 3, 131-158.
- CARBONNIER, Clement & MOREL, Nathalie (eds.). (2015), *The political economy of household services in Europe*. Londres, Palgrave Macmillan.
- CONNOR, Phillip; PASSEL, Jeffrey S. & KROGSTAD, Jens Manuel. (13 nov. 2019), "How European and U.S. unauthorized immigrant populations compare". *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/11/13/how-european-and-u-s-unauthorized-immigrant-populations-compare/>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- COSER, Lewis A. (1973), "Servants: The obsolescence of an occupational role". *Social Forces*, 52: 1, 31-40.
- FREY, William H. (1º jul. 2020), "The nation is diversifying even faster than predicted, according to new census data". *The Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- GOTTFRIED, Heidi; BORIS, Eileen & GUIMARÃES, Nadya Araujo (eds.). (forthcoming), *Caring across borders: Assessing home care policies and workers' rights in Europe and the Americas*. Londres, Brill.
- HIRSCH, Barry T. H. & MACPHERSON, David A. (2019), *Union membership and earnings data book*. Arlington, Virginia, Bloomberg Law and Bureau of National Affairs.
- INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, ILO. (2013), *Domestic workers across the world*. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/domestic-workers-across-world-global-and-regional-statistics-and-extent-0>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, ILO. (2021), *Making decent work a reality for*

- domestic workers*. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/making-decent-work-reality-domestic-workers-progress-and-prospects-ten>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- “JAPAN DEMOGRAPHICS PROFILE”. *Index Mundi*. [https://www.indexmundi.com/japan/demographics_profile.html#:~:text=124%2C687%2C293%20\(July%202021%20est.\)&text=Japanese%2097.9%25%2C%20Chinese%200.6%25,Brazilian\)%20\(2017%20est.\)&text=The%20World%20Factbook%2C%20the%20indispensable%20source%20for%20basic%20information.&text=Shintoism%2069%25%2C%20Buddhism%2066.7%25,6.2%25%20\(2018%20est,](https://www.indexmundi.com/japan/demographics_profile.html#:~:text=124%2C687%2C293%20(July%202021%20est.)&text=Japanese%2097.9%25%2C%20Chinese%200.6%25,Brazilian)%20(2017%20est.)&text=The%20World%20Factbook%2C%20the%20indispensable%20source%20for%20basic%20information.&text=Shintoism%2069%25%2C%20Buddhism%2066.7%25,6.2%25%20(2018%20est,) consulted 07/10/2025.
- JOKELA, Merita. (2015), “Macro-level determinants of paid domestic labour prevalence: A cross-national analysis of seventy-four countries”. *Social Policy & Society*, 14 (3): 385-405.
- JONES, Nicholas; MARKS, Rachel; RAMIREZ, Roberto & RÍOS-VARGAS, Merarys (12 ago. 2021), “Improved race and ethnicity measures reveal U.S. population is much more multi-racial”. *U.S. Census Bureau*. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- KIM, Jeounghhee. (2020), “Informal employment and the earnings of home-based home care workers in the United States”. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 51 (4): 283-300.
- LEDUOX, Clemence; SHIRE, Karen & VAN HOOREN, Franca (eds.). (2021), *The dynamics of welfare markets: Private pensions and domestic/care services in Europe*. Londres, Palgrave.
- “LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH, TOTAL (YEARS)”. *World Bank Open Data*. <https://data.world-bank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?end=2020>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- “MIGRATION INFORMATION SOURCE”, *Migration Policy Institute*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/migration-information-source>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- MILKMAN, Ruth. (2020), *Immigrant labor and the new precariat*. Londres, Polity.
- MILKMAN, Ruth. (2023), “Stratification among in-home care workers in the United States”. *Critical Sociology*, 49 (1): 11-22.
- MILKMAN, Ruth; REESE, Ellen & ROTH, Benita. (1998), “The macrosociology of paid domestic labor”. *Work and Occupations*, 25 (4): 483-510.
- MILLER, Katherine E. M.; CHATTERJEE, Paula & WERNER, Rachel M. (2023), “Trends in supply of nursing home beds, 2011-2019”. *Jama Network Open*. Available at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2801837>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- NADASEN, Premilla. (2023), *Care: The highest stage of capitalism*. Chicago, Haymarket Books.
- “OLD-AGE DEPENDENCY RATIO”. *OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*. <https://data.oecd.org/pop/old-age-dependency-ratio.htm>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- PHI. (2024), *Direct care workers in the United States: Key Facts*, pp. 8, 11. Available at <https://www.phinational.org/resource/direct-care-workers-in-the-united-states-key-facts-2024/>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- POLARIS and the NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE. (2019), *Human trafficking*

- at home: Labor trafficking of domestic workers*. Available at https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Human_Trafficking_at_Home_Labor_Trafficking_of_Domestic_Workers.pdf, consulted 07/10/2025.
- “POPULATION AGES 65 AND ABOVE – Country rankings”. *The Global Economy*. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/elderly_population/, consulted 07/10/2025.
- “POPULATION OF ENGLAND AND WALES”. (22 dez. 2022), *Ethnicity Facts and Figures, Gov. UK*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- “REAL WAGE TRENDS, 1979 TO 2019”. *Congress.Gov*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R45090>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- SCHULTE, Brigid & ROBERTSON, Cassandra. (2021), “Mother and daughter do the same job. Why does one make \$9 more an hour?”. *The New York Times*, May 10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/10/opinion/home-health-wages.html?searchResultPosition=1>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- SCHWEID, Richard. (2021), *The caring class: Home health aides in crisis*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- SHERMAN, Rachel. (2017), *Uneasy street: The anxieties of affluence*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- SHIERHOLZ, Heidi. (2013), “Low wages and scant benefits leave many in-home workers unable to make ends meet”. *Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper 369*: 1-25. Available at <https://files.epi.org/2013/bp369-in-home-workers-shierholz.pdf>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- “THE CANADIAN CENSUS: A rich portrait of the country’s religious and ethnocultural diversity”. *Statistics Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- UCLA LABOR CENTER. (March 2022), *Lives and livelihoods: California’s private homecare industry in crisis*. Available at <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Lives-and-Livelihood-Report-1.pdf>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- WOLFE, Julia; KANDRA, Jori; ENGDAHL, Lora & SHIERHOLZ, Heidi. (2020), “Domestic workers chartbook”. *Economic Policy Institute*, Washington, DC: 1-64. <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- ZALLMAN, Leah; FINNEGAN, Karen E.; HIMMELSTEIN, David U.; TOUW, Sharon & WOOLHANDLER, Steffie. (jun. 2019), “Care for America’s elderly and disabled people relies on immigrant labor”. *Health Affairs*, 38 (6): Community Care for High-Need Patients. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05514>, consulted 07/10/2025.
- ZUNDL, Elaine & MEULEN RODGERS, Yana van der. (2021), “The future of work for domestic workers in the United States: Innovations in technology, organizing, and laws”. In: SCHULZE-

-CLEVEN, Tobias & VACHON, Todd (eds.). *Revaluing work(ers): Toward a democratic and sustainable future*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, pp. 201-19.

Abstract

How exceptional is the USA? Carework and inequality

Countering the popular claim that what differentiates the USA for other wealthy countries in regard to the labor market dynamics of paid domestic labor is its relatively large immigrant population, this article argues that the critical factors are instead the USA's minimal system of social provision and its extreme level of economic inequality (including inequality among women) which drives up both the supply of and the demand for paid domestic workers. In addition, in the USA paid domestic work is highly stratified, with extensive variation in pay and working conditions. In many respects the USA more closely resembles countries in the global South than its counterparts in the wealthy world.

Keywords: Care work; Paid domestic work, Inequality, USA.

Resumo

Quão excepcionais são os EUA? Trabalho de cuidado e desigualdade

Contrariando a alegação corrente de que o que diferencia os EUA de outros países ricos em relação à dinâmica do mercado de trabalho doméstico remunerado é sua relativamente grande população imigrante, este artigo argumenta que os fatores críticos são, na verdade, o sistema mínimo de proteção social em vigor nos EUA e o nível extremo de desigualdade econômica no país (incluindo a desigualdade entre mulheres), o que aumenta tanto a oferta quanto a demanda por trabalhadores domésticos remunerados. Além disso, nos EUA, o trabalho doméstico remunerado é altamente estratificado, com ampla variação na remuneração e nas condições de trabalho. Em muitos aspectos, os EUA se assemelham mais aos países do Sul global do que a seus equivalentes no mundo afliente.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho de cuidado; Trabalho doméstico remunerado; Desigualdade; EUA.

RUTH MILKMAN is professor of Sociology and History at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She writes frequently about labor and social policy. Her recent books include *Immigrant labor and the new precariat* (Polity Press, 2020) and *On gender, labor and inequality* (University of Illinois Press, 2016). E-mail: rmilkman@gc.cuny.edu.

Data usage not reported: no research data generated or used.