The “Nanny” Question in Feminism

JOAN C. TRONTO

Are social movements responsible for their unfinished agendas? Feminist successes in opening the professions to women paved the way for the emergence of the upper middle-class two-career household. These households sometimes hire domestic servants to accomplish their child care work. If, as I shall argue, this practice is unjust and furthers social inequality, then it poses a moral problem for any feminist commitment to social justice.

Danielle Slap [age 3] was looking out the window into the backyard when she spotted a group of four deer of varying sizes. “Look,” she said. “There is a family: there’s a daddy, mommy, baby and the baby sitter.”

—Enid Nemy, Metropolitan Diary

I. The Question: Who Is Responsible for Unjust Unintended Consequences?

Are social movements responsible for their unfinished agendas? One of the great accomplishments of second-wave feminism was to end the gender caste barrier that had kept women out of professions. Since most women professionals are heterosexual and marry, and because people generally marry within their socioeconomic status groups, one consequence of this greater freedom for women to become professionals has been to increase social and economic inequality between households (Milkman, Reese, and Roth 1998). Another consequence has been to make the problem of finding child care arrangements a concern for working mothers from all social classes. There are many options for child care in the United States: mothers can decide not to work or to arrange a work

Hypatia vol. 17, no. 2 (Spring 2002) © by Joan C. Tronto
schedule with their partners so that they need no external support for child care. Where it is available, they can use professional day care at work or in the community. There are informal child care centers. Mothers can leave their children with a family member (Uttal 1999) or a neighbor. Mothers can also hire a nanny, au pair, or domestic worker who lives with them or who works in their own home full time. Such practices have become sufficiently widespread to be naturalized into the small joke quoted above published 6 September 1999 in the New York Times.

This essay mainly concerns the morality of practices of upper-class and upper middle-class men and women who are raising children in (usually) two-career (usually heterosexual) households.1 Some suggest that two professional adults raising children constitute a new family type, the two-career household (Gregson and Lowe 1994). The two-career household is different even from dual-earner households in that both professionals in such a household hold down professional jobs where the time demands are excessive or unpredictable. The two-career households, and others similarly situated, are more likely to use a paid full-time domestic caretaker who either lives in the household or does not. This focus is narrow demographically, but these particular families are important. First, these are the families who have most benefitted from the end of caste barriers to the professions, and part of my goal in this essay is to invoke long-standing feminist commitments of “sisterhood” and support for all women as a guide to moral action. Second, despite their small number in society, the broader ideology of “intensive motherhood” (Hays 1996) closely parallels what this group of men and women are doing, and their mothering ideals permeate and reflect prevailing ideology.

Of course, all child care work in the United States pays relatively poorly and has low prestige. Nevertheless, the women hired to do in-home, full-time child care endure the most difficult circumstances. In this essay, I shall primarily focus on two of the three groups described by Pirette Hondagneu-Sotelo in her recent study of domestic workers in Los Angeles. These are women who are hired as live-in help and those who are employed full time in a particular household.2 Almost all of the workers employed in these ways in Los Angeles are immigrant women from Mexico, Central America, and Latin America. I shall use the terms domestic servants, domestic workers, and nannies to refer to these individuals.

In this essay I want to consider how the confluence of these two unintended consequences, greater social and economic inequality and greater demands for child care, have rearranged responsibilities in a way that undercuts basic feminist notions of justice. I shall first demonstrate that when the wealthiest members of society use domestic servants to meet their child care needs, the result is unjust for individuals and for society as a whole. I shall then consider whether there are ameliorating circumstances that make this solution, even
if unjust, necessary. I shall consider some alternative ways in which women might think about child care to make it less unjust. Then I shall return to this question, under what circumstances should social movements be responsible for the unjust unintended consequences of their actions? I shall conclude that, in this case, the “nanny question” is a serious problem for feminists interested in justice.

II. Domestic Tyranny

“[A] family with live-in servants is—inevitably I think—a little tyranny.”

—Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*

“Isn’t ‘feminist domestic employer’ a contradiction?”

—Cynthia Enloe as quoted in Bakan and Stasiulis

Although the extent of domestic service in the United States is hard to measure (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 50), there is no doubt that it is on the rise in the last twenty years. (This is also the case elsewhere; on Britain, see Gregson and Lowe 1994; on Canada see Giles and Arat-Koç 1994; Bakan and Stasiulis 1997.) In the United States, the use of domestic servants for child care and other “core” household care activities has increased, especially in those urban areas where economic inequality is greatest (Milkman, Reese, and Ross 1998). Thus, inequality is associated with increased use of domestic servants. Activists in industrial societies have been concerned to regulate the global trade in domestic servants (Glenn, Chang, et al. 1994; Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Chang 2000).

In this section of the paper, I want to argue that the use of domestic servants is unjust in all but the most unusual cases, constituting a tyranny in Walzer’s term (1983, 52) and contrary to feminist principles in Enloe’s judgment (in Bakan and Stasiulis 1997, 13)

A. Moral uniqueness of domestic service

[Quoting an employer who was hurt and angry that her live-in nanny had asked for a bonus:] So I made some points. I said, “You know, you say that I didn’t give you a bonus, well, why don’t you take back all those Christmas presents I gave you and cash them in? There’s your bonus!” . . . I said, you know, “Is money just really all that’s important to you?” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 120)
Let me first consider the objection that there is no reason to expend any special moral energy on this question because using domestic service is no different from purchasing services and goods on the market. One might argue that to make the choice to use domestic servants is only to participate in another market relation, no different from sending a child to a day care center, or purchasing prepared food, or eating in a restaurant that employs and underpays dishwashers. There are several morally relevant differences between hiring domestic servants and purchasing commodities and services on the market.

First, the institutional setting of the household is a different setting than the market. Because domestic service takes place in a private home, it is often not regarded as employment at all. Michael Walzer writes: “The principles that rule in the household are those of kinship and love. They establish the underlying pattern of mutuality and obligation, or authority and obedience. The servants have no proper place in that pattern, but they have to be assimilated to it” (1983, 52). Feminist scholars have been more dubious than Walzer about the household as the realm of kinship and love; nonetheless, the household’s personalism makes it distinctive. Insofar as domestic servants are conceived as a substitute for the wife in a traditional household, they are expected to conform to an account of their work that is only partly real “work.” As Hondagneu-Sotelo observes, employers were often shocked to think that their child care workers were only working for the money (2001, 120). The household is a different kind of institution than a market.

Second, the relationships within a household are considerably more immediate and more intimate than in a market. The status of quasi-family member means that the domestic servant is enmeshed in the complete details of the lives of the people served. Domestic workers’ work is expected to reflect the values (for example, in raising children or performing household duties), tastes (for example, in purchasing food, cleaning products, and other commodities for the household), and other aspects of the lives of their employers. The space in which they do their work is not a public work space, but someone else’s most private space. Thus, the level of control that employers expect to be able to exert over domestic workers is very great, and noncompliance is often emotionally and psychologically charged.

A third factor that distinguishes domestic service from other market relations. Insofar as the work of domestic service is care, one of the “products” of care is that it creates ongoing relationships among the care givers and care receivers. The quality of these relationships is thus one of the measures of the quality of the work that is done. Thus, part of the work of domestic service itself is to nurture and maintain care relationships. While these concerns also exist in market relations of care (for example, among nursing home aides and their charges), they are presumed to be paradigmatic of domestic relations, and thus, form a central part of domestic service.
B. Domestic employment from within the relationship: Three perspectives

Within the relationship of domestic employment, there are different moral perspectives that we can consider. If, for the sake of simplicity, we consider the simplest pattern of relationship, then we need to consider three perspectives. We can consider the perspective of the worker, of the employing parent, usually a mother, and of the cared-for charge (to borrow a term from Kittay 1999). In this essay I shall assume that the charge is a child, but the argument is also true in part when the charge is an older person in need of sustained assistance.

Workers. The average domestic is paid woefully low wages. Hondagneu-Sotelo reports that job offers of $150 per week for a live-in worker are not unusual in Los Angeles. She estimates that live-in domestic workers earn less than minimum wage and work an average of sixty-four hours each week. Live-out nannies she surveyed averaged $5.90 an hour for approximately forty to forty-five hours each week (2001, 35, 38).

Nevertheless, according to the workers themselves, the most degrading aspect of their work is that they are not accorded sufficient respect and dignity. From the standpoint of workers, the moral stress of being a domestic worker is great. Not really “one of the family,” domestics occupy a netherworld without support or moral acknowledgment for their roles (Rollins 1985; Romero 1992). The work that one is expected to do involves reflecting the values of an employer, which makes it alienating in many ways from one’s own sense of value and worth. Domestic servants must work hard to establish and keep their dignity (Colen 1986) and to cope with the sense of anger and powerlessness that they often feel (Rollins 1985). Further, many domestic servants have families of their own, often left far away or far behind (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). While all working mothers have to cope somehow with the fact that they must leave their children in someone else’s care, there is a poignant irony in the way in which domestic workers must leave their children so that they can ensure that “other people’s children” receive the proper care (Romero 1992; Romero 1997). Live-in workers have still less control over the space that they occupy, the food that they can eat, and whether and how they can spend their leisure time. They might be vulnerable to sexual harassment or abuse by their employer or others in the household, and there is little recourse to anyone outside of the household for assistance. Although some employment laws do pertain to domestic workers, they are rarely enforced. Although there are a few organizations such as Domestic Workers of America, most domestics have little or no recourse to address complaints, no union protections, and so forth. While many low-paid workers in the United States lack such opportunities for collective action, the situation is obviously worse when each worker is in a separate workplace.
There are also moral rewards that can flow from this relationship. Caring for children and elderly people, though devalued in our culture, is very powerful and important. Domestic workers surely have an appreciation of the work that they do, and many find “respect and feelings” (Colen 1986) in their work. Domestic servants often find that a close personal relationship that might develop with an employer will be rewarding as well (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

On balance, though, as Diemut Bubeck has observed, care workers are always especially vulnerable to a particular form of exploitation. “The exploitative mechanism,” she writes, “is the social institution of the sexual division of labor which constructs women as carers and thus systematically ‘extracts surplus labor’ in the form of unpaid care from them (to hearken back to Marx’s definition of exploitation)” (1995, 181). This is especially true for domestic workers.

Among other aspects of the way in which the “circle of care” is exploitative, according to Bubeck, is the way in which workers can express their discontent. In most work, workers who wish to resist some aspect of their employment can respond by shirking their work responsibilities. In caring work, workers who shirk their duties impose the greatest harm on their charges. Because care work creates a relational bond between the worker and the charge, it is thus harder for any care worker to fight back, and this is especially so in a household where one is working intensively with others with whom one has established an ongoing caring relationship. We should conclude that the nature of domestic work makes likely the abuse of the workers and threats to their moral dignity. Given the low levels of pay, the working conditions, and the high level of arbitrariness that employers can exercise, domestic servants are highly vulnerable to abuse.

Employing Parents. Usually, the burden of hiring, firing, and supervising the domestic help, like all domestic duties, falls to women. A mother might think of the domestic worker as either her ally or her competition. In so doing, and in the assumptions about she makes about the competence of her worker, she has considerable control over the quality of the worker’s work life. Nonetheless, given the intimacy and high stakes of this relationship, chances are high that some part of the work will be unsatisfactory on some terms. The power of the employer to change the conditions of employment, to act erratically, and to insult and degrade workers, is very high. It is likely, given such great power, to become tyrannical. The mother might think of the worker as competition for the affection of the children, for example. She might then fire workers after some time, regardless of the quality of their work (Hrdy 1999).

On the other hand, an employing mother might be aware of all of these potential abuses, of the low wages that she is paying, and so forth, and feel guilty about it. The guilt of mothers around using domestic workers is, thus, often great. But what positive role does such guilt have? It may in fact result in forms of behavior, such as gift-giving or enforced intimacy, that actually also
may act as burdens on the lives of domestic workers (Rollins 1985; Bakan and Stasiulis 1997).

More recently, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) has noticed a different disparity. Very busy two-career mothers are less eager to spend time establishing a personal relationship with their workers. While the workers value such relationships, the interviewed employers resented the time that they spent learning about the workers’ lives, concerns, and problems. Thus, there is a lack of reciprocity between the involvement of the worker in the life of the employer and a corresponding involvement of the employers in the lives of their workers.

Children. Finally, what is the consequence for children of growing up with another adult charged with their care? As feminists have asked about male domination in the household, what kind of moral education does one learn from being in a household in which one adult is so clearly subordinate to others? No doubt children do well when they are surrounded by adults who take care of them, and many testimonials suggest how vital the caregiver has been to the children (Romero 1997). On the other hand, there are a number of undesirable consequences of such care. Children may well come to expect that other people, regardless of their connection to them, will always be available to meet their needs. They may come to treat people as merely means, and not as ends in themselves. While it may be desirable for children to have another ally in a household, if that ally is not an independent person, what good will it do? Susan Okin has suggested (following J. S. Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft) that the family is the learning and proving ground for democracy and a sense of justice (Okin 1989). It does not bode well for the creation of democratic citizens if children witness the arbitrary and capricious interaction of parents and servants or if they are permitted to treat domestic servants in a similar manner.

Indeed, when we recall that race/ethnicity usually mark and distinguish the employers and the workers, children cared for by domestic servants are being more completely immersed into a racist culture. Sau-ling Wong goes further, and in writing about the role of people of color in recent Hollywood films, suggests that “in a society undergoing radical demographic and economic changes, the figure of the person of color patiently mothering white folks seems to allay racial anxieties” (1994, 69).

Mary Romero observes that the other side of this issue is also important. Working-class children are forced to learn early on that they have to endure the difficulties of life. What equality of opportunity can exist for a child who grieves as her mother goes off each day or week to serve, essentially, as a substitute mother for some other children and leaves her without her mother? Or, when the child is taken along to be a human toy for the children of the well-to-do (Romero 1997)? For the children as well as the mothers and the workers, then, there are likely to be unjust consequences from domestic service.
For a variety of reasons, then, hiring domestic servants seems an intrinsically unjust practice. In saying so, I do not deny that there are some employing mothers and fathers who are aware of these moral hazards and do their best to preserve the dignity of the workers that they employ. Nonetheless, study after study finds these similar patterns of abuse (Colen 1986; Romero 1992; Gregson and Lowe 1994; Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Giles and Arat-Koç 1994; Chang 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001).

If it is unjust, though, why is this practice increasing? It is possible that, though unjust, there is no alternative to hiring domestic servants. People do not act in ways that they consider immoral. What might the parents who hire domestic servants be telling themselves as they hire domestic workers, and what moral status do such arguments have?

### III. The Necessity Defense: Are There Alternatives to Hiring Domestic Servants?

“You want someone who puts the children before herself,” said Judy Meyers, 37, a mother of two in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y., who works for a health insurance company. “But to find someone for the right amount of money is not so easy.”

—Caren Rubenstein, Consumer’s World: Finding a Nanny Legally

In an article entitled “Consumer’s World: Finding a Nanny Legally,” published in the *New York Times*, 28 January 1993, Caren Rubenstein says that working mothers who hire nannies do so because they believe it is in the best interests of their children, even if it means that they will try to take advantage of their nanny. Such a belief only outweighs the injustice of the practice, though, if it is the only way to provide adequate care for their children. Furthermore, simply because there is a rationalization for a belief does not make it just. In this section I shall first inquire about the values of upper middle-class mothers that might justify their belief. I will show that a set of beliefs that primarily benefit only well-off families make hiring nannies look necessary.

#### A. Upper Middle-Class Values and the Need for Competitive, “Intensive” Mothering

The well-off women who hire domestic servants believe that they are acting in the best interests of their children. For the upper middle-class, “good mothering” is inevitably tied to children’s success in the context of a highly competitive capitalist environment.
Feminist philosophers in recent years have emphasized and taken some comfort in the ways that mothering stands against the hegemonic culture of capitalistic competition. Sara Ruddick (1989) and, more recently, Eva Kittay (1999) argue that mothering or caring for a charge follows a different, noncapitalist, logic. Virginia Held argues that, in a post-patriarchal world, we would be able to view the noncontractual relationship between mother and child as an alternative paradigm that could serve to inform a broad array of social relationships and institutions (Held 1993). Sharon Hays has argued that by stepping out of the labor market, young mothers defy capitalist logic (Hays 1996).

In fact, though, mothering practices can only ever partly defy their existing culture, and hiring domestic servants seems to be a part of capitalist logic. As Ruddick noted, one of the central tasks for mothers (that is, anyone who engages in mothering practices) is to help their children fit into existing societies. Thus, mothers are also in part enforcers of existing culture. It seems almost a truism to acknowledge that “the approach to child rearing—and the language used to articulate it—has always paralleled the ideology of the era” (Schwartz 1993, 262). Since World War II, as Ellen Seiter and others have argued, the model for child rearing that has predominated emphasizes the child’s intellectual development. “The new child psychology was a child-centered model. Implicit in its proscriptions was a disavowal of maternal authority and an upgrading of the child’s own desires as rational and goal directed. Because early life events for the child were of supreme importance, caretaking responsibilities expanded” (Seiter 1998, 308).

Ironically, then, as demands on mothers increased, their authority decreased. Their authority passed to experts. The standards for mothers’ success become their capacities to produce children who meet or exceed expert predictions. Because these standards are often based on comparisons with other children, the dream of every good mother or parent is to produce, as Garrison Keillor has humorously noted, children who are all above average, reported Joe Pollack in his article, “Keillor Dazzling Down River,” in the 19 July 1990 edition of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Mothers are asked to find a way to squeeze more out of limited resources, and have little authority to act to control this world. The perception that opportunities will not always expand means that children require an ever greater competitive advantage over other children (Schwartz 1993; Edwards 2001). Mothers are urged to provide their children with the right music, to have them participate in the best activities, attend the right schools, and so forth, to improve their chances later on in life. Mothers are caught in a cycle of competition to try to improve their children's lives. While mothers may unselfishly love their children and try to do the best for them, in a competitive society they must also try to gain and keep competitive advantage over other people’s children.

This view is, of course, an ideal type and somewhat overdrawn. Research also suggests that though parents are constrained by the demands of raising
their children, their children also connect them to a broader social network where they engage in care giving towards others (Gallagher and Gerstel 2001). Nonetheless, the justified anxiety about their children’s futures makes parents, and especially middle-class parents (Lareau 2000), engage in practices designed to improve the competitiveness of their own children. That some other person’s children (for example, the nanny’s children) might be disadvantaged by this action may be regrettable, but it is a part of the “system” that individual mothers can well argue they are powerless to affect.

Short of hiring someone to come into their homes full time to take care of their children, upper middle-class parents could choose to take their children to day care centers, to use the services of women who provide day care in their homes, to leave their children with relatives, or to arrange for their children to spend their time in after-school programs. Any worthy form of day care provides workers who are deeply committed to the interests and needs of each child. But the fear for upper middle-class parents is that their children may not receive enough attention in such settings.

Relatively little high-quality, accessible day care is available in the United States. There is no guarantee that relatives and informal at-home day care providers will provide a sufficiently enriching environment for children (Uttal 1999). After-school programs may not be available, convenient, or of sufficient quality. In a book review published 16 April 1995 in the New York Times, Susan Chira points out that parents who are “obsessed with providing their children with sufficient intellectual stimulation” hire household work because they believe that the children are better off in their own homes where the parents can control the enriching environment to some extent by providing material benefits to their children.

Insofar as parents who hire household work are “obsessed with providing their children with sufficient intellectual stimulation” (Chira 1995), they believe that the children are better off in their own homes, where the parents can control the enriching environment to some extent by providing material benefits to their children. They then need to decide whether to hire a worker who is like them or different, either to reinforce their world views or to provide children with additional enriching experiences; for example, learning French or Spanish from a native speaking nanny (Wrigley 1995). For example, Los Angeles public relations consultant Kathleen Rogers, in an article entitled “A Real Nanny Dilemma: Many Caretakers Have Limited English Skills; Will Kids They Watch Fall Behind?” published 6 March 1995 in the Los Angeles Times, worries that if children spend all day with a Spanish-speaking maid they will be at a competitive disadvantage to children whose nannies speak grammatically correct English. Thus, the decisions made about who and how to provide care flow from the parental concern with the children’s competitive advantage. The result is to further create a sense that, as long as an action is taken on behalf of one’s children, then it cannot be morally questionable.
If there were opportunities for public discussions of needs, questions might open about the material needs of households, whether parents have to work so many hours, and about other ways to cope with competition among children. At present there is no discussion of the ways in which working more hours to earn enough money for all the “stuff” might distort other values, such as spending time with one’s children. Barbara Omolade made a similar point when she reflected upon her own children’s relatively poor economic background but their rich emotional and familial life and compared it to the material abundance but emotional impoverishment experienced by many suburban children (Omolade 1994). Yet there is no public arena for the discussion of such conceptions of needs. Fueled by a fear of the increasing competition for scarce future seats in competitive colleges, jobs, and so forth, the needs of children become greater and more expansive, without limit or public discussion.

Thus, the injustice of hiring domestic servants is obscured by the ideological construction of intensive and competitive mothering.

B. Obscuring Injustice

This problem is more intractable still. For exactly what makes domestic work potentially abusive is what makes it most adequate as the form of care for intensive and competitive mothering. This situation highlights two dimensions of caring not often stressed but crucially important.

The first complication is that caring work cannot be compressed into a manageable block of time (Stone 2000). As a result, given the ideology of “intensive motherhood,” no working mother’s care can be fully adequate. Anita Garey analyzed how mothers minimize their absence through distinctions between the routine work of care and the tasks that really require that they, and not a substitute worker or service, be present. She described three essential roles as “being there”: the mother’s relationship to the child, “family time”; the integration of children into the family’s life (usually having to do with mediating the relationship of child and father); and “doing things,” linking children to the larger public world (usually of school or activities) (1999, 31). Other activities, such as cooking, cleaning, driving children around, and so forth, could be delegated. While the mothers that Garey interviewed did not hire domestic workers, they either had to figure out a way to be present during the crucial times and to make certain that there was some way to provide the care during the other times, or think of themselves as less than perfect mothers. Nevertheless, what is difficult about these essential caring tasks is that they resist any logic of temporal control. Separating the wheat from the chaff in “being there” for one’s child is not a simple matter. “Being there” is obviously important for a school play, but if a child injures herself during routine play that has been delegated to a sitter, then someone needs to fill in the “being there” role for the mother.
In truth, no mother can ever be present for all of the “essential care” moments even though the ideology of intensive motherhood sets this standard. Domestic workers, because they are present in a full-time way and devoted only to these children, are more likely to seem an adequate substitute for the mother. (In fact, they realize that they need to finesse these anxieties; they will deliberately not mention, for example, a child’s first steps but wait until the parent sees them (Hodagneu-Sotelo 2000).

Second, insofar as all caring involves “the politics of needs interpretation” (Fraser 1989), hiring a domestic worker greatly enhances the authority of parents to define their children’s needs. Human needs are only set in the most basic form: what particular children “need” will depend upon their parents’ views of what they need. But parents are not able to assert their view of needs unilaterally. Day care center staff, informal providers of home care, and school staff are all likely to provide competing definitions of children’s needs. Domestic workers might disagree with parents, but they are not likely to remain employed for long if their views of the children’s needs do not conform with the parents’. Hiring a nanny is a way for parents to try to keep control of their children’s senses of their needs. This becomes increasingly difficult in our culture where increasingly the market defines the needs of people (Luttwak 1999; Schor 2000). Nonetheless, denied authority elsewhere, parents can view their imposition of their view of needs as a necessity for the children’s well-being.

Thus, qualities intrinsic in the nature of care, the complexity of time, and of defining needs are made easier through the hiring of domestic workers. Ironically, the more the domestic servant’s work approaches the ideal of meeting all of the desires of the parents to “be there” constantly and to adopt their account of what children need, the more the individual domestic worker loses her capacity to shape her work through control of her own time and to apply her own judgment.

By the same token, insofar as hiring domestic workers serves the economic self-interests of well-to-do mothers and fathers, it only does so insofar as it remains economically worthwhile for women to work in a second career. At the point where it is no longer to their economic advantage, mothers might make other decisions about their work. The idea of dramatically increasing the pay of domestic workers is not feasible because mothers’ professions only “pay” if they make substantially more than they pay their domestic workers.

But such an advantage is very much at the cost of other people’s children. The problem with this division of responsibility is that it makes men and women who are vulnerable economically more blameworthy for their lack of resources. Consider, as a simple matter, a parent’s capacity to schedule time so that he or she can “be there” when his or her kids need him or her. As Jody Heymann has demonstrated, working and lower middle-class families are less likely to contain workers who have such job benefits as flex time, sick leave, personal days, and
so forth. To be able to exercise some control over one's working time is very important to take care of children when they are sick, or have an important school event, and so forth. But if this allocation follows class structure, then the students most likely to be disadvantaged are those who are already disadvantaged (Heymann 2000). This image of mothering is thus not easy for anyone, but it is especially hard for less well off parents.

We have considered the possibility that hiring domestic servants is justified because it is necessary to provide adequate child care for children. We have seen that there are reasons why upper middle-class parents might think this way, but these reasons rest upon an account of good parenting that is, in its own way, also unjust.

**IV. Feminist Responsibilities**

According to Margaret Urban Walker, “An ‘ethics of responsibility’ as a normative moral view would try to put people and responsibilities in the right places with respect to each other” (Walker 1998, 78). The question that remains for us, then, is whether feminists bear any responsibility for the increasing practice of hiring nannies. Assigning responsibility is a complex problem. Nevertheless, we can draw upon some familiar notions of justice to work our way to a conclusion.

Theorists of justice have long agreed that it is unjust if people directly benefit from harming others. There is no doubt that upper middle-class working men and women benefit greatly from hiring women to work as underpaid, exploited, domestic servants. As Audrey Macklin bluntly states, “The grim truth is that some women's access to the high-paying, high-status professions is being facilitated through the revival of semi-indentured servitude. Put another way, one woman is exercising class and citizenship privilege to buy her way out of sex oppression” (1994, 34). But even if upper middle-class women who employ domestic servants are acting unjustly, do feminists share any responsibility for this injustice?

Obviously, feminists, who as a group made a political argument that had this consequence, cannot be held as responsible as the women who engage in the unjust practice. Indeed, we might say that a completely unexpected consequence should relieve actors from the consequences of their actions. Nonetheless, I suggest that if this consequence was foreseeable, even if unintended, then feminists have to bear some responsibility for it.

Should feminists have foreseen this danger lurking in their calls for more open professions? Several points suggest so. First, in retrospect, feminists should have recognized the class bias in their own professional desires. African American critics frequently worried that white, upper middle-class women were not thinking of all women when they drew up their agendas for action (hooks...
Consider, as another example, this reading of Betty Friedan’s position: “For Friedan, housework can be done by ‘anyone with a strong enough back’ (and a ‘small enough brain’) and it is ‘particularly suited to the capacities of feeble-minded girls.’ When Friedan defined housework in these terms, she defined ‘women’s liberation’ for the white, middle-class housewives she wrote for as getting out of the home” (Friedan quoted in Giles and Arat-Koç 1994, 4).

Second, since feminists long argued that “the personal is political,” they should have foreseen that changing the professions would affect private institutions, such as the family, as well.

While increasing economic inequality and the subsequent increase in domestic service are thus unintended consequences of feminist activity, they are not unforeseeable consequences of feminist positions. While feminists are clearly not as responsible for these developments as are the upper middle-class women who are hiring domestic servants, feminists need to recognize that they bear at least some responsibility for this situation.

The incomplete feminist revolution left unresolved the fundamental questions of how to allocate responsibility for child care in our society. For upper middle-class families, resorting to domestic service seems to be a way through the Scylla of mandated stay-at-home moms and the Charybdis of inadequate child care. To put it another way, the use of nannies allows upper middle-class women and men to benefit from feminist changes without having to surrender the privilege of the traditional patriarchal family. The hired household worker is an employee, but she is mainly treated as if she were a wife. Nannies can be imposed upon as if they were members of the family, and that imposition often proves to be abusive. By the same token, if we look at the question from the standpoint of the nanny’s children, or from the standpoint of children whose parents have to jury-rig some form of care for them, what benefits the best off may not be the best solution.

V. Toward a Resolution of the Nanny Question

At a minimum, if the analysis of this paper is accurate, then it becomes incumbent upon feminists and other women of means to continue the struggle to realize the feminist revolutionary goals of reallocating household responsibilities within and among households. Short of revolutionary change, however, there is still a great deal that can be done:

Ameliorative Steps. Hondagneu-Sotelo wryly observes that Los Angeles could not function without the care labor of immigrant workers. She does not suggest the abolition of domestic service but urges that steps be taken to make working conditions more humane. These include enforcing the labor laws that exist, including laws for minimum wages and social security benefits. They require
that workers and employers be informed of their legal obligations. Beyond these minimal steps, wages can be raised and working conditions made more standard. The Domestic Workers Association, for example, lists among its fundamental demands “an end to sexual harassment, adequate breaks and work schedules, no leftover food, sick days, paid vacations, medical benefits” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000, 217).

**Radical Reforms.** The United States needs to join other industrialized societies in providing child care facilities that are publicly supported, locally based and organized, and that provide for the needs of diverse children and families (compare Michel 1999). The shape and provision of such child care is a complex question, but the first step is to generate a sense that child care is a central public responsibility and that it is wrong to force families to try to solve the problem of child care on their own. Nor, obviously, is it adequate as an argument for justice to insist that women not work and return to their homes; among other reasons, such an answer ignores its own class bias by failing to notice that working-class women have often worked.

**Revolutionary Changes.** The most profound change that is necessary, however, is to recognize and rethink the ways in which the assignment of responsibility for children’s success to their parents (and still, primarily, to their mothers) reinforces the “winner take all” attitudes in our culture. Children are not seen as a collective good in our society but as a good assigned to individual parents (Folbre 1993). Once parents see themselves in competition with all other parents, the prospect for collective action diminishes. Rethinking the balance between work and life, determining how everyone can be properly cared for in a way that exploits no caregivers in particular, is the most profound challenge that remains.

My goal, however, is not to condemn mothers, but to point to the way in which our individualized accounts of mothering make us inured to the social structures that contribute to the growing gaps among advantaged and less advantaged children. Injustice justified by care may not be worse than other forms of injustice, but it is often more difficult to see. Feminists cannot allow their approbation for care to obscure the ways in which current family practices further social and economic inequality and delay into a still more distant future, a time in which all people will be able to do their caring work well, and where all people will be well cared for. Recognizing the argument made in this paper requires feminists to recommit themselves to some very hard political work.
Notes

I thank the editors of this issue and anonymous reviewers for their assistance in writing this essay. An earlier version of this work was presented at Temple University and the comments received there were extremely helpful. I wrote this paper while a Laurance S. Rockefeller Fellow at Princeton University’s Center for Human Values, and I am grateful for their support.

1. In this paper, I will switch between referring to mothers and to parents. Despite a generation of feminist activism, relatively little has changed in terms of the willingness of men to assume greater roles for child care duties. See (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer and Robinson 2000; Hochschild 1989 and 1997). On one level this paper is more directly addressed to women. As the primary beneficiaries of feminist success, they should be most concerned about the unintended consequences of their benefits. Nonetheless, husbands and other family members also benefit from being part of two-career households. Thus, at some points in the paper, especially those that refer to the ways in which we think about children in society, I shall refer to parents and not just mothers.

2. I exclude Hondagneu-Sotelo’s third category, women who clean homes one day a week or less, to simplify the argument about “need” and to focus this essay on child care; one can easily extend the argument to the need for a “clean house.”

3. In one sense, since two working parents are likely to spend less time in the home than a non-working upper-class woman in the past, it may seem that domestic workers are less subject to such supervision than before. Nonetheless, parents will often resort to extraordinary means to control their nannies. See Rollins 1985; Romero 1992; and Hondagneu-Sotelo, especially where she shows an advertisement for a so-called “nanny-cam” (2001, 140).

References


