

“MAKING THE DIGNITY OF OUR LABOR A REALITY”:
HOUSEHOLD WORKER ORGANIZING IN NEW YORK CITY, 1960-1980

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis investigates the local movement of household workers in New York from 1960-1980. Adding to labor and feminist histories that challenge the notion of domestic workers as “unorganizable,” this thesis provides an account of the Household Technicians of New York, an organization created and run by working-class Black women in New York. These women fought to gain decent pay and benefits for their labor, and dignity and respect as household workers. With the use of meeting notes, recordings, correspondences, and publications, as well as secondary sources, this thesis examines the vision of the Household Technicians of New York, within the context of the larger national movement of household workers in the 1960s and 1970s.

This study pays particular attention to tensions within the movement of household workers and to the efforts to find allies, two topics which have yet to be fully explored

in previous scholarly literature on domestic worker organizing. This thesis finds that the Household Technicians of New York saw an alliance with women's movement, largely middle class white women, as central to redefining household work. At the same time, the larger women's movement was trying to find ways to get women out of the household all together. Rather than focus on the civil rights movement or labor movement, household workers made a strategic choice to focus on the women's movement. Through this alliance, they hoped to create a coalition of household workers and employers. While the women's movement did have brief moments when it worked with household workers, ultimately, white feminists were unable to see Black household workers as a part of their vision for liberation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Today a thriving movement of household workers exists in New York. In 2010, after years of organizing, Domestic Workers United and their allies helped to pass the historic “New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights,” which set new standards for better wages, benefits, and job security. This is not the first time that household workers in New York have organized. In fact, New York has a rich history of domestic worker organizing. In 1977, household workers under the name of the “Household Technicians of New York” worked with Bronx Assemblyman Seymour Posner, as well as the NAACP, the Urban League, the Service Employees International Union, and the National Organization of Women to pass a state law that allowed household workers in contract cleaning firms to collectively bargain.¹ While the bill was limited in its coverage, it was the first of its kind in the history of the country. Astonishingly, household workers, who had been repeatedly excluded from labor legislation, were able to pass legislation that was unheard of in the rest of the country. This local victory came shortly after a national triumph, when Congress expanded the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to include private household workers and brought them minimum wage protection in 1974.

The Household Technicians of New York emerged in 1971. It was directly run by local Black household workers, while being an affiliate of the national Household Technicians of America (HTA). The HTA was created by the National Committee on

¹Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, “We Were the Invisible Workforce”: Unionizing Home Care,” in D.S. Cobble, *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 184; Nadine Brozan, “Bargaining Legislation for Domestic May Have Wide Impact,” *New York Times* April 28, 1975, accessed October 1, 2012. http://spiderbites.nytimes.com/pay_1975/articles_1975_04_00000.html.

Household Employment (NCHE) which was based in Washington D.C. with 33 chapters and about 5,000 members by 1974.² Originally, the NCHE was created in 1928, mostly to protect the white middle class household.³ In 1964 the NCHE reemerged, with the help of the National Council of Negro Women and the U.S. Women's Bureau, with more focus on household workers, rather than employers. And it was truly remodeled under the leadership of Edith Barksdale-Sloan in 1969. Sloan, not a household worker herself, was a Black feminist activist who had previously worked on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.⁴ The NCHE served as a central organization to the movement of household workers that grew in the late 1960s; similar to the NAACP, which served as a base for the civil rights struggle.⁵

One NCHE executive, Anita Bellamy Shelton, once described the goal of the NCHE as "making the dignity of our labor a reality, not just a dream." The NCHE, she argued, would help household workers, "move toward the day when our children can take pride in what we are doing." That day could only come "when we have done all that needs to be done to elevate this honorable occupation to the position it deserves."⁶ These aspirations were also shared by leaders on the local level in New York. Carolyn Reed, a

² Patrick McCormack, "Maids Want Household Technician Title." *Herald Tribune*, April 21, 1974, accessed October 1, 2012. <http://news.google.com/newspapers>.

³ Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm": Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56 (1991): 34; Vanessa May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-class Reform in New York, 1870-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011).

⁴ Dorothy Sue Cobble. *The Other Women's Movement, Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004),198-200; Vanessa May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-class Reform in New York, 1870-1940*.

⁵ "Meeting Notes" Series 3 Box1 Folder 11 in NCHE Records, 10. In these notes, Sloan says that she envisioned the NCHE as a membership organization similar in design to the NAACP or the League of Women Voters.

central leader of the Household Technicians of New York, explained that “The image and dignity of household employment will improve only after wages, hours, and working conditions have been raised sufficiently to reflect the value of the service performed.”⁷

Many labor and feminist scholars have begun to document the FSLA victory and the larger national movement led by the NCHE of the 1970s.⁸ But very little has been written on the local household workers movement in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. What did this local movement of household workers look like? In what ways was it a successful movement, and in what ways did it fail? What was the relationship between household workers and other major social movements at the time? What can we learn from studying this largely unexamined local movement which was led by working class Black women?

In an attempt to begin to fill in this historical gap, this thesis examines the Household Technicians of New York from 1960-1980, its leadership, and its goals within the context of the larger national movement. Affirming Premilla Nadasen’s claim that “domestic worker activists forged a feminist alliance of working women and housewives, professionals and domestics, to revalue women’s household labor and claim it as legitimate work,” I argue that Black household workers pushed for a coalition with the

⁶ Donna Allen, “Household Technicians’ Organize To Gain Equal Status As Workers” *In These Times*, August 10, 1977, 16. Accessed October 1, 2012, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/InTheseTimes-1977aug10-00016a02>.

⁷ McCormack, “Maids Want Household Technician Title.”

⁸ Cobble, “A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm”; Boris and Klein, “We Were The Invisible Workforce”; Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, “Domestic Workers Organize!” *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 11 (2008); Premilla Nadasen, “Power, Intimacy, Contestation” Dorothy Bolden and Domestic

larger women's movement.⁹ Household workers also sought out allies in the labor movement and civil rights movement, but saw the women's movement as particularly important. They strategically sought to create a coalition between household workers (mostly Black working class women) and employers (mostly white middle class women). Household workers challenged the "hegemonic feminism" of the time by attempting to discuss and dismantle class and race based tensions within the women's movement.¹⁰ Ultimately, white middle class women failed to see household workers as a part of their vision for liberation. Yet there were brief moments when household workers were able to push the larger women's movement to take up their struggle. These moments produced some concrete legislative victories in New York, and the rest of the country.

Looking at this local history reveals new dimensions of the household workers movement in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the topics, not fully covered in the national histories, is the tensions that arose internally within the movement of household workers. By exposing the tensions that existed within the movement in New York, it becomes clear that Black household workers were not a homogeneous group. Rather, household workers were a diverse group of women, who had different views on how household work could be improved. Another topic not fully explored in previous scholarly literature is that of alliances. By looking at the local movement, this thesis provides an intimate perspective on alliances, or lack of alliances, with the movement of household workers.

Worker Organizing in Atlanta in the 1960s" in *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, ed. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas (Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁹ Premilla Nadasen, "Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work, and the Fair Labor Standards Act," *The Journal of Policy History*, 24 (2012):83.

¹⁰ Chela Sandoval. "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders 10* (1991).

Review of Literature

Traditional civil rights, labor, and women's histories have overlooked household workers' organizing. Perhaps because, as Kimberly Springer argues, "Just as black feminists crafted their collective identity and organizations from between the cracks of civil rights and women's movements, studying these vital organizations have fallen between the cracks of these two movements in the scholarly literature."¹¹ More recent scholars of labor and women have shown that domestic workers have organized within traditional labor unions, and created their own organizational structures outside the traditional collective bargaining framework. These scholars challenge the commonly accepted notion that household workers are impossible to organize.

Domestic work was the largest occupation for women until the 1940s and continues to be an occupation performed mostly by women today.¹² Household work has long been considered a stigmatized form of labor. Many thought that this was because it is performed by women.¹³ But household work is a particularly racialized and gendered form of labor.¹⁴ In her pioneering book *Maid In America*, Mary Romero argues that, while capitalism made household work "women's work", intersections of race, class, and gender must be also be acknowledged. Romero points out that the exploitation of a

¹¹ Kimberly Springer, *Living for the revolution: Black feminist organizations, 1968-1980*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005, 2.

¹² Premilla Nadasen and Tiffany Williams, "Valuing Domestic Work." <http://bcw.barnard.edu/wp-content/nfs/reports/NFS5-Valuing-Domestic-Work.pdf> (accessed November 14, 2012); May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-class Reform in New York, 1870-1940*.

¹³ Donna Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Household workers, 1870-1940*. (New York: Praeger, 1988).

¹⁴ Eileen Boris, "The Racialized Gendered State: Constructions of Citizenship in the United States " *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 2 (1995): 60.

housewife is different from that of household worker, who is typically a poor woman of color.¹⁵

Until the early 1900s mostly foreign-born Irish and German women were hired to do housework. They were later replaced by Black women as the institution of slavery shaped domestic work significantly. Enslaved Black women performed domestic work without receiving compensation and were defined as submissive caregivers. The image of the “mammy”, an “obliging woman who places loyalty and subservience to her masters far above her own needs and those of her family” is one that was constantly conjured by white families.¹⁶ And it continues to be reproduced today.

Even after slavery officially ended, Black women were relegated to performing domestic work as they had no other options. In her seminal book, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985), Jacqueline Jones argues, “The fact that the overwhelming proportion of African American wives and mothers remained confined to domestic service served as a reminder that divisions of labor based on racial ideologies were national, and not regional systems of power.” For this reason Black women made up a majority of the household work occupation into the 1970s.

While white families often insisted their household workers were a “part of the family,” household workers have been repeatedly stigmatized as unskilled, untrustworthy, dirty, and sexually available.¹⁷ Because household work is performed in

¹⁵ Mary Romero, *Maid in The U.S.A.* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 28.

¹⁶ Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking In Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1860-1960.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present.* (New York: Basic, 1985); Tera Hunter, *To 'joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997).

intimate and private spaces, it has a distinct history of exploitation.¹⁸ Long after slavery, household workers tell stories of receiving little pay, no or few benefits, facing physical and sexual abuse, and being generally treated disrespectfully rather than “one of the family”, while also having to perform grueling and very intimate work.¹⁹ In addition to being disrespected and unfairly compensated for their labor, the state has repeatedly excluded household workers from federal and state labor protections, making household work particularly precarious and unregulated.

Nevertheless, just as there is a history of exploitation of household workers, there is also a history of household worker’s organizing collectively to protest low pay, no benefits, and disrespectful treatment. Rather than solely relying on labor unions and collective bargaining, Black women used resources in their own communities and institutions to fight for better pay, benefits, and protections.²⁰ They also strategically sought out allies to help them in their fight.

Challenging the Myth of the Unorganizable Worker

Much of the early scholarship on household workers organizing first established that household workers could organize. Donna Van Raaphorst *Union Maids Not Wanted* (1988) provides a history of domestic worker organizing. Raaphorst contends that domestic workers have been repeatedly left out of labor legislation and traditional labor unions, and also out of labor histories. She believes that the particular exclusion of

¹⁸ May, *Unprotected Labor*, 13.

¹⁹ Boris and Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, 2.

²⁰ Elisabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers and the Great Migration*. (New York: Kodansha International, 1996).

domestic work evolved from the fact that domestic labor was considered strictly women's work. While Raaphorst recognizes the gendered nature of housework, she lacks an examination of the intersections of race and class.

Informed by the Black feminist concept of multiple oppressions, later work provided an analysis of race and class, as much as gender.²¹ Tera Hunter's *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (1997) for example recognizes the centrality of legacy of the slavery and the stereotypes produced. Hunter revives a history of Black laundry workers who organized the Atlanta Washer Women's Strike in 1881. Hunter shows that when Black women were able to work out of white homes they were able to gain relative autonomy. This allowed them to create strong networks, have unity, and organize a massive strike in a highly contentious period.²² These women who organized themselves drew from their leadership experiences in churches, political groups, and labor unions.²³ Hunter reminds us that Black household workers have been fighting and organizing - even in a period that came only shortly after slavery was abolished.

The struggle for household workers is one that continued to look similar far after slavery ended. In the 1930s, domestic workers were excluded from New Deal legislation including minimum wage and social security protections. However, they continued to organize. For example, a group of household workers in New York created the Domestic

²¹ Kimberly Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43(1991); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

²² Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 63.

²³ Hunter, 75.

Workers Union in 1934.²⁴ Vanessa May's *Unprotected Labor Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940* (2010) looks at middle class women reforms efforts in conjunction with household workers organizing efforts in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. May argues that household workers were systematically excluded from labor legislation at the time, because of their race and class status and because middle class white women refused to see their home as a workplace. This resulted in domestic worker's concerns being left out, while the protection of middle class white homes became a central concern.

Another surge in domestic worker organizing occurred in the late 1960s, with the revival of the National Committee on Household Employment and its local affiliate household worker organization. A majority of the early scholarship on household worker organizing focused only on the South, and the period before WWII. Dorothy Sue Cobble, a labor historian who consistently challenges the notion of "the unorganizable" brings this history into the 1960s and 1970s. In "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm," (1999) Cobble illustrates that the 1970s were significant because it was the first time a national movement of household workers took shape. She begins to paint a picture of the larger national movement, but also the National Domestic Workers Union, led by Dorothy Bolden, and Bolden's "Maid's Day"; a day in which employers could nominate their maids. This local perspective reveals that, while the national movement pushed to get away from being treated as "one of the family," Bolden embraced notions of motherhood and being caretakers for the family.

²⁴ May, *Unprotected Labor*, 146.

Similarly, Premilla Nadasen in “Power, Intimacy, Contestation: Dorothy Bolden and Domestic Worker Organizing in Atlanta in the 1960s” in *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (2010) provides a case study of Dorothy Bolden and the Domestic Workers United based in Atlanta. Nadasen argues that the DWU not only promoted standards and pushed for legislation, but also attempted to professionalize the occupation. In “Domestic Workers Organize!” (2010), Premilla Nadasen and Eileen Boris provide a comprehensive history of domestic workers organizing starting with the “Washing Society” of 1881 to the Domestic Workers United of today. In their analysis, Nadasen and Boris make the vital claim that “Domestic workers have integrated an analysis of race, class, culture, and gender—a form of social justice feminism.”²⁵

The Difficulties of Organizing

In “Organizing the Unorganizable: Private Paid Household Workers and Approaches to Employee Representation” (1999), Peggie Smith concurs that unions have generally considered domestic workers “unorganizable”. Smith, and others, such as Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen, also recognize that household workers do face a multitude of challenges in organizing; more than any other occupation. Household workers are separated from each other, work in individual homes, and have little legal protections. Therefore, they face significant barriers to organizing. The job was also very individualizing, as household worker must seek employment and negotiate with employers on her own.

²⁵ Boris and Nadasen, “Domestic Workers Organize!”, 1.

In her case study of the National Domestic Workers Union in Atlanta, Premilla Nadasen writes “The traditional shop-floor model of union organizing with elected representatives serving as a bargaining agent was simply not an option for these workers. They were unable to shut down their workplaces with a sit-down strike as workers in large scale industry sometimes did.”²⁶ In order to organize, household workers had to use common spaces they shared. And even then, they still faced the dilemma of dealing with different employers; some worse than others.

Household workers also faced a lack of work options and fierce competition. Many women had no other means of employment and needed to support their families. This led to a highly competitive market for household workers. Even after the days of the “Bronx Slave Market” ended, household workers constantly had to decide what wages and conditions they were willing to settle for.²⁷ Even if household workers went to hiring halls and agencies, an underground market always existed. Many household workers felt that if they pushed an employer for better pay or treatment, there would always be another woman who was willing to work for less pay, less benefits, and deal with bad treatment. In addition to these struggles, household workers also had to work in very intimate settings, often acting as caregivers. This meant that going against an employer was not always an easy task.²⁸

Because household workers were working class women of color, they also lacked access to power and resources. This created real barriers to organizing. For example, the

²⁶ Nadasen, “Power, Intimacy and Contestation”, 206.

²⁷ Ella Baker and Marvel Cook, “The Bronx Slave Market,” *The Crisis* 42 (Fall 1935). The Bronx Slave Market was the term used for the street corner in the Bronx where domestic workers would line up and wait for employers to pick them up for a day of precarious work.

Domestic Workers Union in New York in the 1930s went into decline because they lacked funds. Household workers themselves did not have money to sustain the organization. While they reached out to other unions for help, they were continuously rejected. Ultimately, they were unable to find sufficient funding to maintain the organization.²⁹

The stigma attached to household work created yet another hurdle when trying to organize household workers. Creating a sense of community and of dignity was important in the struggle for household workers. Many authors describe that there was a particularly strong need for creating a sense of pride amongst the women before they could take on their employers. As Donna Van Raaphorst points out, “household labor could possess no dignity. Nor could the woman who performed this work – work devoid of skill, authority, and economic control – be worthy of considerable treatment.” This meant that organizers had to educate themselves and resist internalized notions of household work.

The Shape of Household Worker’s Resistance

Black household workers developed their own forms of resistance and organizing strategies shaped by their limitations. Because household workers have been so excluded from various political structures, they were “especially passionate in their politics” and “found interesting ways to organize their communities and resist oppression.”³⁰ Even in situations when Black women were not formally organized, subtle forms of resistance

²⁸ Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar. Parreñas. *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2010).

²⁹ May, *Unprotected Labor*, 164.

³⁰ Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 81.

such as decisions to quit jobs, taking things from their employer's house to use for themselves and their families, slacking off on the job, or even dancing after work. It is useful to look at not just official organizations or unions, but also to think about these more subtle forms of resistance, in which black women were able to take "control over their bodies, sexuality, and time."³¹

Rebecca Sharpless in *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, argues that we must look for household workers resistance even within conditions of domination. She even argues that Black women who faced sexual violence from white men, sometimes actually chose to go into relationships with white men in order to better their own lives. This is important because it recognizes that the choices of black women household workers were always made in a context of oppression. Drawing from Black feminist theory, Nadasen also contends that domestic workers resisted within a context of interlocking oppression, and within the limits of their occupation. These constraints shaped their methods.

Another form of early resistance, for example, can be seen in household workers attempt to change their status from "live in" workers to "live out" workers, an act that was meant to gain more autonomy.³² Or when black women took things from white homes to provide for their own families, this was another form of resistance.³³ Even the act of caring for their own family resisted the desire of white families to constantly be available to care for them.

³¹ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 171.

³² Clark Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*.

³³ Sharpless. *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 156.

Premilla Nadasen in “Power, Contestation, and Intimacy” describes “alternative mobilization strategies,” the methods that black household workers developed due to the conditions of their occupation. She is particularly interested in their use of public space and how they used their own community networks to their advantage. She contends that because these workers could not gather in the workplace, they used the home and community spaces to recruit, gather, and educate each other. Nadasen also points out that instead of having strikes, they trained individual domestic worker to negotiate with their own employers.³⁴ Black household workers were forced to create new organizing strategies due to limitations and exclusion from formal labor organizations.³⁵

With or Without Unions?

In, “Rethinking Troubled Relations Between Women and Unions: Craft Unionism and Female Activism”(1990), Dorothy Sue Cobble points out that much of the early feminist scholarship on trade unions denounced them as patriarchal institutions. This helped to dismantle the myth that women were not concerned with labor organizing. At the same time, she also recognized that domestic workers have worked within traditional labor unions.

Shireen Ally in “Caring about Care Workers: Organizing in the Female Shadow of Globalization” (2005) describes the differences between the “union model”, in which care workers attempt to form collectively bargaining units, and the “association model”, in which they formed different organizations. Both models have positive and negative

³⁴ Nadasen, “Power, Intimacy and Contestation”, 205.

³⁵ Shireen Ally, “Caring about Care Workers: Organizing in the Female Shadow of Globalization,” *Labour, Capital & Society* 38 (2005).

aspects.³⁶ The association model has been predominantly used by domestic workers because they have been excluded from labor legislation. Ally argues that it allows for more innovative organizing methods which fit the needs of the workers. While some unions shun these association models, or see them as a threat, she recognizes their strengths. Household workers, who choose to try to organize through a “union model”, challenge the notion that they are unorganizable, by demanding to be a part of the “traditional” labor movement.

In To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War (1997), Tera Hunter writes that, “strikes and formal unions were not the only tools of working-class resistance. Conventional strikes and trade unions, nonetheless, had their place.”³⁷ Hunter points out that the shape of household workers organizing took different forms. Household workers worked within more traditional union structures, but were not limited to them. At the beginning of the 1900’s white and black alliances in labor unions splintered, as many white workers began to side with middle and upper class whites. Even though black women were often excluded from unions “clandestine labor organizing among household workers was evident through the South during the war [WWI].”³⁸

While most traditional unions have failed to organize household workers and they rarely showed a strong interest in them, there were times when labor and household workers worked together. For example, the Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of

³⁶ Ally, “Caring about Care Workers: Organizing in the Female Shadow of Globalization”; Boris and Nadasen, “Domestic Workers Organize!”.

³⁷ Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 224.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the World, and more recently the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), have attempted to organize household workers.³⁹ And household workers also formed their own unions, such as the Domestic Workers Union of 1930s, even though they could not engage in collective bargaining. Other examples include the Domestic Workers Union in Atlanta in the 1960s, the Domestic Workers Association of CHIRLA in the 1990s, and Domestic Workers United in New York today.⁴⁰

Alliances

Household workers have sometimes found allies within labor organizations, civil rights organizations, and women's organizations. However, these allies were typically few and far between. Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein in "We Were the Invisible Workforce" (2005) explore the alliances between labor unions and care workers in the 1970s. They provide examples of how SEIU and AFSCME attempted to work with household workers. In general unions were really unprepared to organize household workers. Unions had to adapt to deal with the particular struggles that household workers face. In addition, Boris and Klein worry traditional labor unions "provide services rather than educators and mobilizers, rather than coming up with ways to redefine the work."⁴¹ Finally, historically racism and sexism continued to exist within the labor movement.

Dorothy Sue Cobble in "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm" introduces the idea that household workers in the 1970s worked with various feminist allies. Expanding on

³⁹ Donna Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Household workers, 1870-1940*. (New York: Praeger, 1988); Boris and Klein, "We Were the Invisible Workforce": Unionizing Home Care," in D.S. Cobble, *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*.

⁴⁰ Boris and Nadasen, "Domestic Workers Organize!": 413.

⁴¹ Boris and Klein, "We Were the Invisible Workforce": Unionizing Home Care," in D.S. Cobble, *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*, 193.

this, Premilla Nadasen in “Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work, and the Fair Labor Standards Act” explicitly addresses the issues of alliances. Nadasen argues that it was a strategy of the NCHE and the HTA to create coalitions with allies in the labor movement, civil rights movement, and the feminist movement. She argues that household workers framed the household workers struggle as a women’s struggle. Nadasen argues that these alliances allowed for victories such as the extensions of the FLSA. She does not discuss some of the tensions that arose with the labor movement, civil rights movement, and the women’s movement.

All of the scholarly literature clearly exhibits that household workers can and have organized. Black working class women in particular have long been a part of this struggle, and have resisted stereotypes, such as the “mammy”, since slavery. While organizing was difficult, household workers still found ways to resist exploitative conditions and fight for improvement. In fact, household workers produced different ways of organizing that challenge a typical ‘factory model’ of organizing, and when possible they even organized with the help of unions.⁴²

Works by Donna Van Raaphorst, Tera Hunter, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, and Rebecca Sharpless provide wonderful documentation of the experiences of the organizing efforts of domestic workers prior to the 1960s. More recent works by Dorothy Sue Cobble, Eileen Boris, and Premilla Nadasen bring this history into the second half of the 20th century and into the present. In addition, Premilla Nadasen and Vanessa May provide interesting and detailed case studies of local household worker movement, which provide

⁴² Dorothy Sue Cobble writes about the ‘factory model’ in “More Intimate Unions,” in *Intimate Labors: Care, Sex, and Domestic Work*. eds. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (Stanford University Press, 2010), 280-295.

different perspectives on the 1960s and 1970s and raise important new areas for research such as the relationship between domestic worker organizations and the larger middle class white women's movement.

The story of household worker organizing in New York from 1960 to the present has yet to be written – and working class Black women remain in the cracks of history.⁴³ While earlier literature introduces the issues of tensions and allies of the household workers movement, these topics have yet to be more fully explored. There are still many questions that have yet to be answered by scholars. Thus, this thesis asks: What was the vision of household workers in New York in the 1960s and 70s? And how did it compare to the larger national movement? What were the tensions, if any, within the movement of household workers? Who did household workers in New York create alliances? What were the strengths and tensions within these relationships?

Methodology

The primary research method used for this thesis is archival. Since most of the leaders of the Household Technicians of New York are no longer alive, and due to my own time limitations, I was not able to interview any of the women involved in the Household Technicians of New York. Fortunately, central leaders were interviewed before their passing. Carolyn Reed was interviewed in 1980. Geraldine Miller was interviewed in 2004. These interviews allowed me to see how these leaders understood

⁴³ Kimberly Springer describes the idea of 'politics in the cracks' in "The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations," *Meridians 1* (Spring 2001).

the household technicians, the national movement, and their relationship with their allies in other movements.

It was difficult to locate primary sources left behind by the Household Technicians of New York. Much of the literature produced by these household workers most likely remains in the possession of the household workers themselves and their families. Kimberly Springer argues that the histories of Black feminist organizations have been marginalized in academia, and physical records of these organizations have been disregarded.⁴⁴ This is absolutely true when it comes to the history of household worker organizations. For instance, I discovered the National Committee on Household Employments records, located at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site in Washington DC. While there, the archivist informed me that the NCHE records were once close to being thrown in the trash, but a Black feminist scholar found them and made sure they were maintained.

The NCHE records became one of my primary archival sources. They contained correspondences, meeting notes, posters, newspaper clippings, and recordings involving the Household Technicians of New York. I pulled out sources that specifically addressed the Household Technicians of New York. This, plus the NCHE Newsletter, and newspaper articles on the Household Technicians of New York allowed me to construct a local history, within the larger context of a national history. I narrowed my selection of sources to those that included quotes or short interviews with local leaders of the household technicians because I wanted to gain a sense of the movement from the

⁴⁴Kimberly Springer, *Living for the revolution: Black feminist organizations, 1968-1980*. (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 31.

perspective of local leaders. Because I wanted to get an understanding of the alliances that household technicians formed, I also looked for sources produced by allies that interacted with the household technicians. The Sarah Lawrence Women's Studies Department records, for example, provided insight on "The Future of Housework" conference organized by household workers and the leaders in the women's movement.

Using archival research methods has limitations. The archives I found for my research reflect only of a small amount of the literature produced during the 1960s and 70s. The data I have collected is in no way comprehensive. I recognize that because I have limited primary sources, my project and conclusions are also limited. Additionally, while many Black women's voices were becoming more and more present in society in 1960s and 1970s, they were still limited. It is important to recognize that Black household workers had limited access to power and resources: meaning, they had fewer opportunities for having their thoughts and actions were documented. Finally, because I was limited in both time and resources, I did not have the ability to conduct interview. Interviews with women who were household workers in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s would have added more complexity to the project.

I employ the theoretical and analytical insights of Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) in order to analyze the sources collected. Collins is useful in thinking about household workers organizing in New York for several reasons. First, she argues that Black women's oppression is intersectional. Black women experience face racism, sexism, and classism. This is important in understanding the context in which Black household workers organizations and their relationships with other movements took

place. Second, Black feminist thought takes the stance that working class Black women produce valid knowledge. This is important, because to the extent that I could I hope to privilege knowledge produced by the household workers themselves.

Finally, let me clarify the use of terms in this thesis. First, throughout the thesis I use the term “domestic worker” and “household worker” are used interchangeably. This is because they are both commonly used today by household workers themselves. Second, household workers in New York were made up of a diverse group of women, who had different politics, different goals, and different desires. In this project I refer to them often as a group. Third, there were white women and other women of color who were household workers at the time. I focus on Black household workers organizing because of my own interest in Black women’s history and because Black women were the leaders of the movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, “middle class white women” and “household employers” are also often simplified and referred to as a group, even though they too were diverse and had different goals and desires among themselves.

Household workers in the 1960s and 1970s sought to build coalitions across race, class and gender lines, especially in New York. They decided to work closely with some of the very women that employed them, in hopes of redefining the household worker. They believed that both the “household worker” and the “housewife” could struggle for dignity and respect as women. Even though household workers were repeatedly stigmatized, mistreated by employers, and ignored by the state, they maintained that household work could be performed with dignity.

Chapter 2 introduces the Household Technicians of America in New York: its origins and its leadership as well as the tensions that existed within the local movement. This chapter also provides some context by framing the movement in New York as a part of the nation movement led by the NCHE. Chapter 3 looks specifically at the vision of the Household Technicians of New York. The local household workers often had common strategies and goals to the NCHE. But looking at the local movement also highlights slight differences. Chapter 4 focuses on the household workers goal to create an alliance with the women's movement. It also explores the class and race based tensions within this alliance and how white middle class women abandoned the fight for the household worker. Chapter 5 concludes by contemplating what can learned by looking at the successes and failures of the Household Technicians of New York.

Chapter 2

The Household Technicians of New York

“...if you still want an underclass to do your bidding, you had better start building robots, because we refuse to play the part any longer. We refuse to be your mammies, nannies, aunties, uncles, girls and handmaidens any longer. What we will be are skilled, professional household technicians, childcare specialists, caterers, cooks and health aids with the same rights and benefits and the respect other workers receive throughout the nation.”⁴⁵

–Edith Sloan, NCHE

In 1971, Edith Barksdale Sloan, director of the National Committee on Household Employment at that time, and a black feminist, addressed a crowd of household workers from around the country, at one of the first national conferences for household workers. Her speech spoke to a radical shift in the politics of the NCHE, which was originally led largely by middle class employers who wanted to find a way to keep their homes clean and safe from the problems of the outside world.⁴⁶ However, Sloan’s words express the newly revived national movement of household workers which was directed to working class Black women. It explicitly addressed the racist and sexist legacy of household work in the U.S. Sloan explicitly described this shift as moving from “employers (who wanted ‘better’ maids)” and a “program ... to train welfare mothers and make them economically

⁴⁵ Edith Sloan, “Keynote Address” in *NCHE News* Volume 2 Number 7 July 1971. NY Public Library.

⁴⁶ Eileen Boris, and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. “Take Us Out of Slavery”. May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-class Reform in New York, 1870-1940*; Dorothy Sue Cobble, “More

independent” to a membership of domestics dedicated to “winning good wages and benefits, raising consciousness and educating consumers of domestic services.”⁴⁷ Both the election of Edith Barksdale Sloan as the director in 1969, and the influence of the growing women’s and civil rights movements at the time, account for these changes.

The NCHE was funded primarily by a grant from the Ford Foundation starting in 1969. Like many other Black women’s organizations, sustaining funding was an ongoing issue, and would eventually lead to the collapse of the NCHE.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, by 1971 NCHE had members from multiple states, including Alabama, California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia - demonstrating the influence that the NCHE maintained nationally. Even before NCHE membership expanded, there had already been local household worker movements growing around the country.

In order to tell the history of household workers organizing in New York City, one must begin with the national movement led by the NCHE. The NCHE sparked local movements across the country and engaged with local household worker activists. In New York, the NCHE ignited a group of household workers sick and tired of dealing with precarious work, low pay, no fringe benefits, and were ready to demand change. The NCHE hoped to be the center of a movement that would professionalize the occupation and also change the standards for household work. Edith Sloan even envisioned the NCHE as the beginning of a movement that would eventually lead to the formation of a

Intimate Unions”, in *Intimate Labors*, eds. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (Stanford Press, 2010), 280-295.

⁴⁷ Eileen Boris, and Jennifer Klein, “Take Us Out of Slavery”.

⁴⁸ Springer explains that black feminist organizations in the 1970s had a difficult time finding resources to sustain their organizations.

household worker's union. While many still thought organizing household workers impossible in the 1970s, the leadership of the NCHE believed that standards could be changed and individual contracts could be written.

In 1971 the NCHE set up the Household Technicians of America, which was intended to focus specifically on supporting local chapters across the country in their fight to gain legal protections for household workers and enforcement of labor law and to educate employers about standards. The HTA provided local household workers with information on how to start your own local association, leaflets to hand out, sample contracts to provide employers, as well as other materials and resources. The HTA chapters organized on a local level, pushing for better standards state-by-state. They endorsed a code of standards, to ensure good wages, benefits, and protections for household workers. In the process the HTA effectively bolstered a sense of dignity and pride for household workers involved.⁴⁹

By 1974 the HTA had 37 local associations and around 25,000 members.⁵⁰ Some of the strongest and most active local associations included the Household Technicians in Warren, Ohio, led by Geneva Reid and the Household Worker's Organization Inc. of Detroit, Michigan led by Mary McClendon.⁵¹ The Household Technicians of New York, led by Geraldine Miller and Carolyn Reed, were also amongst the most active. Both Miller and Reed were highly involved in the larger national movement. Each served on

⁴⁹ Jane See White. "Maid or Household Technician." *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 17, 1978. Accessed October 1, 2012. <http://news.google.com/newspapers>.

⁵⁰ Series 3 Box 1 Folder 11 in NCHE Records.

⁵¹ Ron Chernow, "All In A Days Work: Housekeepers, Mostly Black Women, Are The Last Frontier of Labor Organizing." *Mother Jones*. August 1976. Accessed September 1, 2012. <http://books.google.com/books>.

committees of the national HTA, and Reed would go on to serve as the head of the NCHE in 1980.⁵²

The NCHE was made up of mostly middle class staff members; people with various backgrounds in the women's movement and civil rights movement. Although Edith Sloan often spoke as if she was a household worker, she had never actually done household labor. Josephine Hulett, sometimes called "Jo Hulett," on the other hand, was one of the few household workers within the NCHE. Hulett handled on the ground organizing and traveling all over the country and talked to household workers about how they could organize themselves and demand good wages, benefits, and respect. Interestingly, Hulett was one of the people within the NCHE who was, "wary about household workers gaining control of the NCHE Board", claiming that there was a "self-destruct tendency among the workers (subconscious or otherwise)."⁵³ She feared that the organization would be torn apart by "internal warfare" if household workers dominated the NCHE. Edith Sloan supported Hulett, stating "I bow to her judgment in this case as she has daily contact with the groups and is more aware of their peculiar problems, and, also because I know of the many "power struggles" and discord within some of the organizations."⁵⁴ Whether or not Hulett and Sloan were right about having household workers run the NCHE board, they were cognizant of disagreements that took place within local groups. In fact, they could have been describing the Household Technicians of New York; an organization with its share of "power struggles".

⁵² Linda Greenhouse, "Assembly Is Urged to Allow Domestics To Organize and Bargain Collectively"; Gail Sheehy, "Hers" *New York Times*, Jan 17, 1980. Accessed September 1, 2012. <http://news.google.com/newspapers>.

⁵³ Series 3 Box 1 Folder 11 in NCHE Records, 10.

A Movement Starts in New York City

In 1971 Geraldine Miller, a household worker from the Bronx, had a conversation with another household worker while traveling home from work one day. This worker raised the idea of household workers having “fringe benefits.” According to Miller, “those two words did it...I wanted it, and I wanted it with a passion.”⁵⁵ Miller decided to gather a group of household workers in the Bronx to attend one of the first NCHE conferences, held in Washington DC. After pushing the Bronx Urban League, Miller was able to get funds to attend the conference.⁵⁶ Miller explained that when she attended the conference she began to feel a sense of pride being around so many household workers who had had similar experiences to her. When Miller returned to New York, set on getting “fringe benefits” and much more, she founded the Household Technicians of New York.

Inspired by the HTA, Miller decided to use the term “household technician”. She said that it was fitting because she and other household workers were skilled and could do almost anything on the job. Miller said, “we felt as though technicians were people that did something and were supposed to be great at it, and we felt as though that we household workers were great people as technicians.”⁵⁷ When asked how she felt about the title “domestic,” Miller responded, “I can’t tolerate that word.”⁵⁸ Household workers

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Geraldine Miller, interview by Loretta Ross. Transcript of video recording, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Northampton, MA, October 14, 2004: 26.

⁵⁶ Miller, Interview; *NCHE News* Volume 2 Number 7.

⁵⁷ Miller, Interview, 30.

⁵⁸ Francis Clines, “Cleaning Women: Why Sit and Cry?” *New York Times* Jun 22, 1978. Accessed September 1, 2012. http://spiderbites.nytimes.com/pay_1978/articles_1978_06_00001.html.

decision to define themselves as technicians was a major act of resistance that challenged long-lasting stereotypes of Black women as servants.

Miller and other local household worker activists drew ideas and resources from the HTA and the NCHE. Jo Hulett would make a visit to the newly formed Bronx Household Technicians in 1971 to share information.⁵⁹ However, on the local level, it was clear that household workers made the decisions about what the household technicians would do and would not do. Miller's organization would eventually change its title, as other local household technician organizations formed and her local would be referred to as the "Bronx Household Technicians".

That same year, in April of 1971, the NCHE made a presentation in Harlem, NY. One of the household workers who attended this meeting was Carolyn Reed. Reed was a local Harlemitte who saw a NCHE ad in the *Amsterdam News* and felt that the meeting would address her existing desire to improve the conditions of household labor.⁶⁰ Reed describes being pulled in by Jo Hulett's speech in particular. Reed identified with Hulett, who was a household worker who had gone on to organize with the NCHE. Interestingly, Reed noted that she was not particularly impressed with Edith Sloan and not identify with her as strongly. Perhaps because Sloan was a middle class Black woman.⁶¹

After this introduction to the NCHE, Reed decided to attend a meeting of the Household Technicians that Geraldine Miller had formed about three months earlier. At the first meeting she attended, the members immediately suggested that Reed take on a

⁵⁹ *NCHE News* Volume 2 Number 4.

⁶⁰ Carolyn Reed, Interview by Martha Sandlin. Oral History Research Office Collection. Columbia University Oral History Collection. New York, NY, 1981.

leadership position. It seems fitting that Reed would be asked to take on such a role, as most accounts of Reed describe her as having an incredibly strong presence. According to Geraldine Miller, who found her own leadership in question, Carolyn Reed:

worked for a very rich family...and my whole group decided she should be the next president, so they tried to impeach me. I hadn't done anything, but they tried to get rid of me, and that's when I made the whole statement that I, Geraldine Miller, am the founder of the Household Technicians. Because they tried to give her the foundership, and I just made up my mind at that time, that I wasn't giving nothing away, you know.⁶²

At this meeting, an ongoing internal tension amongst the household technicians in New York City was born. Eventually, Reed would lead her own separate local group, sometimes called the "Progressive Household Technicians."⁶³ Still, Miller and Reed frequently worked together, and they would both identify as part of the Household Technicians of Greater New York. Because the Household Technicians of New York were known by many different names, this could lead to some confusion for anyone looking at the records of the organizations. Newspaper articles in the 1970s also add to the confusion over names, as they referred to the household technicians under different names. One of these variations was, "household technician union", although they were never formally a union that collectively bargained.⁶⁴ However, it seems that they all

⁶¹ Reed, Interview, 31.

⁶² Miller, Interview, 55.

⁶³ "NCHE Agenda" in Series 1 Box 1 Folder 5, NCHE Records.

⁶⁴ For example of this reference, see Gail Sheehy "Hers: Carolyn Reed She's Trying to Destroy The Superwoman Myth." *New York Times*. January 17, 1980, C2.

identified as a part of the national HTA. Reed reiterates Miller's feelings on the household technician title, saying "We call our group Household Technicians of America because we want to get away from servant, maid and domestic."⁶⁵

Leaders of the Movement

Regardless of their personal disagreement, Geraldine Miller and Carolyn Reed were both incredible leaders of the household workers movement in New York City. They can both be seen as "founders" and "presidents" of the Household Technicians in New York City. In fact, part of what makes the history of the local movement of household workers in New York stand out, is that it had somewhat exceptional leadership. The story of the household technicians told in this thesis is very much based on the accounts of Miller and Reed. Both women lived rather remarkable lives. Each had limited formal education, worked as household workers for most of their lives, and then went on to become leaders of the household workers movement as well as lifelong Black feminist activists in New York.

Geraldine Miller (1920 - 2005)



Figure 1⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Reed, Interview, 1.

Geraldine Miller was born in Sabetha, Kansas in 1920. According to Miller, both her mother and grandmother were household workers who didn't tolerate disrespect. Miller claimed that being raised by tough women allowed her to develop a tough personality, and inspired her to form the Household Technicians. Miller's mother died when she was a teen, an event she described as having a profound effect on her life. She did not graduate from high school, but moved around different towns taking different jobs, such as waitressing and operating an elevator in a hotel. Miller was married for two years of her life, but left her husband because he was abusive to her. In the 1950s she moved by herself to New Jersey to start a new life on the east coast and proceeded to work a variety household work jobs in New Jersey and New York.⁶⁷

After forming the Household Technicians of New York in the 1971, Miller would remain an active participant in the NCHE. She was involved in helping to bring household workers under the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1974, as well as passing New York State Assemblyman Seymour Posner's bill in 1977 that allowed some household workers to collectively bargain in the state.⁶⁸ Miller even traveled across the world to Germany on behalf of NCHE to participate in a conference on women. Miller went on to work with National Congress of Neighborhood Women in 1974. In 1981, she became

⁶⁶ National Organization for Women. "In Memoriam: Geraldine Miller", <http://www2.now.org/organization/conference/2004/speakers.html> (accessed November 1, 2012).

⁶⁷ Miller, Interview, 19-20.

⁶⁸ Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, "Take Us Out of Slavery" in *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State*, ed. Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein/ (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

president.⁶⁹ Later she also ran a workshop called Project Open Doors that connected the concerns of homemakers and household workers.

Miller believed strongly in the potential of the women's movement. At the same time, she was not afraid to challenge or critique white feminists. For example, Miller once described challenging a white feminist professor at a conference:

I told her, I said, "What have you done with your theory?" You know, having a theory and doing something with it are two different things... It's the thinking about it, the theory, putting it down on paper, and doing nothing about it means nothing. But having a theory and then trying to see how it will work is different.

Miller recognized that even though she did not have formal education, she had knowledge developed out of lived experience. And she was willing to teach the women's movement something about working class Black women. In 1974 Miller became involved with the National Organization for Women and founded Bronx NOW, which was dedicated to ending racism within the women's movement. If asked, Miller would identify herself as a "feminist" and said that she never hesitated to adopt the title.⁷⁰

Carolyn Reed (1940 - 1993)

⁶⁹ Miller, Interview, 39.

⁷⁰ Miller, Interview, 47.

Figure 2 ⁷¹

Born in 1940 in Rockaway New York, Carolyn Reed was abandoned by her parents at birth. She was taken to live in South Carolina with a family friend. Carolyn described having had a troubled childhood because she said she was constantly reminded that her parents did not want her. This abandonment, Reed believed, caused her to develop into a very independent and strong woman. Reed moved north as a teenager to become a household worker to raise money to continue her education after completing high school. In the first job she took, posted as “mother’s helper,” she learned to take care of children, cook, clean, and other skills.⁷² She held many house work positions thereafter. While Reed always recognized that both racism and sexism shaped her career options, she also had a pride for her work. Reed claimed that, “I could be my own boss, even though there was someone else paying you. Literally, most household workers are their own bosses. And I think that’s probably what I liked most.”⁷³

Reed became involved with the NCHE in 1971, and remained active in organizing and fighting for household workers for the rest of her live. Reed’s employer for most of

⁷¹ Chernow, Ron. "All In A Days Work: Housekeepers, Mostly Black Women, Are The Last Frontier of Labor Organizing."

⁷² Reed, Interview, 13.

the years of her life, the Clayburgs, who lived on the upper east side, supported her involvement in the HTA, and worked out schedule so that she could remain active (she even took a sabbatical to serve on the NCHE). Reed and her husband lived in their own apartment in the Clayburg's basement across the street from Gloria Steinem, who would become her friend and ally in the fight for dignity for housework. Reed developed many feminist allies through her work, and even helped organize a conference in 1977 with Gerda Lerner of Sarah Lawrence Women's Studies Program titled, "The Future of Housework: The Role of the Housewife and Sharing Arrangements for Child Care", which was held in Harlem.⁷⁴ The conference brought household workers and employers of household workers together.

In addition to being active in the fight for protection under federal and state labor laws, Reed also served as a member and Chair of the New York Women's Political Caucus sometimes in the late 70s. Like Miller, Reed defined herself as a "feminist".⁷⁵ Reed was invited to serve on the National Advisory Committee for Women under President Carter in 1979. However she and others resigned after Senator Bella Abzug, an ally of household workers, was fired. Reed was disillusioned with President Carter prior to this as well, saying that the committee was, "set up to fail".⁷⁶ Finally, Reed became the Executive Director of the NCHE under the National Urban League, in 1980. She always

⁷³ Reed, Interview, 10.

⁷⁴ "The Future of Housework: The Role of the Housewife and Sharing Arrangements for Child Care." in the Women's History Graduate Program Records, 1968-present. Sarah Lawrence College Archives.

⁷⁵ Sam Roberts, "One who shaped domestic issues." *New York Times* April 12, 1993. Accessed September 1, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/12/nyregion/metro-matters-one-who-shaped-domestic-issues.html>.

⁷⁶ Reed, Interview, 51; Unknown, "In Washington: Who Left, Who Stayed." *New York Times* January 20, 1979, 2.

said, despite her many leadership positions, she would rather be a household worker than be in a position of leadership.⁷⁷

Household Technicians of New York Take Form

One of the first events of the Household Technicians of New York was a large meeting at the Riverside Church in 1971. Reed, who already attended the church, was able to get the space for free. It was Reed's idea to have a "luncheon" in which household workers and their employers would be invited. They asked Eleanor Holmes Norton, the city Human Rights Commissioner, who became a strong advocate for household workers, to be the keynote speaker.⁷⁸ There were 180 people in attendance at the luncheon, but only one employer actually attended. Reed said most women probably weren't surprised by this low turnout on behalf of employers because the other women had already been exposed to the difficulties of organizing events. Reed, on the other hand, was new to the whole thing. After that first meeting the group would enhance their skills and focus on educating both household workers and employers.

The organization met regularly in churches and sometimes in women's homes, mostly in Harlem.⁷⁹ They discussed campaigns going on in the national movement, but they also took time to talk about their daily lives, and vented about poor work conditions. They controlled these meeting spaces. Although others were welcome, it was about create a space where household workers could express frustration and come up with ideas on how to push employers for better conditions. Later, Carolyn Reed gained a reputation as a

⁷⁷ Chernow, "All In A Days Work: Housekeepers, Mostly Black Women, Are The Last Frontier of Labor Organizing."

⁷⁸ Reed, Interview, 33.

good organizer. One HTA member described Reed as having “wit, cunning, and chutzpah.”⁸⁰ Reed explained that she would go to “church groups, the women’s groups, and the civil rights groups” as well as parks, buses, and supermarkets, to try to convince household workers that they could make demands for better conditions if they organized with the household technicians.

Reed expressed that many of the women she encountered were mistrusting of the household technicians, or were mostly concerned with supporting a family. These women were working in situations of great competitiveness. Many felt there were always women willing to work for less than her, so they had to do anything they could to keep their job. Joining an organization made up of household workers who were demanding better pay, benefits, and treatment seemed like too bold of a step. Some women were also wary of the household technicians because they associated the technicians with traditional unionism, which many saw as white male organizations. As Reed said, “what people see are the Teamsters Union, or... They see the rip-off. They don’t see the positive things that unions did. If it had not been for unionizing in this country, we would have a royal class.”⁸¹

Another difficulty in recruiting household workers was that many felt intimate ties to the families they worked for and cared for, making it difficult to make demands. Geraldine Miller herself once described working for a family, saying, “The baby’s name was Mark and he was beautiful” and that there was “no way to avoid mixing

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Chernow, "All In A Days Work: Housekeepers, Mostly Black Women, Are The Last Frontier of Labor Organizing."

⁸¹ Reed, Interview, 44.

the emotions when housework is your profession.”⁸² Carolyn Reed combatted all of these concerns using her strong ability to start up a conversation. She discussed what it meant to be a household technician; not a maid. The latter had no rights. Reed also stressed that she was a member of many of the same community institutions as other black women. As a result of good organizing skills, the Household Technicians of New York grew from having a few hundred members, to claiming almost a thousand by the mid-70s.⁸³ The organization kept close ties with the NCHE and its leadership and it also began to build alliances with local politicians and activists from different movements.

Tensions Within The Household Workers Movement

As with any movement there were disagreements. Tensions existed between household workers within New York as well as between the local chapters of the HTA and the NCHE. Tensions among household workers in New York existed in part because they had different goals, did different kinds of household work, and had different needs whether it be supporting a family or living alone with an employer. Tensions between the national and local chapter may have been an outcome of a diverse group of people from different backgrounds working together, with the national leaders being mostly comprised of middle class activists, and local leaders being working class household workers.⁸⁴ There were also greater struggles and tensions between household workers and the civil rights movement, women’s movement, and labor movement, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁸² Clines, “Cleaning Women: Why Sit and Cry?”.

⁸³ Leslie Maitland, “They Still Call Us Girl.” *New York Times* February 15, 1976.

One of the tensions within the movement in New York City has already been noted: the rocky relationship between Geraldine Miller and Carolyn Reed. Although it is not clear what caused divisions between them. Some of the friction was their struggle over the leadership of the household technicians. Miller believed that the tension arose because she was a “day worker” and Reed was a “live in” household worker. Reed never commented on this fact. Whether this was the cause of their differences or not, it speaks to a larger issue that divided household workers: differences in the work they did and the status attached to these differences. Miller describes a hierarchy of household work, explaining that,

It’s like if you were a caterer that gave you a little more status. If you were considered a cook, that gave you a status. If you were just a cleaning person, that put you down below the others. So I was one of those that didn’t always cook in the home. I would be the cleaner. And if I was doing it by the day, instead of by the week, then that would lower my status. So, I’m the one with the lowest status of the whole group that I put together, and they tried to hand me my head almost every time we met...So I ended up with half elites and half just plain workers and the elites really and truly were very hard to deal with. Like the one woman said, “You can’t be our founder”.⁸⁵

Miller’s quote reveals the divisions amongst household themselves. These divisions may have had roots going all the way back to the division of labor during slavery. This serves

⁸⁴ Boris and Klein suggest that mixed class backgrounds was one cause of tension within the organization in “We Were The Invisible Workforce: Unionizing Home Care” In *Sex of Class*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble.

⁸⁵ Miller, Interview, 28-29.

as a reminder that household workers were not a homogenous group, and that they performed many different forms of labor. Furthermore, these divisions added yet another layer of difficulty to organizing.

In addition to the tensions amongst household workers involved in activist organizations such as the Household Technicians of New York, there was also a larger debate that took place among household workers in New York. In 1978 an article titled “Maid or Technician” introduced two competing images of household workers. One was Carolyn Reed, who chose the household technician title. The other image was of a woman named Mary Berry. Berry marketed herself as a mammy type figure that she named “Aunt Sally”, seen in the image below.



Figure 3⁸⁶

In this, Berry markets herself, saying that she is able to work harder than other household workers. Reed was surprised when she first saw the “Aunt Sally” ad. “I thought, “My God, another white woman. What are they going to do next? It hit me in the gut when I learned Aunt Sally was a black woman.”⁸⁷ Reed was shocked to find that a black household worker would be willing to market herself as “the mammy”.

While the article simply says that Reed and Berry have differing approaches to business, there is much more going on in these two competing images of household workers. Berry offers the promise of playing the role of the submissive black woman, reproducing an image from slavery, because she is aware that this is what white

⁸⁶ Jane See White, “Maid or Household Technician.”

⁸⁷ Ibid.

employers prefer. It's interesting that even in 1978 images such as these were still being reproduced. It was exactly the kind of stereotype that Reed is trying to get away from. Berry explained her choice by notion her two children and how "Aunt Sally" gave her a competitive edge. This is an indication that times were hard for household workers and that there was a highly competitive market. But in spite of these conditions, Reed believed that household workers could still demand good pay and benefits without sacrificing dignity. This local debate reveals that household workers attempting to organize had to work within a context of competition that did not lend itself to collective organizing. Many black women were trying support themselves and their families. It also shows that not all household workers believed that professionalizing the occupation would help. They needed a secure job to improve their living standards.

Chapter 3

Strategies and Goals of the Household Technicians

The goals of the NCHE were once briefly summed up as “the Three P’s: pay, protection, and professionalism.”⁸⁸ The struggle for all three can be seen in the fight to change the FLSA to include household workers, the promotion of a “code of standards,” and in efforts to unionize household workers. Professionalization, however, was probably one of the most explicitly discussed goals of the movement. The NCHE sought to redefine the “domestic” as the “household technician”. They did this through education for both household workers and employers. Many saw issues of pay and protection and professionalization as directly connected. Trainings for household workers, as well as support of local household worker agencies, was pushed by the NCHE, as they sought to satisfy employers, by saying they could provide quality and reliable employees.

The vision of change for household workers in New York greatly resembled the vision at the national level. However, there were moments when they seemed to differ slightly. On the issue of unionization, for example, local leaders parted ways from the national movement. While local leaders supported the idea of collective bargaining for household workers, they stressed that they wanted to maintain autonomy from the established labor movement. The local movement also reveals different goals and strategies that the national movement did not emphasize. One of these goals was the creation of worker cooperatives, a goal not widely discussed by the NCHE.

Household Technicians of New York Join National Struggle

Since there were no actual laws in place to guarantee household workers any wages or benefits, they were left on their own to ask employers for whatever they could get. This is why household workers decided to create a “Code of Standards”, which they would use to promote living wages and protections. In the Household Technicians of Greater New York Code of Standards one paragraph read,

Because the image and dignity of household employment will improve only after wages, hours and working conditions have been raised sufficiently to reflect the value of the service performed. To assist in developing a viable and responsible business relationship between household worker and her employer.⁸⁹

Within the Code of Standards there were sections titled wages, hours, social security, sick leave, vacations, holidays, and working relationships. For wages, they demanded that the minimum wage be paid, with the cost of living kept in mind, and that jobs required training, the worker should receive higher pay. It also demanded overtime for over 8 hours in a day as well as a 40 hour work week. They also asked that employers report payment to the government in order for the worker to receive social security. There were some differences in demands depending on whether the household worker was a live-in employee or a day worker. Live-in workers receive, for example, a minimum of 6 sick days a year, and 1 paid vacation day for each 6 months worked, and a minimum of 8 paid holidays, while “day workers”, or an employee that worked at least one day a week, at least 1 day a week, received one sick day a year, one paid vacation day every 6 months,

⁸⁸ *NCHC News* Volume 2 Number 7.

and 1 paid holiday. The Code of Standards also included respectful treatment and a dignified work environment.

Still, the NCHE and the Household Technicians knew that a “Code of Standards” was not enough to produce meaningful change. They also needed to have the backing of the state by gaining the inclusion of household work in labor laws. Therefore, they focused on the Fair Labor Standards Act to include household workers. This effort started in the early 1970s. In 1972 the idea was proposed, but failed.⁹⁰

Interestingly, in 1971 New York was actually one of the few states that did include household workers in their minimum wage laws. Wisconsin and Massachusetts did so as well. These were all highly unionized democratic leaning states. New York was a central location for domestic work. It was also known for having better wages. This did not mean that employers always complied with the laws, or that household workers were content. For this reason, leaders such as Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller were both involved in the struggle for the FLSA, possibly because they felt that any improvement for household workers in the country would help to gain them respect and better wages on a local level. On a national level, the NCHE would push for the inclusion of household workers, attending congressional hearings in 1971 and 1973⁹¹.

In order to pass legislation, the NCHE and Household Technicians of New York knew that they would have to build alliances with political figures. One of the most notable allies was New York Representative Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to

⁸⁹ “Code of Standards” Series 1 Box 1 Folder 6 in NCHE Records.

⁹⁰ Ronald Sullivan, “To Domestics, a Minimum Wage Is a Raise.” *New York Times*. June 6, 1973.

be elected to Congress, who worked with NCHE as well as the New York Household Workers to pass supportive legislation. Chisholm attended the NCHE Conference in 1971 and addressed household workers, saying that “We want our piece of the American Dream”.⁹² Another supportive political figure was Bella Abzug, a New York State Congresswoman, who was friends with both Geraldine and Carolyn, and would later serve on Carter’s committee with Carolyn. In addition to political supporters, they also reached out to women’s organizations and civil rights organization for support.

In 1974 the FLSA finally included household workers, and for the first time household workers would be bumped up to the minimum wage of \$1.90. However, it was not a victory for all, because not all domestic workers were covered: babysitters and caretakers of the sick and elderly were excluded. Some household workers expressed concern that because of the new law, their employers might fire them because they did not want to pay the minimum wage.⁹³ Immediately after the passage of the law, the NCHE put together informational leaflets that would be distributed to the local associations. The leaflet provided information for employers so that they could comply by the law⁹⁴. The passage of the FLSA was also a victory because household workers around the country felt validated by being included in the FLSA. It only helped to strengthen the movement nationally and locally. Always underlying the decisions of the Household Technicians was an idea that household workers would feel dignified with their occupation, while also bettering their actual living conditions.

⁹¹ Dorothy Sue Cobble, “More Intimate Unions” in *Intimate Labors*, eds. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (Stanford University Press, 2010), 200.

⁹² *NCHE News* Volume 2 Number 7.

⁹³ Series 4 Box 2 Folder 8 in NCHE Records.

Fighting For Local Legislation

In 1974, Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller began working with State Assemblymen Seymour Posner of the Bronx, to pass legislation that would allow household workers to collectively bargain in New York State under the State Labor Relations Act. Assemblyman Posner, a liberal democrat, had formerly worked with AFSCME and was a supporter of household workers. Posner argued that, “Sometimes the same people clean business establishments or schools and also clean homes for the same contracting firm. When they clean the former, they have collective bargaining rights; when they clean homes, they do not.”⁹⁵ The proposed bill was limited in possibility, because if passed, it would only cover women who worked in cleaning firms or agencies. The household technicians supported it however because they saw it as being one step closer to having representation in labor legislation and gaining respect and dignity that other occupations had. Advocates—such as the A. Philip Randolph Institute (led by Bayard Rustin), the Urban League, the NAACP, the American Jewish Congress, and NCHE supported Posner’s bill. The bill received support from National Organization for Women New York and The New York State Women’s Political Caucus as the household technicians reached out to them asking for their support.⁹⁶ Other groups such as the “NAACP, American Jewish Congress, and NCHE” also joined in support of the bill.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Series 3 Box1 F 12 in NCHE Records

⁹⁵ Boris and Klein, “We Were The Invisible Workforce: Unionizing Home Care” In *Sex of Class*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble, 137.

⁹⁶ Linda Greenhouse, "Assembly Is Urged to Allow Household workers to Organize and Bargain Collectively."

⁹⁷ Boris and Klein, “We Were The Invisible Workforce: Unionizing Home Care” In *Sex of Class*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble, 184.

After a long struggle, and many revisions, Posner's bill was finally passed in 1977, making New York's legal protection of household workers rare.

Educating Household Workers and Employers

In addition to passing labor legislation, the local household technicians sought to professionalize the occupation, just as the NCHE had waged on national level. One of the ways that they did this was by offering training. Geraldine Miller, for example, was a big proponent of teaching a younger generation of household workers skills that she had learned while working. At their monthly meetings, the Household Technicians of Greater New York would offer to teach different skills, such as sewing, knitting, or cooking. Another way that the NCHE promoted professionalization was by providing literature for employers and the public. This literature would focus partially on the harsh facts of household employment, like low wages and no fringe benefits, but would also place great emphasis on the skilled nature of the work, and the pride that many household technicians took in doing their work well.⁹⁸ On the local level as well, Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller tried to get as much media attention as possible, and talk about the skilled nature of their work, and why they claimed the name "household technician".

Education and training for household workers themselves was often supported by the NCHE and the local NY Chapter of the HTA in an attempt to build support among employers. Reed and others understood that they had to be incredibly skilled, if they were demanding that they no longer be seen as "maids", but "household technicians". In a film put out by the NCHE, a household worker talked about how she had no incentive to stay

⁹⁸ "NCHE Film" Series 6 Box 1 Folder 1 in NCHE Records.

at a job, if she had little pay and benefits. Reed often reiterated this idea, and stressed that the relationship between an employer and employee had to be two way street. For example she pushed the code of standards, saying that “It’s advantageous for both employer and employee, and basically just a matter of good common sense.”⁹⁹ Yet she stressed that household workers had to have incentives and to be respected in order for them to provide skilled work; it could not simply be that an employer wanted great service but wasn’t willing to pay for.¹⁰⁰ In addition to educating household workers on how to perform their duties, the New York Household Technicians stressed educating women about the possibility of having better conditions as household workers.

Household workers in New York wanted to make sure they could educate their employers. Some were lucky enough to have employers like Reed, who were willing to support a movement of household workers, and to create contracts, however, many were not so lucky. The HTA and NCHE provided many materials, such as pamphlets as well as a film that household technicians could use to teach their employers. The NCHE launched various campaigns where they reached out to employers to educate them about their legal requirements as an employer of a household worker, as well as what the NCHE hoped they would in addition to the legal minimums. The following sticker is an example of an NCHE campaign to educate employers about fair labor standards.

⁹⁹ Deborah Rankin, “Domestic Workers: Pay Problems” *New York Times* April 8, 1982. Accessed September 1, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/08/garden/domestic-workers-pay-problems.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Chernow. "All In A Days Work: Housekeepers, Mostly Black Women, Are The Last Frontier of Labor Organizing."

**Stick up for
Fair Labor Standards**

Employers who observe fair labor standards in private household employment can demonstrate their commitment to fair and equal employment standards by displaying the NCHE campaign sticker on a window or door of their homes.

By doing so, employers demonstrate their support of NCHE and its national campaign to ensure the rights and working benefits of private household employees.

**Help us achieve
Fair Labor Standards in
Private Household Employment**

NCHE believes that professional dignity for the household worker will only be achieved through compliance with the laws which apply to the occupation, and through the adoption of certain standards which reflect the value of services performed by the household employee. NCHE is the only national organization working to eliminate the problems of private household employment. Through organization, public information and training programs, NCHE is determined to improve the conditions of household employment and to win the respect and dignity workers deserve.

**This is a
Fair Labor
Standards
Household**

NATIONAL
COMMITTEE ON
HOUSEHOLD
EMPLOYMENT

nche

7705 GEORGE AVE. NW
SUITE 208
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20012
(202) 291-2422

nche

**National Committee on
Household Employment**

7705 GEORGIA AVE., NW • SUITE 208
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20012
(202) 291-2422

A non-profit service agency. Contributions to NCHE are tax deductible.

Figure 4¹⁰¹

The sticker attached to a sheet that outlined the requirements of employers with the changes in the FLSA. Changing the practices that employers had was crucial. As one household worker explained NCHE meeting, “We can change legislation, we can talk about enforcement...but if the people who hire us are not educated...what happens then?”¹⁰² Even with changing legislation, there was little enforcement. Household workers thus took it upon themselves to educate their employers.

Maintaining Autonomy in the Labor Movement

The topic of household workers joining traditional labor unions was widely discussed in the 1970s. In 1976, the AFL-CIO publicly favored an extension of the FLSA

¹⁰¹ Fair Labor Standards Sticker found in NCHE Records.

to cover household workers, however in an interview, the AFL-CIO President at the time, George Meany, was quoted as saying, “We don’t organize domestic servants; not because we don’t think we could possibly help them, but it’s just impossible.” Unfortunately this attitude reflected the thoughts of many union leaders at the time.¹⁰³ After reading this statement, Edith Sloan sent President Meany a letter saying that she had seen his comment in the interview. She then explained precisely what the NCHE did and provided some literature. Sloan then received a response from Meany’s office explaining that his remarks were “incomplete”. This speaks to the sometimes tense relationship the NCHE and household workers had with traditional unions. Nevertheless, the NCHE still pushed for household workers to be able to join existing unions.

When the Posner Bill was passed in New York, Carolyn Reed said that it was only a start, because she understood that the bill would only cover a limited amount of household workers in private homes who were part of cleaning agencies. It excluded “babysitters and companions to sick, convalescing, and elderly people”.¹⁰⁴ She was willing to make this compromise she said but ultimately, it was important to have household workers covered.¹⁰⁵ While the bill was discussed, there was also much discussion of SEIU being ready to take on household workers. However, while people like Seymour Posner celebrated this idea, Reed expressed resistance to the idea that Household Technicians would become a part of SEIU.

¹⁰² “Meeting Recording” in Series 6 Box 2 Folder 1 in NCHE Records.

¹⁰³ Series 1 Box 1 Folder 13 in NCHE Records.

¹⁰⁴ Series 4 Box 2 Folder 13 in NCHE Records; Boris and Klein, 184.

¹⁰⁵ Chernow.

Indeed Reed and Miller worked hard for the bill, they each expressed caution around working within tradition union structures. They wanted the ability to collectively bargain but they didn't want union organizers coming in and taking over. They wanted to maintain autonomy with the Household Technicians of New York. They also knew that some women would be scared away by union organizers. Reed expressed her attitude this way:

What I'd like to see is a strong union of household workers. And it's going to be difficult to do. People say that people just...you know. All the negatives. "You just can't start a union. It's too expensive"... I think it has to be on our terms, not on the terms of some union organizers who see it as another membership...One of the unions has been putting a lot of money into organizing household workers—the Service Employees Union."¹⁰⁶

Reed was not ready to give household workers over to mostly white male organizers because she didn't think they would be effective at organizing household workers. She also believed strongly that household workers should be the ones making the decisions about what they wanted. Miller also expressed reservations about traditional unions saying, "I felt as though the union needed more money to buy another car with or put in their pocket, when we had not been getting that much money all that length of time."¹⁰⁷

A Radical Revision of Household Work

¹⁰⁶ Reed, Interview, 45.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Household Technicians of New York thought that fighting to get protections under the FLSA and collective bargaining rights provided by the Posner bill were incredibly important. However, local leaders also introduced different ideas for how to change household work. One of these ideas was the creation of worker cooperatives. Carolyn Reed attended many local events and conferences where she introduced suggestions for how household labor could be improved. At a feminist conference held with Sarah Lawrence for example, Reed explained her vision for the future of household work, which included “effective legislation, unionization, and training program.”¹⁰⁸ In addition to these more typical suggestions, Reed suggested “female cooperatives in which women would devise new methods for housework.”¹⁰⁹ In Reed’s own words:

I think that we have to start thinking about restructuring the whole system. We have to start thinking in terms of team cleaning, in terms of cooperatives, and not the old traditional ways. The way society is structured today, a paid household worker needs her own paid household worker to do her work. A household worker should be able to afford to have someone come in and to do the work too. We have to change the whole thing.¹¹⁰

The language that Reed uses here is very different from the language used by the NCHE. Reed suggests restricting the system, signifying that she envisioned a radical revision of labor. This seems to suggest that Reed imagined more than passing labor legislation. While other feminists at the conference were questioning whether or not they should do

¹⁰⁸ “Conference Notes” The women’s history graduate program records, 1968-present. Sarah Lawrence College Archives.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

their own housework, Reed suggests that household work itself is not the problem. She introduced the idea of women's cooperatives a way to make sure that those that do household work are properly compensated for that work. It is not clear exactly how Reed envisioned these cooperatives would operate. And it was not something she discussed in her interview. Perhaps Reed was not completely sure how these cooperatives would work either, but she knew that household workers needed to imagine possibilities.

It is not clear if Reed's vision expressed here was widespread amongst household workers in New York at the time. Still it is important to unearth such visions, which get lost in the narrative of the larger national movement. Later in her speech at the conference, Reed goes on to speak to a room full of feminists: "We have to start considering each other and working together, and not let class come above it, and separate us."¹¹¹ Reed's vision for changing the conditions of household work required another central element; a coalition of women.

¹¹⁰ "Evaluation Report: Household Conference" in The women's history graduate program records, 1968-present. Sarah Lawrence College Archives.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Chapter 4

A Difficult Alliance

One of the things that enabled the household workers movement from 1960s through 1980s to grow as strong as it did, in New York City and the rest of country, were the alliances that household workers built with people in different social movements at the time, including the civil rights, labor, and women's movements. There was overlap in the membership and goals of these movements, and household workers themselves were inspired by and participated in these movements. Alliances were not easy to come by for working class black women, nonetheless, they were essential to providing the support that allowed for some of the changes of the time, such as the extension of FLSA and the Posner Bill in New York State to occur. Outside of these moments when organizations rallied to pass labor legislation, it seemed like allies could not be maintained. Still, of all of the movements that household workers sought to build relationships with, the women's movement was seen as the most important and the most promising.

Tensions in the Black Community

Overall, the leaders in the civil rights movement and labor movement did play a role in some of the successes of household workers in the 1960s and 1970s. However, there were clear tensions within the black community based on class. This tension was also alluded to during the fight to pass Seymour Posner's collective bargaining bill in New York. In a *Mother Jones* article on the Household Workers, Ron Chernow wrote:

Assemblymen Posner recalls that whenever he has brought up the matter with lobbyists from black organizations, they've shrugged their shoulder indifferently. There's a common belief among household workers that the Establishment black organizations are concerned only with professionals and big money programs and would like to sweep the whole problem under some thick psychic rug.¹¹²

Another example came from one of the NCHE board meeting. At the meeting a man argued with household workers present, saying that the women's movement was not on board with their struggle.¹¹³ Another speaker, a woman present at the meeting, contested his claim, saying that she could get support from women's movement. She felt that the women's movement could be easily pushed, but civil rights organizations, including Urban League and some black churches, needed to be pushed to be more involved in working class Black women's struggles. Her argument that black organizations actually needed to be pushed to support household workers was an interesting claim. It signifies that there were tensions within the civil rights movement, around class, and also that the women's movement played a central role in the struggle for household workers.

Women's Lib Meets Household Workers

In the eyes of leaders like Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller, through the women's movement, household workers and their employers could come together, to create an alliance that would change how society thought of household work all together.

¹¹² Chernow, "All In A Days Work: Housekeepers, Mostly Black Women, Are The Last Frontier of Labor Organizing."

¹¹³ "Recording" in Series 6 Box 2 Folder 1 in NCHE Records. It is unclear as to who is speaking during the recording; therefore I did not identify the speakers. It is possible that it could have been Reed or Miller.

Or in Geraldine Miller's words: "As we upgrade the household worker, we will upgrade woman in the home."¹¹⁴ And of all of the relationships that household workers built, the alliance with women's movement was one of the strongest in New York City. The Household Technicians of New York chose the women's movement strategically, because they saw a rare opportunity to create an alliance with white middle class women, i.e. the majority of their employers.

It is also significant that the 1970s was a time when the Black feminist movement was being birthed, and black feminist organizations began to challenge racism and classism within the women's movement.¹¹⁵ In New York, household workers pushed local feminists to expand their discussions of gender and labor to include paid household workers.

Ultimately however this alliance did not pan out as planned. White feminists were not able to include paid household workers in their vision for liberation, which for them meant, getting out of the house completely. Vanessa May in *Unprotected Labor* makes a similar argument when examining the household worker movement in the 1930s. May contends that the limits of women's movements was one reason why household workers were not protected by FLSA. Similarly, the limitations of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s also failed to work with household workers, which played a role in the decline of the household workers movement after 1980.

The topic of household labor was one that was actually being frequently discussed in the late 1960s amongst white feminists. The *Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty

¹¹⁴ Chernow.

Friedan is often cited as the work that sparked a revival in the women's movement. It ignited a conversation about women and household labor. Feminists sought to find alternative arrangements in the household that would allow women to seek out new lifestyles and alternatives to the tradition "housewife" role.¹¹⁶ However, it was also a time when Black household workers were starting to demand better wages and treatment as laborers in white homes, and as Black women. Their organizing can be placed within a larger history of black feminism, which had its roots in the 1970s as well. These two discussions did sometimes meet, and household workers called upon their employers to see their similar struggles as women whose labor had been ignored or taken for granted. While there were serious tensions between the two movements, they were able to accomplish a lot together. Major legislation was passed and interesting dialogues about the possibility of re-defining housework were produced.

It might have seemed that household workers in New York City wouldn't find alliances with feminists, most of whom were white and middle class. But black household workers believed that it was possible to appeal to the women's movement. Because black women like Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller sought out women's organizations and local feminists, some women's organizations and leaders got involved in the household workers struggle. Organizations such as NOW and the New York Political Caucus, and women such as Bella Abzug, Gerda Lerner, and Gloria Steinem serve as examples. However, it is clear that household workers were not the central concern of most white feminists. To be clear, it was black feminist leaders that played a

¹¹⁵ Springer, *Living for the revolution: Black feminist organizations, 1968-1980*.

¹¹⁶ Nadasen, "Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work, and the Fair Labor Standards Act."

crucial role in supporting household workers, and pushing the larger women's movement to be concerned with household workers.

It is significant that a black feminist movement began to grow strong, with the Cohambee River Collective statement written in 1974. Many black women, regardless of their class background, had personally known someone who had performed household work, and heard horror stories of bad work conditions. It was a time when Black women leaders were particularly present and vocal in the public eye. Not only was Edith Sloan the leader of the NCHE, but Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman in Congress, and Eleanor Holmes Norton, also a Black woman, was chair of New York City Human Rights Commission. All of these women were key advocates of the household workers and pushed the mainstream women's movement to take up issues of household workers. These leaders hoped to speak to women's organization, and inform a large portion of the employers of household workers about pay, benefits, and treatment of those who worked in their own homes. Sloan herself recognized that the household workers movement had the most potential working with the women's movement, which, when pushed, would be responsive.¹¹⁷ While they may not be in history books, Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller were Black feminist leaders in their own right and spent a lot of time communicating with leaders of the women's movement and pressing issues of race and class as well as gender.

In April 1971 Eleanor Holmes Norton, who was a strong advocate for household workers pushed for the City Commission on Human Rights to hold a conference titled, "Toward A Strategy For Solving The Problems of Household Employment in New York

City. At the conference, there were members of the Household Technicians, including Geraldine Miller present. Josephine Hulett and Edith Sloan of NCHE, Assemblyman Seymour Posner, a number of unions, and leaders from National Organization of Women were also present. In her speech Holmes recognized that the household workers struggle and women's liberation were tied, even if it was a complicated situation. Holmes pointed out a growing tension within the movement: not just rich women were using the services of household workers, but how could they demand fair wages and good benefits for household workers and still make it available to working women who were not rich? However, Holmes did not think it was impossible. She drew on common themes in the two movements, arguing that all women should be able to work, and have support in the home.

Later in the conference, Holmes stressed the central role that she believed the women's movement could play in the fight for better conditions for household workers:

This is why I have sought to highlight the plight of household workers as a question for the women's rights movement. The civil rights movement and the trade union movement must, of course, feel equal responsibility. But only the movement for women's rights embraces the entire affected group – those who work as household workers and those who need it most. . . . When the movement for women's rights can claim that it has done something concrete to change these conditions, such as winning legislative protection, it will have established itself as a serious movement that can deliver for all women and will lay rest the

¹¹⁷ "Meeting Recording" in Series 6 Box 2 Folder 1 in NCHE Records.

foolishness about black women not having a stake in the fight for women's rights.¹¹⁸

Not only did prominent national Black women leaders at the time believe this, but local leaders, such as Carolyn Reed, also believed strongly in getting the women's movement engaged in the issues of household workers.

Reed herself was very vocal about how she felt that solving the issues of household workers was intimately tied with the issues that white women faced. She was very seriously engaged in the women's movement, which can be seen in her interaction with different leaders within the women's movement, and her time on President Carter's Committee of Women, when she developed strong ties with women like Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem, and in 1977, she was a part of the New York Delegation of Women to attend a First National Women's Conference.¹¹⁹ Geraldine Miller also had extensive ties with women in N.O.W., who she would eventually work for in the Bronx, and serve as an expert on issues of race. Miller describes her first exposure to many of these feminist leaders when she attended and Women's Equality Day march, in which Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem were present:

there was a large group of women that had written books and what have you — and see, I think it was *Ladies' Home Journal* who had the Household Workers down and they would, you know, try to be helpful with us, and they had this, uh,

¹¹⁸ Edith Lynton, "Toward Better Jobs and Better Service In Household Work" A Report and Recommendations Based on a Conference on Household Work Held by the New York Commission on Human Rights, 1972.

¹¹⁹ Nan Robertson. "N.Y. Delegation to Women's Conference Is Decidedly Feminist", *New York Times*, July 26, 1977.

little saying on material, “Never underestimate a woman,” and that intrigued me and so, of course, I kind of liked them.

Both Reed and Miller connected with white women in the women’s movement because they identified them as strong women, who were fighting for equality for all women. They also respected them because they supported the Household Technicians – through financial support, resources, ideas, supporting legislation, or even just letting Geraldine Miller use a typewriter to create a flyer.

Geraldine Miller explains that she learned that she had similarities with white women through her involvement with women’s movement. She also recognized that she “suffered a little bit more,” due to her race and occupation.¹²⁰ Miller saw that after aligning with the women’s movement, household workers were able to pass the FLSA in 1974, which they had never done before. Women’s organizations gave a lot of support to the NCHE campaign, as well as the Household Technicians campaign, to get the FLSA passed. They did this by sending people to attend hearings, where women, some of which who were employers, testified in support of domestic workers, as women. Other forms of support were shown during the campaign, such as spreading information and literature for the campaign, and sharing resources. People like Gloria Steinem used their own resources and contacts to help push for the bill in her own community. Similarly, with Seymour Posner’s sponsored Labor Act of New York, women’s organizations again

¹²⁰ Miller, Interview, 46.

pushed for passing of the state bill. Posner, had attended the Conference on Household Workers that Holmes arranged in 1977.¹²¹

Another accomplishment from the alliance between the women's movement and household workers was a new understanding and relationship between employee and employer in some cases. Geraldine Miller, for example, talked about her relationship with employers, after the Household Technicians had been working for some time. She stated that, "Well, I think that, uh, white women, or other nationality of women that will hire you has been able to think more like you're not this little machine that they brought in, but that's a human being that is in your house to help you, and that you have to treat them better than what you did before."¹²²

A Conference on Housework

In October of 1977 the women's studies program at Sarah Lawrence, with household workers from New York City, held a conference titled "The Future of Housework, the Role of the Housewife, and Sharing Arrangements for Child Care". Carolyn Reed sat on the planning committee for the conference as the Chairperson. At the time Sarah Lawrence Women's Studies program was directed by Gerda Lerner, who recalls that, "The conference was an innovative attempt to cross racial, ethnic, and class barriers and to bring theory and practice to bear on major societal problem".¹²³ Sarah Lawrence professors were invited to Brooklyn by the Congress of Neighborhood Women to plan the conference, and it was first suggested by women from Brooklyn that they hold

¹²¹ Boris and Klein, 137.

¹²² Miller, Interview, 25.

the conference there. Lerner writes, “The African American women had never met with white housewives (in this case professors) on common ground, but they shared their culinary expertise and soon found they had other common interests.”¹²⁴ The conference was particularly interesting because it displays the genuine effort on behalf of both household workers and largely middle class white women to come together around the issue of household labor, but also the limitations of the relationship, and what led to ultimately a weak partnership.

The purpose of the conference was said to have been to address “growing public concern and confusion regarding the changing role of the homemaker in society.”¹²⁵ While the planning of the conference seemed to be guided mostly by the desires of the women at Sarah Lawrence, household workers made a huge impact on the way the conference came together. One of the black household workers who attended a planning meeting suggested that the conference be held in Harlem. Many of the Sarah Lawrence professors were concerned that it would be unsafe. Lerner states that “The black women assured us they’d protect us”...”And so the decision was made. Probably that was the most important thing we did at the conference.”¹²⁶ While Lerner takes a large amount of responsibility for organizing the conference it was surely a group effort, with a lot of input coming from both household workers and housewives. The conference was held in Harlem at the State Office Building.

¹²³ Gerda Lerner, *Living with history/making social change*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 61.

¹²⁴ Lerner, *Living with history/making social change*, 62.

¹²⁵ See Conference pamphlet in The women's history graduate program records, 1968-present, Sarah Lawrence College Archives.

¹²⁶ Lerner, 62.

The conference was endorsed by “Lieutenant Governor Mary Ann Krupsak, Bella Abzug, and State Senators Carol Bellamy and Karen Burstein.”¹²⁷ Groups such as Congress of Neighborhood Women, Black Women for Wages for Housework, Wages Due Lesbians, writers from MS magazine, as well as professors from nearby colleges were also in attendance. The idea of pay for housework was discussed, and there was even a bill... The household workers at the conference identified themselves as “Union of Household Technicians.” Reed spoke in the morning session on “Paid Domestic Employment”. In addition to explaining the problems that household workers face comparing them to that of the housewife, Reed suggested solutions such as “female cooperatives in which women would devise new methods for household, as well as share household and child care duties.”¹²⁸ She also suggested changing legislation and unionizing household workers.

Gerda Lerner believed that “as long as unpaid household is women’s work, all women are downgraded.” Lerner hoped that by working with the Household Technicians of New York, they would create a partnership that challenged the low value of unpaid household work. However, Lerner came from a very different perspective than Reed, who was a household worker. Reed’s presence at the conference served as a reminder that even women who get paid for household labor continue to be exploited, sometimes by other women. In her presentation at the conference, Reed made a radical suggestion, stating,

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ “Evaluation Report: Household Conference” in The women's history graduate program records, 1968-present. Sarah Lawrence College Archives.

I heard some of the greatest feminists say, “Well, I just can’t afford it.” What I always say is, if you can’t afford it, then you can’t have it done. You have to make your priorities...Not only that, a lot of these household workers have to leave their own homes. They leave their own children...¹²⁹

Not everyone thought that the conference was a success or a symbol of unity among different women. In one attendee’s description of the conference, a woman who attended and was an employer of domestic worker was critical of it for not taking up the issue of paid household work. As the very title of the conference suggests, the conference was focused on housewives. She sought out Carolyn Reed for advice about how to handle the relationship between her employee, a Black household worker, and how to challenge the legacy of the “white-black servant tradition with its roots in slavery”. She said that she found Reed making lunches for the conference participants while they have a discussion. This concern reveals that while Reed was included on the planning committee, there were still divisions within the group, and Reed was still not considered to be on the same level as the middle class white women that attended the conference.

The Alliance Crumbles

Barbara Ehrenreich claims that “Housework, as you may recall from the feminist theories of the Sixties and Seventies, was supposed to be the great equalizer of women.”¹³⁰ At the time, it did seem like household work could be an issue taken up by all different types of women. However, eventually, the desire to rid themselves of housework completely became one of the central themes in the mainstream women’s

¹²⁹ Ibid.

movement and household workers were somehow left behind. In the process of fighting for women's liberation, divisions of race and class remained, and household work remained devalued. Women (or white middle class women) were encouraged to go out and find jobs formerly done by white men. Meanwhile, working class Black women remained in low paying jobs. As many women tried to get away from household work, household workers had to convince them that they did not want to eliminate the work itself, instead, they wanted to be fairly compensated for performing it. Some feminists argued that no one should hire household workers because it would always produce an oppressive relationship. Many household workers insisted that their labor was something that provided for themselves and their families, and that when given decent pay and dignity and respect, as other workers had, the occupation did not have to be oppressive.

Some household workers even describe a tension between household workers and middle class black women. Dorothy Bolden who led the Domestic Workers Union from Atlanta was quoted saying that, "Low-income black women outnumber middle-income black women, and those women have been overshadowed and over-looked, not only by whites, but by the black middle class".¹³¹ While Black feminists played a central role in the struggle for household workers, there were also divisions of class present in these relationships. Just as there were class divisions with the civil rights movement.

Neither the household technicians, or the women's movement, or Black feminists were able to figure out the problem that Eleanor Norton Holmes brought up in 1971. How

¹³⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order The politics of other women's work." *Harpers Magazine*. April 1, 2000.

¹³¹ Charlayne Hunter, "200 BLACK WOMEN 'HAVE DIALOGUE'; Debate Issues That Differ From White Movement's" *New York Times*. January 10, 1972.

could working women get affordable help with household work, and household workers still make a decent living with dignity? Issues of race and class were also never discussed enough in the women's movement to resolve the divisions that would further separate in the next decades.

At the start of the 1980s, there was an overall decline in the membership of the household technicians and many of their hopes and dreams were never realized.¹³² The household technicians were ever able to find a way to guarantee that new laws could be enforced, and many employers continued to offer low pay and little benefits. Many Black women began to transition out of household work, due to its overall unpredictability, and poor pay. And many who left did so only to do other low paying jobs such as hotel maids or janitors.¹³³ The make-up of household workers began to change, and immigrant women of color began to become the dominant women doing household work and care work as globalization forced immigrant women migrated to the United States, and to take positions as household workers. "In the United States, African American women, who accounted for 60 percent of domestic in the 1940's, have been largely replaced by Latinas, many of them recent migrants from Mexico and Central America."¹³⁴ Globalization forced many women from third world countries to migrate to the United States and take low paying jobs, such as household cleaners and nannies.

Accomplishments of the Household Technicians

¹³² Cobble, "A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm", 37.

¹³³ Cobble, "More Intimate Unions," 200.

¹³⁴ Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order The politics of other women's work."

In 1977 NCHE lost its funding from Ford Foundation and was struggling for funding and general support. To survive, the organization shifted, becoming a minor project of the National Urban League. This greatly affected the Household Technicians as well. In addition to poor funding, household workers had to face the conservative national policies of Ronald Reagan. This also led to a larger decline within the women's movement and civil movements.

Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein expand on the downfall of the NCHE saying,

Unable to change the traditional expectations of deference and the arbitrariness of informal household jobs, Barksdale-Sloan could not sustain NCHE as an independent organization. Nor could she or her coworkers maintain the fledgling domestic worker associations and unions that NCHE had helped foster in an attempt to alter the nature of the employment relationship...NCHE did have a measurable long-term impact by leading the campaign to amend the FLSA.¹³⁵

Like the NCHE, the Household Technicians were also in decline in by 1977. It is not clear when the organization of household technicians officially ended. When Geraldine Miller was asked when the household technicians officially ended, she could not recall an actual date. She demanded that as long as she was alive, she would be the President of the Household Technicians. Reed remained active in fighting s for household workers into the 1980s. However, Reed passed away in 1993 at only 53.

The Household Technicians of New York, as well as the NCHE, accomplished more than the inclusion of household workers in the FLSA, or the change in New York

State labor laws. They significantly changed household workers perception of themselves in the 1970s.¹³⁶ They also forever changed the relationship between household employees and their employers. Geraldine Miller talks about the pride that she and the other household workers felt after forming the Household Technicians, making demands of their employers, and demanding respect from society at large.¹³⁷ After the 1970s, it was more common for household employees to be seen as actual employers. The organizing of the household technicians would pave the way for later organizing.

¹³⁵ Boris and Klein, “We Were The Invisible Workforce: Unionizing Home Care” In *Sex of Class*, edited by Dorothy Sue Cobble.

¹³⁶ Cobble, “A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm: Workplace Feminism and the Transformation of Women's Service Jobs in the 1970s.”

¹³⁷ Miller, Interview, 24.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis asked: What was the vision of household workers in New York in the 1960s and 70s? How did it compare to the larger national movement? What were the tensions, if any, within the movement of household workers? With whom did household workers in New York create alliances? What were the strengths and tensions within these relationships? Through an exploration of the local movement of Household Technicians in New York, the vision of local organizers in New York was placed within a larger national context. Looking at this local movement helped to show tensions that existed within the household worker movement, as well as between household workers and other social movements.

Household workers in New York were able to create alliances with civil rights, labor, and women's organizations. However, these alliances were all short lived. These alliances were strongest when organizations rallied around a specific piece of legislation, such as the Posner Bill. However, these alliances were unable to be maintained – in part due to class and race based tensions within them. New facets of the civil rights, labor, and women's movements are revealed by looking at their alliances with household workers. For example, by looking at the relationship between the NAACP and Urban League with the Household Technician of New York, classism and sexism within the civil rights movement are brought forth. Looking at the women's movement, we learn that there have been multi-racial and class based feminist alliances that don't appear in women's history. They too failed because of the inability of white feminists to recognize and deal with difference. This thesis only provided an initial look at relationship between household

workers and their allies in New York. There is still much more to be said that future research could expand upon.

The Household Technicians of New York emphasized feminist alliances as a central strategy for redefining household labor. They sought to frame household work as a woman's issue; creating a coalition of household workers and employers. They worked closely with some of the very women that employed them, in hopes redefine how we think about household work, whether that labor was being done by a "domestic worker" or a "housewife". Both Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller both believed strongly that this alliance could meet the needs of both household workers and their employers. Perhaps they were too optimistic because they had built strong personal relationships with members of the women's movement.

Mary Romero's contention that household workers and women who perform unpaid housework do not have a "shared experience" is especially true when looking at the failed alliance between household workers and the women's movement. Romero writes,

Domestic service reveals the contradiction in a feminism that pushed for women's involvement outside the home, yet failed to make men take responsibility for household labor. Employed middle- and upper-middle class women escaped the double day syndrome by hiring poor women of color to perform housework and child care, and this was characterized as progress.¹³⁸

Black household workers understood the differences between their experiences and those of middle class white women and the contradictions within the larger women's movement. They attempted to talk about differences of race and class by sharing their own experiences

¹³⁸ Mary Romero. *Maid in The U.S.A.*, 127.

with white feminists. The larger women's movement was only able to come together with household workers by discussing shared experiences. Yet the Sarah Lawrence conference on housework shows that white feminists were more focused on figuring out how to solve the problems of the housewife. In short, the larger women's movement was not ready to fully engage with the differences between household workers and women who performed unpaid housework.

While it was short lived, the coalition of household workers and the women's movement did produce concrete victories in New York, such as the Posner Bill. It also provided a space where women of different class and race backgrounds could come together on issues of gender and labor. But what do these victories mean to household workers today? And, to what extent were they even victories? Both the local and national household worker movement of the 1970s pushed to change legislation. But today it is not clear how meaningful this legislation was. Household workers still remain largely excluded from labor law, and the laws that are in place are rarely enforced. Household work in New York is still an unregulated underground world.

Barbara Ehrenreich argues that, "Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely at all, no one talks about the "politics of housework" anymore. The demand for "wages for housework" has sunk to the status of a curiosity, along with the consciousness-raising groups in which women once rallied support in their struggles with messy men."¹³⁹ This is partially true. At the same time, issues that face household workers are still being engaged by groups like Domestic Workers United, and scholars like Premilla Nadasen

¹³⁹ Ibid.

and others who do research for Domestic Workers United and on domestic worker organizing.

But what happened to Carolyn Reed's vision of forming worker cooperatives? Today, some household worker cooperatives exist, but they are indeed rare.¹⁴⁰ Instead of worker run and own cooperatives, we have cleaning companies like Merry Maids. Barbara Ehrenreich describes growth among "the national and international chains -- outfits like Merry Maids, Molly Maids, Mini Maids, Maid Brigade, and The Maids International -- all named, curiously enough, to highlight the more antique aspects of the industry," by saying "they are finally transforming the home into a fully capitalist-style workplace, and in ways that the old wages-for-housework advocates could never have imagined."¹⁴¹ But in these companies, household workers still receive low pay and little benefits. If anything, the owners of the companies receive more benefit than the workers.¹⁴²

What happened to the pride and dignity that had been so central in the movement of the 1970s? How did we go from "household technician" to "Merry Maid"? Similar to the Household Technicians of New York, Domestic Worker United has pushed to pass impressive legislation, such as the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. What effect will this new law have on domestic workers in New York? What about Reed's notion of worker cooperatives and feminist coalitions? These are questions that remain unanswered by this thesis, and that future scholarship must explore further.

¹⁴⁰ For example of contemporary domestic worker cooperative in New York, see Ken Estey, "Domestic Workers and Cooperatives," *WorkingUSA*, 14 (2011): 347–365.

¹⁴¹ Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order The politics of other women's work."

¹⁴² Muriel Jackson, "The Maids", 28 mins, 1985 Women Make Movies.

Furthermore histories that highlight local leaders of movements, such as Carolyn Reed and Geraldine Miller, are important. These local histories recognize that working class people and people of color did organize themselves. Rather than only highlighting charismatic leaders, they bring focus to everyday women. Writing histories of household worker's efforts to organize is incredibly important. Revealing what previous work household workers have done can serve as a guide for future organizers and activists. These histories have the capability of inspiring and giving hope to future generations of household workers. As with all history, it important to understand the past in order to learn from previous struggles, their successes, and their downfalls.

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