The Political is Personalized: Feminist Solidarity in the Context of Outsourcing Domestic Work to Migrant Domestic Workers

Narges Mohammadi, 'Invisible Hands', exhibition at Stedelijk Museum Schiedam. Photo: Io Sivertsen

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Summary of the argument

In this thesis, I examine how feminist solidarity takes shape in the context of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers in the Netherlands, aiming to understand the connection between the private/individual sphere of solidarity (employers' solidarity with the migrant domestic workers they employ) and the public/collective sphere of solidarity (employers' solidarity with the migrant domestic workers' movement). Literature discusses a practical disconnect in the public/collective sphere of solidarity between the feminist movement and the migrant domestic workers' movement, evidenced by the lack of alliances (Federici, 2016; Geymonat, Cherubini & Marchetti, 2021; Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021). My research, which includes interviews and a focus group with female employers who feel involved with feminism and/or good employment practices for migrant domestic workers, as well as with self-organized migrant domestic workers who are members of the Dutch Migrant Domestic Workers Union, shows, in line with this literature, a lack of involvement of (feminist) female employers in the migrant domestic workers' movement. By examining in this thesis how solidarity plays a role in shaping the employment relationship and how this affects (the potential for) employers' individual practices of solidarity within the employment relationship and collective solidarity with the migrant domestic workers' movement, we can better understand this issue.

I argue that employers' affective tensions (conflicting emotions and feelings of discomfort) about their complicity in the precarious social position of the migrant domestic workers they employ, which conflict with the employers' feminist and equality values, are addressed within the employment relationship through a combination of distancing practices from employer responsibilities and establishing close personal relationships of assistance. This results in informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity that can only improve the circumstances of the migrant domestic workers in their employment to a certain extent. The assistance relationship complicates the possibility for migrant domestic workers to discuss their working conditions with their employers, while the distancing practices lead to a lack of clear agreements about payment and working conditions. Furthermore, this type of solidarity does not extend to migrant domestic workers outside of their employment or address the devaluation of domestic work. Dealing with affective tensions in the employment relationship allows employers to distance themselves from the larger problem of the devaluation of domestic work, which hinders collective solidarity with migrant domestic workers. Transforming informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity so they become productive for migrant domestic workers involves formalizing and publicizing them. This includes clear agreements on fair payment and working conditions that are discussed publicly, as well as addressing other people's poor employment practices. These formalized and publicized individual practices of solidarity bridge the gap between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity by making individual solidarity a part of the public sphere, thereby extending employers' solidarity to migrant domestic workers outside of their employment.

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This thesis is a work built on the great thoughts of women who have shared them with me, both through texts and in the many conversations I have had about this thesis over the past year. Inspired by Ahmed (2017), who states that citation is feminist memory and that writing feminist texts requires feminist materials, the bibliography of this thesis consists almost entirely of works by female feminists[1] whose words have deeply shaped my ideas and this thesis. But arguably even more important in the making of this thesis are the amazing thoughts of the women around me who have shared their opinions, experiences, and vulnerabilities with me throughout the thesis process. Thank you for your support, for enriching me, and for making the time writing this thesis an enjoyable one. I would like to thank several people in particular for their indispensable contributions to this thesis.

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[1] The bibliography that consists predominantly of works by female feminists is not only a conscious choice but also a reflection of the available literature on domestic work, which is largely authored by women. By men not engaging with this subject, the ongoing perception that domestic work is "a women's issue" can be reproduced. Regarding my focus on women in this thesis, I do not in any way intend to reproduce domestic work as "a women's issue" as I certainly don't agree with that stance. However, my theoretical interest in the complexity of the personal ties between women who outsource domestic work and migrant domestic workers, and the possibilities for a collective movement have guided this focus.

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1. Introduction

Last March 2024, I attended the anti-racism and discrimination festival at Pakhuis de Zwijger where members of the Dutch Migrant Domestic Workers Union performed their play '*Second-class citizens in a globalized world'.* The play showed the challenges faced by undocumented migrant domestic workers, including their lack of access to a bank account, health insurance, and identity card, and highlighted their dependence on employers in private households for their working conditions. Anderson (2000) states that because domestic work is outsourced in the private sphere of the home and because labor laws offer little protection to domestic workers, the working situations of migrant domestic workers are highly precarious and dependent on their employers, especially for undocumented migrant domestic workers. The members of the Migrant Domestic Workers Union illustrated in their play how this dependence can lead to unstable and poor working conditions, including unpaid overtime and the lack of paid sick leave. Through this performance, the Migrant Domestic Workers Union, established in 2006 and currently an affiliate of the FNV trade union network, aimed to raise awareness for their objectives as a union, with one of their primary goals being the ratification of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 (C189). This convention states that domestic workers should have the same labor rights as other workers. Despite the Netherlands voting in favor of adopting this convention, it has yet to be ratified (*Up-to-date Conventions Not Ratified by Netherlands*, n.d.). During the discussion on strategies to improve the position of migrant domestic workers after the play, an audience member posed a question that had been on my mind since the beginning of my thesis process: 'What can employers do?' A question, I learned throughout my fieldwork, that is also of significance to the members of the Migrant Domestic Workers Union and for which a satisfactory answer has yet to be found. This thesis will offer some valuable insights into addressing this question.

The Migrant Domestic Workers Union which emerged from the self-organization of migrant domestic workers, who later joined the FNV, fits within a global trend of the self-organization of migrant domestic workers. In the last chapter of her book *Revolution at Point Zero*, Federici (2016) zooms in on this trend and the implications for the feminist movement. She states that the efforts of migrant domestic workers to valorize their work have revitalized the feminist interest in domestic work, while simultaneously questioning the possibility of solidarity between women, as women who outsource domestic work benefit from the vulnerable position that migrant domestic workers are in. For this reason, Federici (2016) is hesitant about the possibility of a common movement in the near future with the goal of ending the social and institutional devaluation of domestic work between migrant domestic workers and women who outsource domestic work. Anderson (2000) also discusses how the outsourcing of domestic work to migrant domestic workers poses questions to feminism. By emphasizing the racialization of paid domestic work and highlighting the structural inequalities in how

paid domestic work is organized, she argues that it complicates the longstanding feminist view of domestic work as the great equalizer, a shared burden imposed on all women equally by patriarchy. Triandafyllidou and Marchetti (2015) however mention the fact that employers and migrant domestic workers are most often both women, as the management of the household falls on women's shoulders even if they can delegate some of their domestic tasks (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010), can also create a sense of mutual understanding and solidarity based on the shared gender roles that need to be performed in the domestic context.

The creation of personal ties through outsourcing domestic work between female, predominantly white, non-migrant, and middle- or upper-class employers and female migrant domestic workers could thus lead to solidarity according to Triandafyllidou and Marchetti (2015). However, the reflections of Federici (2016) and Anderson (2000) on feminism, solidarity, and the outsourcing of domestic work primarily highlight that the relationship between female employers and migrant domestic workers is characterized by power imbalances and inequalities which makes the personal ties complex. Anderson (2000) states that both migrant domestic workers and employers are aware of these inequalities and have a social consciousness of the contradictions they are attempting to manage within the employment relationship. Research has shown that employers manage these contradictions by either creating distance from or fostering closeness to the migrant domestic workers they employ (Anderson, 2000; Lan, 2003; Botman, 2011). What we do not know, however, is how solidarity plays a role in shaping the employment relationship to manage the complexities of personal ties, and how this affects the possibilities for employers' solidarity with migrant domestic workers in and outside of their employment.

While theoretical literature (Anderson, 2000; Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2015; Federici, 2016) thus discusses the issue of solidarity between the migrant domestic workers' movement and the feminist movement, and, on a smaller scale, the issue of solidarity between migrant domestic workers and their female predominantly white, non-migrant, middle- or upper-class employers, empirical studies examining the employment relationship and the different ways in which employers shape this relation, do not address the question of solidarity. However, examining solidarity in this context can provide valuable insights for conceptualizing feminist solidarity within the framework of outsourcing domestic work, and it can help identify opportunities for fostering solidarity between both groups and movements, which, in the words of Anderson (2000, p. 197), "we need empirically based theory for." Grounded in the feminist adage that the personal is political, this qualitative research project will examine how feminist solidarity takes shape in the context of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers with the aim of understanding the (dis)connect between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity. The private/individual sphere relates to solidarity in the employment relationship, and the public/collective sphere relates to employers' solidarity with the

migrant domestic workers' movement. To establish this connection between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity, the main research question, *how does feminist solidarity take shape in the context of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers?* is divided into three sub-questions. The first sub-question lays the groundwork for answers to the subsequent second and third sub-questions. The sub-questions are formulated as follows: (1) How do female employers make sense of and deal with unequal social positions and questions of solidarity in the employment relationship with migrant domestic workers? (2) How does this affect (the potential for) individual practices of solidarity within the employment relationship and collective solidarity with the migrant domestic workers' movement? (3) How does this (potentially) impact the personal circumstances and social position of migrant domestic workers? To examine these questions, I employ a qualitative research strategy in which interviews and focus groups are conducted with female employers and self-organized migrant domestic workers.

The geographic location of this study is the Netherlands. This is because the Netherlands is home to a small yet active group of self-organized migrant domestic workers who advocate for the implementation of ILO Convention 189 and because the Netherlands employs a specific exclusionary regulation for the outsourcing of domestic work, the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan huis* (Eleveld & Van Hooren, 2018; Van Hooren, 2018). This regulation allows individual households to hire someone for domestic services up to three days a week without paying taxes or social security benefits. While the regulation provides domestic workers with some protections such as minimum wage and holiday allowance, these protections are minimal since workers cannot access unemployment benefits or insure themselves for long-term illness or disability through their employers (Van Hooren, 2018). In practice, this regulation is rarely utilized due to low awareness of its existence and insufficient enforcement. As a result, obligations stated in the regulation such as paying the legal minimum wage, providing wages during illness and vacation, and offering holiday allowance are often not met (Panteia, 2014).

The structure of this thesis is as follows: the first chapter that follows this introduction is the theoretical framework, which is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will discuss the devaluation of (paid) domestic work and the political struggles of migrant domestic workers over this devaluation, highlighting the disconnect with the feminist movement. In the second section, I will go into the promise of personal ties for solidarity and the complexity of the employment relationship between employers and migrant domestic workers. In the third section, I will introduce affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) as a guiding concept to examine feminist solidarity in the context of outsourcing domestic work. The next chapter consists of the Dutch case which I will discuss by going into the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* and the self-organization of migrant domestic workers. In the following chapter, I will discuss the research design and methodology which covers the interviews

and focus groups conducted in this study. After the research design chapter, three chapters will follow that together comprise the results section of this thesis. In the first results chapter, I will discuss the affective tensions (conflicting emotions and feelings of discomfort) employers experience due to outsourcing domestic work. The second results chapter is centered around the private sphere of the employment relationship, in which I will discuss how employers manage these affective tensions, what individual practices of solidarity look like in the employment relationship, and how this affects the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers in the employment relationship. The third results chapter will address the collective and public sphere of solidarity focusing on the lack of employers' involvement in the migrant domestic workers' movement. I will end the thesis with a conclusion and a summary of key insights and recommendations for policymakers, employers, and feminists.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Political struggles over the devaluation of (paid) domestic work

Fraser (2017) sees the activism of self-organized migrant domestic workers as calls for a reorganization of the relationship between productive and social reproductive labor. Within capitalist societies, there is a division between two types of labor: social reproductive labor and productive labor. Social reproductive labor, associated with women, encompasses the activities involved in life-making: making, sustaining, and reproducing the worker and her labor power which includes domestic work. Productive labor encompasses the activities involved in profit-making for the market which is seen as the only legitimate form of labor in capitalism as it produces financial value, constructing social reproductive labor as not profitable and consequently, 'non-productive', thereby devaluating social reproductive labor (Fraser, 2017; Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser, 2019).

Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2010) argues that domestic work is not only devalued because it is seen as non-productive but also because of its feminized and racialized labor force. Thereby stating that value is a historical, social, and cultural outcome based on systems of gender differences and racialized hierarchies. She argues that the devaluation of domestic work as simple and unskilled labor is interlinked with the feminized and racialized labor force doing this work. Due to its feminized labor force, domestic work is naturalized as non-labor as it is perceived as naturally given and as a personal service —not considering the labor power and time it requires. Moreover, because of the attribution of 'inferiority' to its labor force—stemming from its feminization and racialization—it is also devalued as low-skilled work. This results in domestic work being unwaged, or when outsourced, poorly paid. The devaluation of domestic work which is thus inherently linked to its feminized and racialized labor force has consequently led to the poor legal and social position of migrant domestic workers around the world, as they have conventionally been excluded from labor, social, and legal protection due to the low politicization of domestic work (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). As a reaction to their poor legal and social position in different countries, migrant domestic workers have started to organize themselves transnationally since the mid-2000s (Lim, 2016).

It is mostly through self-organization that migrant domestic workers have made their struggles heard, finding their own networks and trade unions, and seeking alliances with NGOs, national trade unions, and international organizations (Federici, 2016). In 2006, various groups of domestic workers from around the world gathered at a conference in Amsterdam. During this conference, they agreed to jointly initiate a project aimed at organizing domestic workers and advocating for an ILO Convention, which was successful. In 2011, the ILO Convention 189 concerning decent work for domestic workers was passed (Lim, 2016). Ciccia & Roggeband (2021) argue that one reason domestic workers often establish their own autonomous organizations and unions is because they struggle to find

representation in other groups. They state that given that the migrant domestic workers' movement speaks to intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and citizenship, it should be highly conducive to forming alliances. However, practice proves otherwise. This is illustrated by Geymonat, Cherubini & Marchetti (2021) who argue that the transnational mobilization of migrant domestic workers, coupled with a resurgence of contemporary feminism that seeks alliances with different groups in the struggle over reproductive labor (Fraser, 2017), has highlighted the practical disconnect between the feminist and migrant domestic workers' movements. Geymonat et al. (2021) state that both movements share similar discursive frameworks, migrant domestic worker activists often draw on classic feminist narratives about the devaluation and unequal distribution of both paid and unpaid social reproductive labor. But, despite the narrative convergence centered around the devaluation of domestic work, in practice, this alignment is often undermined by a lack of collaboration and a convergence between the feminist and migrant domestic workers' movement is not yet on the horizon (Federici, 2016; Geymonat et al., 2021).

According to Federici (2016), a possible explanation for these scarce alliances is that paid domestic work has made domestic work a ground of division instead of unification for women. For this reason, many feminists have conflicting views about paid domestic work as it conflicts with the feminist agenda and can be seen as a failure of the feminist movement to solve 'the housework problem' as the responsibility for this work still falls on women. Ciccia & Roggeband (2021) furthermore mention the lack of personal ties as an obstacle to the forming of alliances. It is noteworthy that Ciccia & Roggeband (2021) highlight the lack of personal ties as a barrier to forming alliances between migrant domestic workers and feminist movements. This perspective fails to consider the many personal ties that are created between feminist employers and migrant domestic workers due to the outsourcing of domestic work, which, according to their statement, would foster solidarity between both movements. However, it is important to note that these personal ties have a unique character as they are formed through an employment relationship structured by inequalities and power imbalances (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010) which raises the question of how these personal ties affect the potential for employers' solidarity with migrant domestic workers in and outside of their employment, and if they could thus foster employers' involvement with the migrant domestic workers' movement.

2.2 The promise of personal ties for solidarity

Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2010) mentions how, when female employers outsource domestic work to female migrant domestic workers, two social groups that typically inhabit distinct social spheres due to their differing social positions come together within the private household. In a context in which domestic work is not outsourced there thus is a lack of personal ties between these two groups of women, as the statement by Ciccia & Roggeband (2021) suggested. But, through the outsourcing of

domestic work, personal ties are created in which employers are exposed to the structural inequalities faced by migrant domestic workers through the lived realities of their employees. Based on Dean's (1996) conceptualization of individual solidarity, these personal ties are particularly promising for the emergence of individual solidarity between employers and the migrant domestic workers they employ. She states that feelings of care and concern develop in relation to a specific other based on a personal bond, leading to individual practices of solidarity. However, because these feelings are tied to a specific other, they do not necessarily extend to unknown others who, due to their social position or 'group membership,' are related to the specific other for whom care and concern are felt. Employers' solidarity with migrant domestic workers in their employment, therefore, does not necessarily have to extend to other migrant domestic workers outside of their employment.

Furthermore, Triandafyllidou and Marchetti (2015) link the promise of personal ties for solidarity to the shared gender roles that must be performed within the household. This is based on the idea that struggles over domestic work can unite all women (Federici, 2016). However, both Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2010) and Federici (2016) argue that this shared aspect of 'femininity' in the household is disrupted by power imbalances and social hierarchies. According to Federici (2016), solidarity in the context of outsourcing domestic work must therefore be rooted in recognizing different experiences and social positions, as migrant domestic workers and their female employers have distinct social positions and experiences due to varying levels of oppression and marginalization. Employers, predominantly white, non-migrant, and middle or upper-class, have the privilege of partially or fully delegating their domestic responsibilities, whereas migrant domestic workers undertake this work due to their marginalized position.

The personal ties that are characterized by inequalities and power imbalances complicate shaping the employment relationship (Lan, 2003). Botman (2011) argues that shaping this relationship is particularly complex because the inequalities are encountered in the private sphere of the home, which also becomes the workplace of migrant domestic workers. People find it difficult to address social inequalities in the private sphere and are not accustomed to shaping employment relationships in this context, as these are usually public affairs. Additionally, research by Lan (2003), Botman (2011), and Kordasiewicz (2017) shows that 'contemporary employers', who increasingly come from the middle class and identify with values such as equality and self-reliance, often struggle more with handling inequalities in the employment relationship than the upper class, who have traditionally been accustomed to outsourcing servile roles. For example, Kordasiewicz (2017) found that middle-class employers often experience class guilt, which she conceptualizes as the 'syndrome' among employers who struggle with embracing the class inequalities intrinsic to hiring a domestic worker. In managing the complexities of shaping the employment relationship, several studies have shown that two distinct approaches commonly emerge: employers either create distance from or closeness with the migrant

domestic worker they employ, which is related to magnifying or minimizing hierarchical differences in the relationship (Anderson, 2000; Lan, 2003; Botman, 2011). While these approaches develop as ways to navigate inequalities and power imbalances in the employment relationship, it remains unclear to what extent solidarity plays a role here.

2.3 Affective solidarity

To examine feminist solidarity in the context of outsourcing domestic work, I will use Hemmings' (2012) concept of affective solidarity. Hemmings demonstrates that it is through affective solidarity that we can move from individual experiences to collective political action. Affective solidarity begins with a feeling of affective dissonance which is an inner conflict that can arise from outsourcing domestic work, which can then be transformed into political action. Since affective solidarity starts with the individual experiences of affective dissonance, it is a suitable concept for examining the connection between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity in the context of outsourcing domestic work. This concept helps us understand whether and how experiences of affective dissonance arising from the private employment relationship can lead to collective affective solidarity. Furthermore, Hemmings notes that affective solidarity is mindful of power and privilege as it emerges through shared emotions and the recognition of different experiences and different social positions, which, according to Federici (2016), is a prerequisite for solidarity to emerge between female employers and migrant domestic workers due to the different experiences and social positions they inhabit.

Hemmings (2012) explains that affective solidarity is the merging of an affective state (such as rage, frustration, passion, discomfort, or the desire for connection) with political action. These affective states lie at the core of transformations and can become a productive basis for solidarity. They start from a feeling of affective dissonance, which makes affective dissonance a prerequisite for affective solidarity to emerge. Affective dissonance refers to the discrepancy between our embodied sense of self and the social constraints that limit our actions and expressions. It highlights the inner conflict that arises when personal values or beliefs clash with actions and social roles imposed on us. Experiencing a sense of discrepancy in how one is acknowledged, feeling an ill fit with social expectations, a sense of being undervalued, and perceiving the same dissonance in others can generate political action rooted in affective dissonance. This dissonance which can lead to political action is thus a result of the affective tensions (conflicting emotions and feelings of discomfort) between one's emotional experiences related to injustices and the awareness of social injustices in others. In the context of outsourcing domestic work, the inequalities and power imbalances in the relationship may lead to affective tensions as employers recognize injustice in the precarious working situations of the migrant domestic workers they employ. Employing a migrant domestic worker may also come with a

heightened awareness of being limited in actions for employers, as they may realize that women can never fully let go of their domestic responsibilities, while their actions of hiring a migrant domestic worker can conflict with their values and embodied sense of self which can lead to affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012).

However, while affective dissonance is a prerequisite for affective solidarity, it does not automatically lead to political action. Hemmings (2012) mentions that it can also be suppressed or used to alter interpersonal relationships, such as by demonstrating individual practices of solidarity, which Hemmings sees as an unsatisfying outcome of solidarity that starts from individual experiences of affective dissonance, as she is concerned with the emergence of collective political action. How individuals process affective dissonance and whether it can be transformed into political action depends on what they can or cannot live with and how much they want to change gender relations. How employers manage the affective tensions and the (possible) subsequent affective dissonance of outsourcing domestic work and the implications for both individual and collective practices of solidarity, will be discussed in the results chapters.

3. (De)Regulating the outsourcing of domestic work: the Dutch case

The Netherlands is an interesting case for studying feminist solidarity in the context of outsourcing domestic work. Firstly, the Netherlands has a specific regulation for domestic work, the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis,* which is an exclusionary policy aimed at deregulating and privatizing the domestic work sector, as I will illustrate in this chapter. Secondly, the Netherlands is home to groups of self-organized migrant domestic workers who have been unionized since 2006 as the Migrant Domestic Workers Union. This union is part of the transnational network of migrant domestic workers who are becoming visible and advocating for their rights through organizations like the ILO (Lim, 2016; Eleveld & Van Hooren, 2018).

The Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis

The *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* which was implemented in 2007 regulates the outsourcing of domestic work by private households. Under the regulation, households that outsource domestic work for less than four days a week are not classified as formal employers and therefore do not have the same obligations as formal employers; they are not required to deduct wage tax and contributions for employee insurance schemes. Because households do not have to pay social security contributions, domestic workers have limited access to social security benefits, such as unemployment benefits, disability insurance coverage, or pensions. Domestic workers are entitled to certain basic labor rights; at least the legal minimum wage must be paid, holiday allowance must be provided, and wages must be paid during vacation for up to four weeks and during illness for up to six weeks instead of the regular two years. This applies not only to domestic workers who can work under the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* but to anyone who performs paid domestic work, including undocumented migrant domestic workers (Panteia, 2014; Van Hooren, 2018). Although the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* has been in effect since 2007, few people who outsource domestic work are aware of the regulation. Research firm Panteia surveyed knowledge of employer obligations in 2013. Only 5% of the outsourcing households have a good understanding of laws and regulations which is understandable as there is no enforcement or monitoring to ensure that the regulation is followed. This translates into a low number of households utilizing the regulation. Obligations such as paying the legal minimum wage, paying wages during illness and vacation, and holiday allowance are thus often not met (Panteia, 2014).

By excluding employers from obligations to pay taxes or social security contributions, and domestic workers from certain labor rights, the regulation essentially condones informal and highly precarious employment (Van Hooren, 2018). Not granting domestic workers the same rights as other workers is legitimized by policymakers based on the idea that the supply in the informal domestic services market consists of women with a (male) breadwinning partner who do not need social protection,

thereby disregarding the situation of (undocumented) domestic workers who fully rely on doing this work for their livelihood (Botman, 2011; Van Hooren, 2018).

To understand this exclusionary regulation, it is important to know why it was implemented. According to the government, the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* aims to stimulate the domestic services market by simplifying and reducing the cost for individual households to hire domestic help, as well as to formalize undeclared work. The idea behind stimulating the domestic services market is that it could reduce dependence on the welfare state as it creates employment opportunities for low-skilled and lower-educated Dutch women who receive social welfare. Additionally, it would allow women who earn enough to be able to outsource domestic work to increase their labor participation (Botman, 2011; Panteia, 2014). Households that want to outsource domestic work need to make use of the services available on the (informal) market. This is a trend that is also evident in other European countries, where care work in general (which includes domestic work) is increasingly left to individual households relying on the market, keeping this sector private and privatized (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Stimulating the domestic services market is thus done by deregulating and privatizing the domestic services sector. This reinforces the dependence of domestic workers on their employers for their working conditions (Anderson, 2000).

The low utilization of the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* is not solely due to employers' lack of knowledge about the regulation (Panteia, 2014), but also because the state allows a significant portion of the workforce to remain in the informal market. The Netherlands is hesitant to welcome foreigners into the domestic work sector because the government wants to reserve this sector for working-class Dutch women or long-term residents, making it nearly impossible for undocumented migrants engaged in domestic work to obtain a residence permit (Botman, 2011; Van Walsum, 2011). The thought process is that if there are unemployed women in the Netherlands, they can fill the vacancies in the domestic services sector as it is labeled as 'unskilled labor' (Van Hooren, 2018). However, the reality is that (undocumented) migrant domestic workers are the ones filling the vacancies as not enough Dutch women (are willing to) perform domestic work. The state thus benefits from the existence of the informal labor market in which (undocumented) migrant domestic workers operate, as the domestic services market is stimulated by the existence of this group, not by the rarely used *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*.

The Migrant Domestic Workers Union

Whereas the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* works to the economic advantage of both the state and employers, it puts (undocumented) migrant domestic workers in precarious employment situations. With the introduction of the *Koppelingswet* (Linking Act) in 1998, it became more difficult and precarious for undocumented migrants to work and reside in the Netherlands, due to restricted

access to public services and increased enforcement of immigration laws. It was in this context of increased enforcement that undocumented migrant domestic workers began to self-organize in 2004, two years before they joined the largest Dutch trade union, the FNV (Eleveld & Van Hooren, 2018). Despite the isolation that comes with working in private households they managed to organize themselves and chose to become publicly visible as political subjects advocating for their rights (Eleveld & van Hooren, 2018; Glaser, 2023). Their goals are twofold: first, they want the Dutch government to ratify ILO C189 and implement its provisions, recognizing domestic work as decent work which will lead to better working conditions. Second, they advocate for work permits for undocumented migrant domestic workers to grant them access to social security. With these objectives, they are essentially seeking recognition for the work they do and the contributions they make to the Dutch economy and society, for which visibility is a necessary means (Eleveld & van Hooren, 2018; *FNV Migrant Domestic Workers Union,* 2024). By joining the FNV, it became possible for them to increase their visibility as a group in the public sphere and make their rights claims heard. However, research by Eleveld & Van Hooren (2018) shows that while joining the FNV has increased the visibility of migrant domestic workers in the public sphere and served as a place of resistance, the more radical rights claims specifically applicable to the situation of undocumented migrant domestic workers such as work permits and issues of citizenship have been rendered invisible. This is the result of the union not considering issues of citizenship within the framework of the union; they deal with labor and not with documentation (Van Hooren, Ledoux, Apitzsch & Eleveld, 2022). This illustrates that, despite unionization and the formation of alliances, advocating specifically for the rights of undocumented migrant domestic workers is still largely done by the self-organized migrant domestic workers themselves.

4. Research design and methodology

To examine how feminist solidarity takes shape in the context of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers, I employed a qualitative research strategy incorporating both interviews and focus groups with female employers of female migrant domestic workers as well as with female self-organized migrant domestic workers. I chose the combination of these methods as the interviews more easily allow for collecting data on the employment relationship in the private sphere of the home. Due to their defining character of group interaction, focus groups more easily allow for data collection on the question of involving employers in the migrant domestic worker movement. The fieldwork took place from September 2023 to January 2024. In this section, I will first discuss the interviews and focus group with employers, followed by the focus group and interviews with self-organized migrant domestic workers. I will end with a discussion of the ethical considerations, positionality, and methodological limitations of this study.

4.1 Employers

Interviews

I conducted a total of 15 interviews with female employers of migrant domestic workers. The aim of these interviews was twofold: to gain an understanding of employers' perspectives on feminist and solidarity issues related to domestic work and the societal position of migrant domestic workers, and to understand, in relation to these perspectives, their employment practices and how they shape the employment relationship. Because of my interest in the complexity of the personal ties between women who outsource domestic work to female migrant domestic workers, and the related question of solidarity, I only interviewed female employers. Specifically, I focused on female employers who feel involved with feminism and/or good employment practices for migrant domestic workers. This allows for an exploration of solidarity in the ‘best case scenario’ compared to employers who do not care about or engage in good employment practices for migrant domestic workers. I did not set specific criteria for this selection but took it into account during the sampling process, using purposive sampling as a strategy (Coyne, 1997). One way I found participants who met this focus was by contacting employers via social media who had commented under certain posts, such as from Atria and other feminist accounts about fair wages for domestic workers. Additionally, within the purposive sampling strategy, I utilized convenience and snowball sampling. I started by looking for participants within my network, and through some of these participants I was able to connect with new participants. Most of my participants were found through this method (Coyne, 1997).

The interviews, except for two—one was conducted in a café and one online—all took place in the employers’ homes which allowed me to observe and absorb the context in which the domestic work is outsourced. The interviews were semi-structured in-depth interviews, for which I used an interview

guide with several pre-prepared topics with questions and statements. The interviews lasted from a minimum of 50 minutes to a maximum of an hour and a half. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, after each interview, I wrote an analytic memo as soon as possible about things that stood out to me, which helped me to 'think as I go' during the fieldwork (Lareau, 2021). The memos allowed me to adjust my interview guide as they provided insight into which questions elicited fruitful responses and which did not. I later used the memos during the analysis of my data.

In the analysis of my data, I used thematic analysis in which I adopted Saldaña's (2012) distinction between first and second-cycle coding. I used ATLAS.ti to code the data. The first cycle of coding consisted of initial coding to gain a thorough and complete understanding of the content of my data. During the coding process, several themes emerged that I subsequently coded and grouped in the second cycle of coding using focused coding to obtain a clear overview of the variation within themes. During the second-cycle coding, I was guided by the abductive analysis approach by Timmermans & Tavory (2012). I found my data to be full of contradictory statements. Working through and understanding these contradictory statements required me to revisit the data in different forms and at different moments in the research process—in memo form, in the context of the full interview, and in relation to other quotes coded in ATLAS.ti that were different but also contradictory in the same way. As part of the analysis, I tried to form different links between these contradictions and possible theoretical explanations for them, thus utilizing the revisiting of the data and alternative casing techniques of the abductive analysis approach to make sense of the contradictory statements in my data.

Focus group

In addition to conducting interviews with female employers, I also organized a focus group. The focus group aimed to foster a discussion on what solidarity between female employers and migrant domestic workers looks and should look like, and on the role employers can play in advocating for the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers. In a focus group participants can build upon each other's ideas and experiences, challenge assumptions, and offer alternative viewpoints, which made it possible to discuss solidarity (Kitzinger, 2005). I noticed that this topic was often too abstract and a far-off concern to explore in-depth during most interviews. Furthermore, during the interviews, I noticed that many participants mentioned feelings of discomfort about outsourcing domestic work but found it difficult to reflect on the origins of these feelings in an interview setting. In a homogeneous group setting, participants feel safer sharing and can more concretely discuss these feelings by relating to each other's experiences (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009).

The focus group had a homogeneous composition, with a newly formed group consisting of female employers who feel involved with feminism and/or good employment practices for migrant domestic

workers. For this focus group, I invited employers in my network as well as several employers who are involved with the position of migrant domestic workers through their work or other means. I chose this approach because, as a moderator, I did not want to intervene too much during the discussion. The presence of employers with extensive knowledge of the position of migrant domestic workers prevented me from having to explain a lot, such as details about the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis.* In the preparations and during the focus group itself, I was assisted by Marijke, who is involved with self-organized migrant domestic workers through her work. With her knowledge of the field, she provided me with suggestions for possible focus group topics and advised me on who to approach.

The focus group consisted of 7 participants, lasted almost 2 hours, and took place in a room on the Roeterseiland campus in Amsterdam. I moderated the session myself, with assistance from Marijke, who occasionally asked questions or provided further clarification. Additionally, there was someone present to take notes who specifically noted non-verbal cues such as nodding and indications of agreement or disagreement on certain points. The focus group was recorded using two phones placed on either side of the room to ensure everyone was audible. Subsequently, the focus group was transcribed. In analyzing the focus group, I used the same approach as I did with the interviews. Additionally, I focused on waves of agreement and disagreement during the focus group for which I used the matrix for assessing the level of consensus in a focus group designed by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009). Filling in this matrix, which consists of positioning participants on a spectrum of agreement or disagreement regarding various focus group questions and topics, allowed me to draw connections between the participants' positions on different points, making the context of their arguments and positions more complete.

4.2 Self-organized migrant domestic workers

The self-organized migrant domestic workers that I spoke with during my fieldwork are all members of both Filipino Migrants in Solidarity (FILMIS), an organization consisting largely of undocumented Filipino migrant domestic workers, and the Migrant Domestic Workers Union as they largely overlap in members. Through Instagram, I got in touch with FILMIS. After explaining my research and my position as a student, I was invited to their general assembly. Following this initial event, I attended three more events hosted by the organization. Although my two main research methods are interviews and a focus group, my data collection on self-organized migrant domestic workers also has an ethnographic character. In the results section, I will also refer to the information I obtained from my presence at these events. In this section, I will first discuss the focus group with the self-organized migrant domestic workers as the focus group took place before the interviews.

Focus group

I conducted a focus group with five self-organized migrant domestic workers. This focus group aimed to gain insight into their views on how employment relationships are shaped and how they should be shaped, as well as their experiences with involving employers in their movement. The focus group took place at the Wereldhuis in The Hague after a FairWork training because it was a convenient moment as the self-organized migrant domestic workers were already gathered at the location. The focus group consisted of a pre-existing homogeneous group and lasted only about 40 minutes, shorter than I had initially planned. The training ran over time, leaving less time for the focus group. For this reason, I did not discuss the first topic of my focus group guide about individual experiences with employers and how employment relationships are shaped. However, the other two topics on employers' practices of solidarity (or the lack thereof) and experiences of involving employers in the movement were discussed. The first topic was later covered in the interviews that followed with the focus group participants. The focus group was recorded and subsequently transcribed. I analyzed the focus group in the same manner as the focus group with employers.

Interviews

After the focus group took place, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with four members who had participated in the focus group. At the end of the focus group, I asked the participants if they were open to doing an interview with me, and all five participants said they were. Due to scheduling difficulties, four interviews were ultimately conducted. In these interviews, I discussed their individual experiences with their employers and probed further into topics that were discussed during the focus group. All interviews were conducted online and lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. They were recorded and later transcribed. For the analysis, I used the same approach for these interviews as I used for the interviews with employers. Additionally, since these were the same participants, I included the transcript of the focus group in the analysis.

4.3 Ethical considerations and positionality

Two ethical themes have been central to the ethical considerations made in this thesis: the impact of the research on the participants and privacy concerns. Starting with the impact of the research on the participants, to ensure the do no harm principle participants need to give their informed consent before participating in the research. Informed consent entails that participants freely agree to take part in the research while being fully, or as fully as possible, informed about its purpose (Bryman, 2016). Based on Bryman's definition (2016), I discussed the research objectives, procedures, the right to decline participation, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. I also highlighted the dynamic character of consent, assuring my participants that participation could be declined at any moment or in some instances, for example, if they didn't want to answer certain questions.

Another important ethical consideration, grounded in feminist research methods, is ensuring that my research not only avoids harm but also positively impacts the participants. Considering aftercare is important in this context. I am aware that my presence, interest, and involvement with the migrant domestic workers' movement affects its members. To avoid merely 'extracting' information for my research and then leaving and never showing interest again, I find it important to report my findings back constructively. Additionally, I aim to maintain my involvement with the self-organized migrant domestic workers beyond the official fieldwork period, continuing at least until the end of the thesis process and hopefully longer.

Continuing with the privacy concerns, two points regarding privacy are particularly important in the context of this research. First, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is more complex in a focus group setting compared to individual interviews, as I cannot control what other participants do or say after the focus group. However, I emphasized to the participants that as a researcher I can ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and I asked them not to mention any names if they discussed their thoughts about the focus group with others afterward. Second, to achieve anonymization in this thesis it was necessary to take extra measures for the self-organized migrant domestic workers compared to the employers, as they are a small and visible group. There are various sources where participants are mentioned by name, photo, and their story. Therefore, pseudonymization alone was not sufficient. Information about their role within FILMIS and personal details, such as how long they have been in the Netherlands, were also deleted. I did this to ensure that the data from this thesis cannot be linked to other sources, thereby reducing the risk of re-identification.

Positionality

I will discuss my positionality based on Reyes' (2020) notion of the ethnographic toolkit. Reyes argues that we strategically draw on both our visible and invisible tools in our ethnographic toolkit which shapes our access to various people and places, as well as the field dynamics during the fieldwork. Visible tools include aspects such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity, while invisible tools include aspects such as a person's social capital and networks. During my fieldwork, I was in contact with two groups: female employers of migrant domestic workers, who are predominantly white, non-migrant, and middle- or upper-class, and (mostly) undocumented self-organized female migrant domestic workers. With both groups I used my ethnographic toolkit in different ways. With the employers, my visible and invisible tools aligned closely with theirs—being white, Dutch, non-migrant, and university-educated (like most of them) —positioning me more as an insider to this group. I used my network and my position as a university student to get access to this group, which went quite smoothly for these two reasons. I believe people were more inclined to make time for an interview or were willing to participate in the focus group because they were familiar with who I was and were willing to help because they could relate to my situation as a university student, either from

their own experiences or those of their children. In contrast, with the self-organized migrant domestic workers, I shared fewer visible or invisible tools, positioning me more as an outsider. Before starting my fieldwork, I was a little worried about whether the self-organized migrant domestic workers would be interested in having a master's student present at their events, as this group already receives quite some attention from a group of researchers. In my contact with the self-organized migrant domestic workers, I specifically emphasized my research interest in the question of involving employers in the migrant domestic workers' movement, as I knew that was a question of importance to them, as well as my interest in staying involved with their organization for a longer period, at least beyond the official fieldwork period. My worries proved to be unnecessary, as I was warmly welcomed by the members of FILMIS.

4.4 Methodological limitations

A limitation of this research design is that the perspective of migrant domestic workers who are not part of a self-organized organization is not included in this thesis as getting access proved unsuccessful. I first intended to speak with migrant domestic workers from the same employment relationship as the employers I interviewed. I was primarily interested in how migrant domestic workers experience their employers' actions and how they would shape the employment relationship. However, as participant recruitment began with employers, gaining access to migrant domestic workers posed challenges due to the power dynamics between employers and migrant domestic workers, raising concerns about the migrant domestic workers' freedom to speak and participate in the interviews voluntarily. I managed to speak with one migrant domestic worker from the same employment relationship, but ultimately, this interview was not included in the analysis. I also tried to interview migrant domestic workers whose employers I had not interviewed. In various ways I tried to get access to possible participants, such as through Facebook cleaning groups, my network, and by putting up notes on notice boards in supermarkets. However, this approach proved unsuccessful as I received either no response or initially received a reply but no follow-up. The absence of this group in this thesis means I can only reflect on perceptions of the employment relationship and how it should be shaped from self-organized migrant domestic workers' viewpoints. However, their affiliation with organizations like FILMIS and the Migrant Domestic Workers Union may introduce bias due to their informed understanding of their rights and reflective discussions within the organization on employment dynamics. Moreover, as this group primarily consists of undocumented individuals, their experiences may not shed light on those of documented migrant domestic workers in the Netherlands.

5. Affective tensions of outsourcing domestic work

"Psychologically, apparently, it is better to clean up your own mess (laughter)" (Iris)

This comment was made by one of the participants during the focus group after employers had just shared feelings of emotional burden, discomfort, and shame about the outsourcing of domestic work to a female migrant domestic worker. In the private sphere of the home employers and migrant domestic workers are confronted with the inequalities structuring their encounters (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). To understand how employers make sense of and consequently address these inequalities and related questions of solidarity in the employment relationship, this chapter focuses on affective tensions—the conflicting emotions and feelings of discomfort that can lead to affective dissonance, an inner conflict arising from the discrepancies of being involved in outsourcing domestic work (Hemmings, 2012). I will argue that managing the affective tensions plays a crucial role in how employers shape the employment relationship. This chapter thus lays the groundwork for the following chapters in which chapter six will delve into the private and individual sphere of solidarity, examining how employers address these affective tensions in the employment relationship. Chapter seven will focus on the public and collective sphere of solidarity, examining the lack of collective solidarity among employers with the migrant domestic workers' movement. In the current chapter, I will first discuss class guilt, as it allows for an understanding of how inequalities in class positions shape affective tensions for employers. Then, I will introduce the concept of feminist guilt, as I observed similar affective tensions among my participants arising from the inability to reconcile outsourcing domestic work to female migrant domestic workers with their feminist beliefs and values. After discussing class and feminist guilt, I will go into the participants' reluctance to mention the racial dimension of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers in the interviews and focus group.

5.1 Class guilt

My research reveals that participants experience class guilt because they struggle with justifying the class differences between themselves and the migrant domestic workers they employ, and because they are aware of their complicity in maintaining these class differences. This feeling of class guilt is expressed in their difficulty with embracing material differences, which Mathilde her story shows: *"That's something I do feel embarrassed about from time to time, about how much money we have. I can feel really uneasy about how good we have it and how bad other people have it.*" During the interview, Mathilde elaborated that there's no direct connection between hard work and income, as she believed domestic workers work just as hard, if not harder than she does. Her discomfort thus isn't solely about the income disparity, but that it is related to the devaluation of domestic work, resulting in low payment. Van Eijk (2013) argues that people do not necessarily struggle with the existence of class differences, but rather with the implications they carry—a hierarchy of worthiness. Mathilde's

comments reflect this, the devaluation of domestic work which is connected to its racialized and feminized labor force, implies a hierarchy of worthiness which makes Mathilde feel uneasy about how much money she has in comparison to the migrant domestic worker she employs.

Lara also felt discomfort about the material differences between her and the migrant domestic worker she employs:

> *That discomfort picks up in very small things. For example, I had bought a new computer, and the old one was standing in the hallway, waiting for a new destination. Then my cleaner asked if she could have it, and I did feel burdened about that because I had a working computer standing there while she didn't even have one.*

During the focus group in a discussion on fair payment for migrant domestic workers, Lara stated the following: *"Maybe it is also that you have to recognize for yourself that you are not a very good employer after all, I think well that 25 euros I never got around to, maybe I should have arranged that more sharply."* The 25 euros that Lara mentions is the hourly wage that migrant domestic workers should receive to ensure they reach the minimum wage, calculated by the FNV, assuming they do not receive separate benefits such as holiday allowance and have to cover their insurance costs, while simultaneously compensating for the lack of social rights. This topic had been previously discussed in the focus group. Lara came back to this incident of the still working computer standing in the hallway, explaining that she feels partly responsible for the migrant domestic worker's request for her to have the computer as she paid her too little to be able to afford one herself. It is thus not only that there is a difference in material goods that gives Lara a feeling of discomfort, but that her position as an employer makes her complicit in the class differences between her and the migrant domestic worker she employs.

In addition to experiencing class guilt because of the complicity in maintaining class differences and the perceived hierarchy of worthiness based on these differences, the middle-class identity that many of my participants identify with can also create a sense of class guilt based on not being able to reconcile values associated with some members of the middle class, such as self-reliance, and the outsourcing of domestic work to migrant domestic workers (Lan, 2003). Eva shares her experience of class guilt as a middle-class employer:

> *When Fatima started with us, I found that awkward. Allowing someone to clean up your mess, so to speak, I found that uncomfortable. I feel like I should just clean up my own mess and keep things tidy. That's how I was raised at home, you know; we didn't have a cleaner at home.*

Eva refers to her middle-class identity by recalling how she was brought up in a household where employing a domestic worker was not considered normal. Eva was not the only participant to refer to being the first in their family to have a domestic worker employed, Doris, Linda, and Mathilde also mentioned this, indicating that some of the participants are social climbers. By emphasizing their middle-class identity, the participants distance themselves from the upper class, thereby distancing themselves from cultural depictions of the wealthy elite who hire a full household staff with whom the participants do not share the same views on outsourcing domestic work (Glaser, 2023). Emphasizing their middle-class identity creates class guilt for these participants on the one hand, because it creates affective dissonance between values belonging to their middle-class identity such as self-reliance around the household, as Eva's quote illustrates, and the outsourcing of domestic work. At the same time, affirming their middle-class identity is also a way for participants to cope with class guilt by decreasing the class distance between themselves and the migrant domestic workers they employ by identifying strongly with their middle-class position, even though some of the employers belong to the upper middle class or even the upper class in terms of material wealth.

Emphasizing their middle-class identity is not the only way employers symbolically decrease the class distance to the migrant domestic workers they employ. While some employers, like Eva, who identify with the middle-class value of 'self-reliance' feel that they should be doing the housework themselves, not all employers share this sentiment. Josephine, for example, couldn't understand why some people felt ashamed for not cleaning their own house. These employers emphasized that cleaning is just another job and highlighted the professionalism of the domestic workers. *"I really can't do it as well myself,"* Iris said during the focus group. By viewing cleaning as a profession and seeing the migrant domestic workers as professionals, these employers minimize class differences by symbolically placing the migrant domestic workers in a higher class, closer to their own.

5.2 Feminist guilt

During the focus group, Lara raised the question of how they, as feminists, justify having another woman clean their homes from a feminist perspective. She explained that feminism plays a role in her feelings of discomfort associated with outsourcing domestic work to a female migrant domestic worker and that she noticed that within her circle of friends, primarily consisting of second-wave feminists, her friends also struggle with justifying outsourcing domestic work to themselves and others.

Lara's remark that it's hard for feminists to justify outsourcing domestic work to a female migrant domestic worker indicates that the participants' feminist ideals are incompatible with outsourcing domestic work to female migrant domestic workers and the option of not outsourcing, as they would otherwise choose not to outsource. On the one hand, outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic

workers in a system of deregulation, privatization, and devaluation doesn't align with their feminist ideals. Doris states the following: *"The fact that it's poorly paid and that as a worker, in this case, a cleaner, you can't rely on some basic rights, I find that very problematic."* Good employment practices can somewhat reduce the affective tension from outsourcing in this system, for instance by paying well, but that doesn't change the situation in which the feminist employers outsource in a system where domestic work is deregulated, privatized, and undervalued, not ensuring basic rights for domestic workers. They feel that by outsourcing in this system they are complicit in the poor legal and social position of the migrant domestic workers they employ. On the other hand, doing all the household work themselves also doesn't align with the feminist ideals of these employers either. Several participants linked their feminism to inequality in the distribution of household tasks they experienced early on in their lives. These experiences, this sense of injustice, moved these participants to become feminists (Ahmed, 2017). Wietske and Sam shared their stories:

> Wietske: *From a young age, as a girl, I had to help my mother with housework, while my older brother didn't have to lift a finger. I found it unfair as if it was some kind of calling for women to do household chores and enjoy it—well, definitely not for me.*
>
> Sam: *I saw that my mother was unhappy just being a housewife. She was very intelligent—she always got straight A's on her report cards, but she had to attend a domestic school to learn how to cook. Now, there's nothing wrong with learning how to cook well, but if that's your life's destiny, that's absolutely not what I wanted.*

Employers find themselves unable to reconcile outsourcing domestic work in a system characterized by deregulation and privatization with their feminist ideals, while they also believe that they shouldn't be the ones doing all the housework themselves based on their feminist ideals. This isn't just a theoretical issue—they must address it in practice, which causes affective dissonance among participants as they question whether they, as employers, are acting in line with their feminist beliefs. For example, during her interview, Wietske admitted that she found it challenging to reflect on the idea that she might not be as good an employer to her current and previous migrant domestic workers as she would like to think of herself. She explained that she sees herself as a practicing, almost in a legal manner, feminist with what she calls 'a union approach,' as she has been involved in equalizing salaries between men and women at her workplace. However, she hasn't been ensuring fundamental workers' rights for the migrant domestic workers she employs, which does not align with her view of herself as a practicing feminist.

Lara's comment that she and her friends struggle with justifying outsourcing domestic work to a female migrant domestic worker also reveals that the image of themselves as feminists in other people's eyes leads to feelings of shame about employing a migrant domestic worker. As Lara further

explained, this sense of shame prevents them from talking openly about employing a migrant domestic worker, which in turn prevents discussions about what constitutes fair payment and good employment practices. This tendency to avoid these conversations means that the employment relationship, already in the private sphere, remains a private matter, further reinforcing the invisible character of paid domestic work.

5.3 Class and gender, but what about race?

Where feelings of class and feminist guilt emerged from the data as sources of affective tensions, I want to emphasize that the racial dimension of the inequalities between female employers and migrant domestic workers did not. In the transnational context of outsourcing domestic work, it is not only the feminized labor force but the feminized and racialized labor force that is connected to the social devaluation of domestic work (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Participants associated class and feminist guilt with the devaluation of domestic work, but the racial dimension underlying this devaluation was not discussed, except by one participant, Johanna:

> *I do think that this is part of why the domestic profession is so underestimated. Because it involves mainly women, and on top of that, women with a migration background. This aspect of considering domestic work and the domestic workers as inferior, because they are mostly women of color with a migration background, is just a small offshoot of the enormous problem of racism that is deeply woven into our entire society*.

Johanna mentions that the devaluation of domestic work is related to racism deeply embedded in Dutch society. In her interview, she elaborates further on this:

> *We are all part of a society built on the backs of people of color, from which we as white people benefit. It is such a large, complex issue. You can see that within activist intersectional groups, work is being done towards anti-racism within the white community. But look at how people still view Zwarte Piet (Black Pete). It is bizarre how poorly white people can listen.*

Johanna ends with the statement that white people are poor listeners. Based on the work of both Essed & Hoving (2014) and Wekker (2016), we can understand this remark and the largely absent racial dimension in the data. Essed & Hoving (2014) and Wekker (2016) both mention in their work on Dutch racism that innocence is a Dutch way of being towards race. In this context, innocence is also related to ignorance; it involves not knowing, but also not wanting to know, and rejecting the

possibility of knowing something that, with a little bit of effort, one should know—what Essed & Hoving (2014) describe as a position of smug ignorance. The inability of white people to listen when it comes to racism, as Johanna mentions, is an outcome of a position of smug ignorance. It is not that white people are just poor listeners, they do not want to listen to maintain their innocent and ignorant position towards the operations of racism. By not mentioning the racial dimension as a source of inequality and affective tensions in the employment relationship, employers maintain their innocent position regarding the acknowledgment that race also contributes to the devaluation of domestic work and the inequalities within the employment, keeping their position of smug ignorance.

6. The personal is political: navigating (good) employment practices

In the previous chapter, I discussed the affective tensions that employers experience due to the outsourcing of domestic work. In this chapter, I will examine how employers manage these affective tensions in the employment relationship. My research reveals two strategies that employers use, mostly combined. The first strategy is the focus on individual practices of solidarity, where employers address affective tensions by seeking a personal, friendly relationship of assistance with the migrant domestic workers they employ. The second strategy is distancing from employer responsibilities. I will end this chapter with a discussion of how these practices affect the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers in the employment relationship.

6.1 Individual practices of solidarity

The focus group with employers started with writing down on post-its what good employment practices for migrant domestic workers meant. It became clear that elements like good payment and paying all the mandatory benefits such as holiday pay, and sick leave were essential for being a good employer, but an interesting discussion arose about the post-its 'interest in the well-being of the domestic worker,' 'helping with problems,' and 'knowledge of backgrounds/circumstances of the domestic worker' as one of the participants wondered if these are indeed conditions for good employment practices.

Following this comment, there was consensus in the focus group that a distinction should be made between having a close personal relationship, in which there is a genuine interest in the migrant domestic worker, and 'helping with problems' based on this personal relationship. Most of the participants had a close personal friendship-like bond with the migrant domestic worker they employed, as Brechtje stated: *"It's more than just 'hello, how are you'; if you've been having coffee together every Wednesday morning for 12 years, you really become part of each other's lives."* The employers considered this personal relationship, in which there is interest in the well-being of the migrant domestic worker and an understanding of the worker's background/circumstances, crucial to being a good employer, mainly to be able to anticipate well in situations related to family matters or other issues. But it also became clear from the interviews that employers preferred a personal relationship as they benefit from it. Emma explains: "*The personal connection also brings a certain degree of security and a sense of responsibility that you don't have when a different person from an agency shows up each time."* Emma thus personalizes the relationship to make sure the job gets done well. During her interview, Eva tells me that she prefers a personal relationship where she can have coffee with the migrant domestic worker she employs, but that the migrant domestic worker is less interested in this personal relationship and often goes straight to work. Eva says*: "I always felt a bit disappointed when she didn't want to have a drink, so I was really happy when she finally had a cup of*

coffee with me—really happy, you know, haha." For Eva personalizing the relationship is a way to deal with her affective tensions of outsourcing domestic work. In forming a close personal relationship with the migrant domestic workers they employ, most participants tried to minimize the hierarchies in the employment relationship such as by finding common ground, as Wietske tells me. She explained that she often started conversations about gardening because the migrant domestic worker she employed knew a lot about Surinamese vegetables. By choosing a topic that the migrant domestic worker had more knowledge of, Wietske tried to reduce the power hierarchy in the relationship to manage her feelings of class and feminist guilt.

While employers try to minimize power differences by personalizing the relationship with migrant domestic workers, they simultaneously use their power as the "Wealthy Madame," as Brechtje puts it, to give assistance to migrant domestic workers in various forms. The giving of assistance is not seen as a necessity for good employment practices by the participants in the focus group but is done to manage affective tensions and out of solidarity based on the close personal relationship they have established. Among my participants who have a close personal relationship with the migrant domestic worker they employ, most have given some form of assistance, often unsolicited, to them. The examples range from taking children to school, helping book vacations to avoid scamming, filing taxes, assisting with asylum procedures, to lending money. Linda explains in what form, and why, she has tried to help the migrant domestic worker who she used to employ:

> *I hired a woman from Colombia for quite a while, and she was very sad about never seeing her child. If I put myself in her place, I thought it was just awful and she didn't have the possibility to do anything about it either. Then at one point, I made a note for her other employers, saying, gosh, shall we all bring her child over for Christmas? Almost everyone but one thought it was a great idea.*

Roos also shares that she did a lot for the migrant domestic worker she employs, like helping pay for plane tickets to Brazil, where the migrant domestic worker is from. Roos explains: "*I've done important things for her, but that was important for me too because we've become good friends."* Roos's experience, as well as those of most of the participants who developed a close friendship-like relationship of assistance, shows that a personal bond can lead to individual practices of solidarity in the employment relationship based on feelings of care and concern (Dean, 1996).

In the discussion about good employment practices during the focus group, one participant mentioned that 'helping with problems' carries a bit of a paternalistic flavor due to the power dynamics in the relationship, and because it's usually not the migrant domestic workers who ask for help, but employers who offer it unsolicited. Notably, the question of paternalism came up in relation to giving

assistance in the employment relationship. This highlights what participants mention about using their privileged position of power when giving assistance, which they believe amplifies the hierarchy and inequality in the relationship. In contrast, they feel that a close personal relationship would equalize things more. However, giving assistance can improve the personal circumstances of the migrant domestic workers, which works to equalize the relationship more than just a personal friendship-like relationship without the offering of assistance.

Most participants in the focus group did not necessarily view helping with problems, even when unsolicited, as paternalistic because of the personal bond they developed with the migrant domestic workers they employ, they did however question how far this should go: *"Helping someone as an individual, when you see they need a hand, there's nothing wrong with that. The question is, where does it stop? It's also important as an employer that you don't get overwhelmed,"* says Diede. While a personal bond can indeed lead to individual practices of solidarity as shown by the examples of Linda and Roos, there are also cases where this got overwhelming for employers. Iris and Josephine share their experiences:

> Iris: *with my previous cleaner I had a very close relationship, I supervised pretty much her whole asylum procedure and took her children to swimming lessons, it was very intensive. But the cleaning did diminish, but I couldn't fire her either. Then I thought with the next one I'll keep a respectful distance.*
>
> Josephine: *I studied law so I also understand it better than she does, but at one point I was with the immigration police, she was stateless very complicated, then she got a Dutch nationality and then she wanted to borrow money. That inequality that I was the Rich Madame and that she could ask inexhaustibly, in a very sweet way, but keep asking, I was very unhappy about that so I decided I never wanted that again.*

These quotes show that in some cases, the relationship in which assistance is given is seen as a burden and that there is a limit to the individual practices of solidarity. Employers are willing to give assistance to manage affective tensions based on the close personal relationship, but this willingness has its limits. It should not require too much work, either emotionally or in terms of time and financial investments. Notably, when individual practices of solidarity can truly make a lasting difference in the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers, such as by supporting asylum applications as illustrated by these quotes, employers perceive it as too intensive. The employers do not necessarily seem to have a problem with the paternalistic flavor of the relationship in which assistance is given, but rather with the fact that it can become too overwhelming in certain situations.

Employers thus create closeness with the migrant domestic worker they employ (Lan, 2003), which they understand as good employment practices, to manage their affective tensions and because they benefit from the reliance that comes with a close personal relationship. This relationship may lead to individual practices of solidarity in the form of giving assistance to the migrant domestic worker they employ. However, such assistance is often unsolicited and limited and arises solely because of the existence of a close personal relationship, which does not always benefit migrant domestic workers as it complicates discussing their working conditions with their employers. I will delve deeper into this in section 6.3.

6.2 Distancing practices from employer responsibilities

As illustrated by the previous paragraph, most employers find it difficult to integrate a certain degree of distance into their employment relationship with migrant domestic workers, resulting in a relationship mainly characterized by a personal emotional bond and the giving of assistance to the migrant domestic worker. Among my participants, there was one employer, Sofie, who consciously chose an approach of respectful distance to ensure professionalism in the relationship. Sofie explains:

> *When it comes to being a good employer, I think there's a limit to the personal bond. That's what I mean by creating a respectful distance—you can be friendly, but you also need to be able to address performance issues and make clear agreements.*

Lan (2003) states that by using a corporate management style in their communication with domestic workers, employers can create a semblance of a private/public divide by seeing the house mainly as a workplace when the migrant domestic worker is present. This is also Sofie's preferred approach:

> *I've always taken a business-like approach. At the first meeting, I create an overview of what I want the domestic worker to do every week and every month, and I try to check regularly together how that list is going, and whether it's realistic. Then you have something to fall back on what's already been agreed upon.*

Sofie experienced less affective tensions than other focus group participants, such as the fear of addressing the migrant domestic worker about her cleaning performance which shows that a professional style, characterized by clear agreements and room for feedback, can decrease the affective tensions related to outsourcing domestic work for employers. For Sofie, a professional style means distancing from a close personal relationship, while also taking on the responsibilities of being an employer. Besides Sofie, another employer, Belle, also distanced herself from a personal relationship with the migrant domestic worker she employs, but she simultaneously distanced herself

from employer responsibilities, leading to a relationship largely marked by avoidance. It is notable that the other employers value having a personal friendship-like relationship, often giving assistance, while also employing distancing practices from employer responsibilities.

In her work, Glaser (2023) states that because domestic work is not valued as real work, employers often fail to see themselves as such. When employers adopt the label of 'employer' it forces them to confront their employment practices directly. In the interviews and focus group the participants repeatedly emphasized that they view domestic work as real work and value it highly. For example, Johanna said:

> "*It is a bit ironic that thanks to someone else, our house gets cleaned, allowing us to work more. On the other hand, it's just serious work as well, and we need to continue acknowledging that household chores are real work too*."

Although employers themselves acknowledge the value of domestic work, the institutional setting in which they outsource domestic work, characterized by privatization and deregulation, allows employers to easily distance themselves from the employer responsibilities and not adopt the label of 'employer'. In several interviews, it emerged that the informal employment of migrant domestic workers, which in most cases was seen by employers as a deliberate choice of the migrant domestic workers, served as a way for employers to create distance from their responsibilities as employers. Regarding the consideration to hire someone off the books, Mathilde shares the following:

> *I remember my boyfriend and I were talking about how I found it hard to hire a cleaner. And then my daughter asked, but why do you think that? So I said, 'Well, I would like her to earn enough. What if she falls down the stairs at my place? Then she has no insurance. Or, then she has to arrange that herself. But I don't like that either.' So, I thought maybe I'd like someone through an organization so that she is a bit more protected. But by hiring Sofia in the end I granted her what she wanted because she wanted to be paid under the table.*
>
> *I: Do you know if she has insurance now?*
>
> *M: No, I don't know at all. Bizarre right that I never actually asked about it? Maybe that is a good one though, to ask. It would actually be a great relief to me because, I am starting about the stairs again haha, but I would really hate it if she fell down my stairs. I feel responsible for that, yes. I'm not officially obliged to do anything, because*

> *she works illegally. That's her choice. But I would gladly pay her a few euros more if I could help pay for her insurance, for example.*

In this quote, Mathilde indicates that she had doubts about employing someone informally because she wants the migrant domestic worker to be paid fairly and to be insured for workplace accidents—things for which Mathilde is, at least in part, responsible. But instead of handling these matters properly, she uses Sofia's off-the-books status to avoid the employer tasks that a business would normally take on. She mentions that she worries about Sofia but takes no action to address the cause of her worries which is in this case Sofia's possible absence of insurance. Prattes (2020) argues that the outsourcing of domestic work is premised on a form of epistemic ignorance. Due to the structurally privileged and powerful position of employers, they can adopt a position of privileged irresponsibility—the privilege of not knowing. This position of privileged irresponsibility based on active forms of unknowing that employers utilize can be understood in this context as a way for employers to reduce affective tensions; by not knowing they avoid confronting their own employment practices and distance themselves from the precarious working conditions of the migrant domestic workers they employ. This is evident in Mathilde's quote; not inquiring about Sofia's insurance is a way to remain uninformed to distance herself from her responsibility for the precarious employment conditions of Sofia.

The result of distancing from the employer responsibilities is that employers do what they think is best in shaping the employment conditions as they, based on epistemic ignorance, do not try to find out what their official responsibilities are. Karlijn shared the following when I asked her what she pays her domestic worker:

> *Lastly, and this wasn't part of our agreement, but I always did it anyway. During the holidays, I paid her for two weeks, and she could go to Morocco for as long as she wanted. And for Christmas, she also got two weeks of paid time off plus an additional two-week bonus, so in December, she really got a kind of big year-end bonus. I thought that was pretty fair.*

In this case, the benefits that Karlijn provides, such as a holiday allowance and a Christmas bonus, could be viewed as relatively good employment practices since they mirror the benefits she receives in her own job, although in a reduced form. However, because these benefits are given without clear agreements, migrant domestic workers cannot rely on them. This results in uncertainty about their employment conditions, leaving them unsure of what to expect in terms of payment and benefits.

My research thus reveals that most participants do not distance themselves from the relationship with the migrant domestic worker they employ (Lan, 2003), but from the employer responsibilities that come with outsourcing domestic work, premised on a form of epistemic ignorance. This is driven by the deregulated and privatized institutional setting of outsourcing domestic work and the informal labor market in which all my participants operate. Since employers, through the distancing practices of employer responsibilities, do not (partially) resolve the affective tensions of outsourcing domestic work by having clear agreements about fair payment and good working conditions with the migrant domestic workers they employ, we can also understand their focus on a close personal relationship to manage these affective tensions.

6.3 Migrant domestic workers' personal circumstances in the employment relationship

The combination of distancing practices from employer responsibilities and the establishment of a close personal relationship of assistance results in unclear agreements about payment, working conditions, and expectations for migrant domestic workers. First, the distancing practices from employer responsibilities result in employers determining payment and working conditions based on what they consider proper, fair, and good, without considering the preferences of migrant domestic workers or making clear agreements. Bianca commented on this: *"I always get Christmas gifts such as chocolate, which is very nice, and I am happy with that, but I would rather receive just a little bit of extra money."* Second, Lutz (2008) notes that giving advice, charity, or care to migrant domestic workers can be reciprocated by, for example, extra hours of unpaid work, loyalty, and commitment, which makes it difficult for migrant domestic workers to negotiate their working conditions with their employers who they have established a close personal relationship with. Interviews with self-organized migrant domestic workers indeed show that participants struggle to advocate for their basic rights with employers with whom they have a personal, friendly relationship. Isabel said: *"I find it difficult to ask for a salary raise, you know my employers are very good and nice now, but everything is very expensive like public transport to get to my jobs."* The close personal relationship of assistance can improve the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers to a certain extent, but these individual practices of solidarity should not come at the expense of good working conditions and the ability to discuss them. It is interesting to note that the self-organized migrant domestic workers don't experience the relationship of assistance as one-sided. Rosa, for example, mentioned that her employers usually vent their feelings to her. She joked about this: *"I am their volunteer social worker haha."*

While most employers, except for Sofie, did not emphasize professionalism in the employment relationship, this is the most important condition for a good employment relationship according to the self-organized migrant domestic workers. Bianca mentions that a professional relationship in which

attention is paid to the domestic worker and her personal circumstances is crucial. She says: *"It's not that I want them to treat me like family, or even like a friend, but respect is very important and also a genuine interest in the worker."* The idea that a genuine interest in the workers is necessary for good employment practices overlaps between employers and self-organized migrant domestic workers. However, employers focus on establishing a close personal relationship, neglecting professionalism in this relationship while self-organized migrant domestic workers advocate for professionalism. Bianca believes that a certain degree of distance is essential to be able to have a professional relationship because she has had experiences with personal, friendly relationships in which too many unpaid favors were requested of her. According to self-organized migrant domestic workers, the employment relationship should involve clear mutual agreements and expectations, fair payment, good working conditions, and recognition of both their work and themselves with respect and interest.

According to Sofie, putting work agreements on paper helps with reducing affective tensions for employers. This raises the question of why employers do not make clearer agreements and document them, for example, through a self-drafted contract (of which many can be found online for the outsourcing of domestic work). The majority of the participants pay above the minimum wage and largely meet the working conditions set out in the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*, but because these practices are informal, good employment practices remain arbitrary. For employers working informally and having a contract do not seem to go together, which is connected to the deregulation of the domestic work sector. Grace says about this: *"They don't want to put it on paper, they are uncomfortable; for them, it is informal to not put anything on paper."* Additionally, having a contract would set limits on their flexibility and freedom to decide when to provide benefits. Emma explains: *"If someone is very often sick or cancels frequently, I feel less inclined to pay them fully during vacation."* A contract can thus provide clarity for both employers and migrant domestic workers regarding payment and working conditions which would lead to less precarious working conditions for migrant domestic workers. However, it requires employers to be less arbitrary in shaping these conditions, which means that they would lose their flexibility in shaping the working conditions.

To conclude this chapter, the combination of distancing practices from employer responsibilities and the establishment of a close personal relationship of assistance results in informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity in the employment relationship. These practices can only improve the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers in the employment relationship to a certain extent because of the lack of clear agreements and because the personal bond complicates the possibility for migrant domestic workers to discuss their working conditions with their employers. Furthermore, as these informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity are based on personal ties and are confined to the private sphere of the employment relationship, they do not

improve the social position of migrant domestic workers outside of the specific employment relationship.

7. Beyond the personal: solidarity with the migrant domestic workers' movement?

While the previous chapter focused on the individual sphere of solidarity in the employment relationship, this chapter will now shift focus to the collective sphere of solidarity. I will address the lack of collective solidarity from employers with the migrant domestic workers' movement, starting with a discussion of the experiences of self-organized migrant domestic workers with involving employers in their movement. I will then switch to the perspective of employers, discussing how they do not see a role for themselves in engaging with the collective actions of the self-organized migrant domestic workers or in organizing employers. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of how employers can contribute to the improvement of the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers outside of engaging in collective actions of the migrant domestic workers' movement.

7.1 On involving employers in the migrant domestic workers' movement

During my fieldwork, I attended several events organized by FILMIS, including the general assembly, which also marked the organization's 10th anniversary. During this event, the members reflected on 10 years of FILMIS and the various efforts made to improve the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers, while also looking ahead to the future. I noticed that employers were not seen as key actors to engage with in the foreseeable future; instead, the focus was on building and deepening connections with other social organizations and labor unions such as FairWork and the FNV. In an interview I asked Rosa, who has been involved with FILMIS and the Migrant Domestic Workers Union for a long time, about the question of involving employers in the migrant domestic workers' movement, she laughed and said, "*Well, yes, employers are the big question.*" She went on to tell me that several attempts had been made to engage employers in their campaigns and the movement in general, with a moment of success in 2013 when migrant domestic workers took to the streets to protest the government's refusal to ratify ILO C189. Around 500 people joined the protest, including employers (Eleveld & Van Hooren, 2018). However, she highlighted that this was a one-time success and that she has not seen such involvement since. Daphne, who works for a social organization helping undocumented migrants and who is involved with FILMIS, explained to me that there is a very small group of employers who are involved with the migrant domestic workers' movement, but that it is difficult to find more employers who want to be involved and to organize them. "*Employers are busy, they don't have time,"* Bianca, a member of FILMIS, tells me. She continues:

> *We really have to think hard about how to approach employers, we have already done a lot, but it is difficult to involve them. I just know you have to approach them in a nice way, that is the most important thing.*

Grace, another member of FILMIS, hopes that with the help of the FNV and other organizations, it is possible to organize more employers by increasing the visibility of their campaigns.

Besides the difficulty of engaging employers who have to be reached through public campaigns, involving the employers of the self-organized migrant domestic workers is also a point of discussion within FILMIS, which proves to be complex. Many self-organized migrant domestic workers find it difficult to inform their employers about their activism, fearing their employers' reactions. In the Netherlands, there's a fine of between 2000 and 4000 euros for employing undocumented workers, which is one reason why employers are hesitant to partake in public campaigns, as they do not want to risk this fine, Bianca tells me. Because of the risk of receiving a fine, the self-organized migrant domestic workers believe that their employers expect them to keep a low profile in society which is why they are hesitant to discuss their involvement in the organizations, as they don't want to risk their job and income when employers don't agree with their activism. Bianca's employers know she is involved with a Filipino organization but not about the campaigns she organizes. "*Maybe if the campaign is nationally visible, I will try to ask their opinion,"* she tells me. Involving and addressing the employers of the self-organized migrant domestic workers has become a particularly sensitive topic after the last campaign that was organized to target employers which was centered around the holiday allowance. The self-organized migrant domestic workers distributed informational leaflets in wealthy neighborhoods in different cities explaining employers' obligations regarding holiday allowance, with some members distributing these leaflets to their own employers, anonymously. Following this campaign, at least one migrant domestic worker was fired by her employer. Isabel tells me that none of her employers reacted to the leaflets that she distributed among her employers which was disappointing. Rosa shares a similar sentiment:

> *Sometimes I post something on social media, such as about the holiday pay, and a couple of my employers follow me, they see the post but they just ignore it, and I still have to ask for the holiday pay myself, they won't start about it themselves"*

Rosa adds that addressing her employers is even more difficult with her long-term employers with whom she is very close, she tells me that it is difficult to change things that have been the same for a very long time, which is why she hasn't addressed all her employers yet. *"They have already done a lot for me, but it is also just my basic right,"* she tells me. Only three out of nine of her employers

currently give her a holiday allowance and only one employer gives all the benefits stated in the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*.

In the focus group, Rosa mentioned that her employers who are aware of her involvement with the organizations don't show a genuine interest in her activism. She explains: *"Employers don't care about our campaigns, they say 'Go ahead, Rosa, you're brave,' but they don't take action."* On one hand, Rosa means that she has to actively ask for employment benefits and salary increases; on the other hand, she also means that her employers don't participate in their campaigns or, more broadly, don't care about the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers in general. Grace agrees with Rosa, stating that she has had the same experience with her employers. She explains, *"My employers are very good, but when it comes to legalization, they don't really care about our status or legalization."* The lack of involvement of the employers of the self-organized migrant domestic workers shows that even when participation in collective actions is relatively accessible due to personal ties with migrant domestic workers involved in the campaigns, which contrasts with the situation of many other employers who are unaware of the existence of collective actions, these employers do not support the self-organized migrant domestic workers beyond sometimes improving their personal working conditions.

7.2 On not wanting to be involved

The experiences of self-organized migrant domestic workers who find it difficult to engage employers in their movement are supported by the interview and focus group data with employers. This data reveals that employers generally do not see a role for themselves in improving the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers through collective actions or by organizing employers. The employers in the focus group mentioned, similarly to the self-organized migrant domestic workers, that it is difficult for them to be involved due to the lack of an employer's organization for private households who outsource domestic work. The lack of organized employers is seen as an obstacle to collective action by trade union officials of the FNV Bondgenoten which the Migrant Domestic Workers Union is a part of (Van Hooren et al., 2022). However, employers do not see a role for themselves in establishing such an organization and believe that change and organization should come from the migrant domestic workers themselves, as illustrated by Lara's quote:

> *We're not employers, right? I am who I am, and you are who you are, and we all hire someone for either 2 or 4 hours, but we're not organized, so I think it's better to leave it to the domestic workers themselves.*

To which Sofie added: *"I agree, you have to approach it from the bottom up."* Lara's quote not only highlights the absence of an employers' organization but also explains the lack of an employers' organization as many employers who outsource domestic work do not see themselves as formal employers (which they officially aren't as stated in the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis)*. This is because the work is fragmented as Lara mentions and occurs within the private sphere of the household. Glaser (2023) argues that the fact that employers often do not see themselves as employers also hinders their ability to act as political actors. In her research on the domestic workers union in New York, she observed that employers only began to perceive themselves as political actors in the context of outsourcing of domestic work when they became involved with the domestic workers union.

Linda's response during the focus group to the question of what employers can do for migrant domestic workers also clearly indicates that employers feel that the self-organized migrant domestic workers are responsible for the improvement of their own working conditions: *"It would be helpful if they came up with some tips on how to be a good employer, and then distribute those."* In the last chapter, I discussed that employers distance themselves from their employer responsibilities based on epistemic ignorance, in Linda's quote we see this again. It shows that, apparently, it is not the responsibility of employers to find out and know what good employment practices are; rather, they want to be informed about this by the migrant domestic workers themselves.

In addition to drafting tips for employers on how to be a good employer, some employers mentioned striking as a potential approach for migrant domestic workers to advocate for their rights. This was discussed in Stella's interview:

> S: *So yes I think cleaning is undervalued, but I don't do that, let me put it that way. I mean, if you look at the government, the lack of regulations, then I would say it's an undervalued profession. I mean, you should really think about it if they weren't there. Just like garbage men and women. If they're not there, what then?*
>
> I: *What do you think would happen? Suppose domestic workers were to go on strike.*
>
> S: *I think a strike could indeed make a difference. Maria goes on vacation to Cape Verde for 6-8 weeks every year, and I really miss her during that time, thinking about when she will be back. It's even highlighted on the calendar. So, I think a strike could indeed make a difference. But yeah, it's a private bond, which might make it more complicated, aside from the fact that they wouldn't be earning money. At least for me,*

I would really feel affected if Maria were to go on strike. Because then I would think, 'Sweetheart, just talk to me if you want more money or whatever'.

It becomes clear from these quotes that Stella sees the devaluation of domestic work as a problem, but that the option for Stella to keep paying Maria while she would go on strike doesn't occur to her as she doesn't see herself as a formal employer due to the private sphere in which the employment relationship is embedded. In addition to recognizing the devaluation of domestic work as an issue, she also acknowledges the problem of the private bond which obstructs the option of striking for migrant domestic workers. However, she also undermines this by stating that the 'sweetheart' can simply discuss it with her if she wants to be paid more. Here, Stella undermines the notion that the social devaluation of domestic workers is a problem in which the private bond plays a role, by seeking the solution solely within the private bond—namely, that the migrant domestic worker should ask her employers for more money herself. Aside from the fact that this is complex precisely because of the private bond, this will also not lead to a better legal and social position for migrant domestic workers.

The lack of employers' involvement with the migrant domestic workers' movement shows that employers are distancing themselves not only from their own responsibilities as employers but also from the collective responsibility for the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work(ers). Employers emphasize the importance of more valuation for domestic work to improve the precarious legal and social position of migrant domestic workers. However, from a position of privileged irresponsibility—which is not only the privilege not to know but also not to care about the broader issue of the devaluation of domestic work(ers) — they leave this responsibility to migrant domestic workers despite being both complicit in and impacted by the devaluation of domestic work (Prattes, 2020). There seems to be a lack of awareness among employers that the social devaluation of domestic work and the migrant domestic workers' movement are interconnected with migrant domestic workers being part of their solution for balancing work, family, and other responsibilities (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser, 2019).

7.3 On improving the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers

Both from the experiences of self-organized migrant domestic workers about engaging employers in their collective actions and movement, and from the perspectives of employers who do not see a role for themselves in organizing employers or partaking in collective actions of self-organized migrant domestic workers, it appears that informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity can occur in the employment relationship between female employers and female migrant domestic workers through a close personal relationship, which is not the preferred form of an employment relationship for migrant domestic workers. However, achieving collective solidarity, where employers

partake in collective actions to improve the social and legal position of all domestic workers, is much more difficult. Yet, between improving the personal circumstances of the migrant domestic workers employed by the employers, participating in actions organized by the self-organized migrant domestic workers, and organizing employers, there's another dimension of individual solidarity that is formalized and publicized. This dimension of individual solidarity is not only focused on improving the personal circumstances of the domestic workers employed by the employers but also on improving the circumstances of other migrant domestic workers whom the employers have no personal connection with. It thus extends solidarity beyond the individual employment relationship.

Josephine noted during the focus group that we collectively define what constitutes decent work. She remarked, "*The least we can do is set good examples, and there are already some out there, for example, in the media."* As setting a good example can only exist in relation to others, Josephine suggests that it is not enough to just be a good employer; the employment relationship and how it is shaped should be drawn out of the private sphere and discussed among family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances—something that is rarely done now. When I asked my participants during the interviews if they ever discussed topics like payment and working conditions within their circles, which often include people who also employ migrant domestic workers, the answer was frequently that they didn't. Employers use their networks when seeking a domestic worker, and payment is discussed when a domestic worker is recommended through someone in their network, often to adopt the same hourly wage. The lack of discussion about payment and working conditions can come from feelings of shame, as illustrated by Lara's circle of feminist friends, which was discussed in the context of feminist guilt. Additionally, it can be a way for employers to create distance and remain ignorant about employer responsibilities and their own employment practices. In her interview, Johanna commented that poor employment practices contribute to the devaluation of domestic work. She stated the following:

> *We should stop with, for example, just asking on Facebook, 'Hey, does anyone know a house cleaner nearby who can do it for cheap?' and then someone comes over to clean your house, you pay them in cash, and that's it. I think that could be damaging to the reputation of the profession, yeah*.

Furthermore, Johanna recognized a responsibility for employers to address the devaluation of domestic work by confronting people with their poor employment practices. None of the employers I spoke to in the interviews knew what their obligations were as employers of domestic workers, and they had never heard of the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis,* which several employers said they would look into further after the interviews. In the focus group, Roos explained that after learning that the domestic worker whom she employs was being paid far too little by other employers, she sent

them a letter. She says, *"A better labor position is obviously preferable, but at least this way I feel like I can contribute. Often people don't know what fair pay is."* Sara Ahmed (2017) states that "moments make up a movement." As feminists, she notes, we are often too shattered to participate in or organize collective actions, but by repeatedly speaking out against injustice, a movement can still emerge. In the case of domestic work, employers are not only too shattered but good employment practices are also too much a part of the private sphere. Formalized (clear agreements on fair payment and working conditions) individual practices of solidarity within the employment relationship should therefore be made public to improve the social position of migrant domestic workers; employers have a responsibility in this regard.

However, during the discussion on what employers can do for migrant domestic workers, Josephine commented that there is a limit to what employers can do, and if the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers is to really improve, *"this begins with moving domestic work from the informal to the formal sector, and for that to happen, domestic work must be seen as legitimate work."* This places a significant responsibility on the government which, according to Josephine, would not only include a revision of the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* to ensure better labor rights for domestic workers but also include legalizing existing cases—in other words, granting work permits to women who have been here doing domestic work undocumented for a long time.

8. Conclusion and discussion

In this thesis I examined *how feminist solidarity takes shape in the context of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers* with the aim of understanding the (dis)connect between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity. To make the connection between these spheres of solidarity three sub-questions were formulated: (1) How do female employers make sense of and deal with unequal social positions and questions of solidarity in the employment relationship with migrant domestic workers? (2) How does this affect (the potential for) individual practices of solidarity within the employment relationship and collective solidarity with the migrant domestic workers' movement? (3) How does this (potentially) impact the personal circumstances and social position of migrant domestic workers?

To address these questions, I made a distinction in the results section between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity. Self-organized migrant domestic workers are active in the public and collective sphere to improve the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers. In contrast, employers, at best, focus on improving the personal circumstances of the migrant domestic workers they employ, showing informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity within the private sphere. Currently, except for a few employers who are involved in the migrant domestic workers' movement, there is little connection between these two spheres. Therefore, this conclusion aims to interpret this gap: why it exists, what factors contribute to it, and how employers can transition to practices of solidarity that improve the social position of migrant domestic workers beyond their employment. Following the same distinction as in the results section, I will first discuss the private sphere of the employment relationship, what individual solidarity looks like in this relationship, and how this affects the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers—addressing the first sub-question and the first part of the second and third sub-question. Then, I will discuss the lack of collective solidarity, examining why the transition from individual to collective solidarity is barely occurring, how this affects the social position of migrant domestic workers, and how this can potentially change, addressing the second part of the second and third sub-questions.

The title of this thesis starts with a twist on the well-known feminist adage 'the personal is political', transforming it into 'the political is personalized'. This adaptation reflects how in the context of outsourcing domestic work to migrant domestic workers, employers attempt to address a collective political problem—the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work(ers)—on an individual

level within the employment relationship. This individual approach to solving a collective issue creates affective tensions for employers as they recognize the devaluation of domestic work and the injustice related to it in the lived realities of the migrant domestic workers they employ, which leads to affective dissonance. This dissonance primarily arises from employers' awareness that by outsourcing domestic work in a system characterized by devaluation, deregulation, and privatization, they are complicit in its institutional and social devaluation, and therefore the precarious position of the migrant domestic workers they employ, leading to feelings of class and feminist guilt. Managing these tensions and the subsequent dissonance results in contradictions and complexities in how employers shape the employment relationship, impacting the potential for both individual and collective solidarity. Based on the interviews and focus groups with both employers and self-organized migrant domestic workers, I conclude that two strategies employers use, mostly combined, to manage affective tensions show how individual solidarity takes shape in the employment relationship and help us understand the lack of collective solidarity from employers with migrant domestic workers. The two strategies involve distancing from employer responsibilities and establishing a close personal relationship of assistance. These strategies reflect the two approaches discussed in the literature on how employers shape employment relationships: creating distance and fostering closeness with the migrant domestic workers they employ (Andersson, 2000; Lan, 2003; Botman, 2011). However, based on my research, I can assert that employers who feel involved with feminism or good employment practices for migrant domestic workers create distance from employer responsibilities rather than from the employees themselves. Additionally, in the fostering closeness approach, there is a significant emphasis on providing assistance to migrant domestic workers.

Managing affective tensions through distancing from employer responsibilities

To deal with the affective tensions of outsourcing domestic work employers distance themselves from employer responsibilities. They express a desire for the migrant domestic workers to be well-paid and have good working conditions, but they remain intentionally uninformed about their own obligations based on epistemic ignorance[2]. By avoiding these responsibilities, they avoid being confronted with the precarious working conditions of the migrant domestic workers they employ and the shortcomings in their own role as employers, while maintaining their flexibility in determining payment and working conditions. While the employers in this study often pay above minimum wage and provide benefits, their approach to shaping the working conditions is arbitrary which results in a lack of clear agreements. For self-organized migrant domestic workers, professionalism and formality, which involve good payment and working conditions that are clearly (in written form) agreed upon, are

[2] The epistemic ignorance underlying the distancing practices of employer responsibilities similarly explains the absence of the mentioning of ‘race’ by the participants in the interviews and focus group. By adopting a position of smug ignorance (Essed & Hoving, 2014), they maintain their innocent stance towards the racial dimension in the inequalities that structure the employment relationship.

essential for establishing a good employment relationship. Additionally, employers avoid discussing payment and working conditions with acquaintances which is another way to maintain their privileged position of not-knowing and evade confronting their own employment practices. This reluctance, often driven by feelings of feminist guilt, does not serve the feminist cause but rather works against it by keeping the collective problem of the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work confined to the private sphere. This results in a double privatization in which the outsourcing of domestic work by means of deregulation is privatized by the state but is also kept in the private sphere by the employers. Within the framework of government policy, employers' tendency to distance themselves from their responsibilities aligns with the deregulation of paid domestic work and the exclusionary *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*, which fails to recognize employers as formal employers. This double privatization, which leaves the outsourcing of domestic work as something that women (employer and employee) have to arrange between themselves, further reproduces gendered inequality. This occurs both between men and women as with outsourcing domestic work to another woman there is no fair distribution of household tasks between men and women, and among women themselves, as the 'emancipation' of employers happens through the precarization of the migrant domestic workers who enable the former to outsource domestic work to marginalized others and participate themselves in higher status, paid work outside the home.

Managing affective tensions through personal, friendly relationships of assistance

The distancing practices from employer responsibilities do not (partly) alleviate affective tensions as clear agreements about payment and working conditions are not established, which explains why employers also attempt to manage affective tensions by fostering personal, friendly relationships of assistance. Based on the combination of these two practices, I can conclude that feminist solidarity in the employment relationship takes shape through *informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity*. The informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity can improve the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers to some extent. Yet, because the individual practices of solidarity rely on a personal bond, the intended improvement is hindered as the personal bond makes it more difficult for migrant domestic workers to discuss their working conditions with their employers. Through the giving of assistance, employers attempt to navigate their position amidst two feminist issues: on one hand, they are reluctant to undertake a 'second shift' in household duties themselves; on the other hand, outsourcing domestic work within a system marked by devaluation, deregulation, and privatization also doesn’t align with their feminist beliefs. To deal with the affective dissonance of their position amidst two feminist issues, employers show informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity, but these can feel too burdensome and impede structural improvements as employers may feel like they are applying a band-aid to a branded fire. To truly change the personal circumstances of migrant domestic workers, the broader institutional and

social devaluation of domestic work(ers) must be addressed—this is precisely the structural issue that employers cannot resolve individually, as collective change is necessary.

Distancing from the collective problem of the devaluation of domestic work

Dealing with affective tensions in individual employment relationships makes it possible for employers to distance themselves from the collective problem of the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work(ers) which hinders the emergence of collective solidarity. Employers recognize, to some extent, their complicity in the poor legal and social position of the migrant domestic workers they employ, but from their position of privileged irresponsibility they not only distance themselves from employer responsibilities but also from the poor legal and social position of migrant domestic workers outside of their employment. Furthermore, the collective progress of migrant domestic workers could be materially disadvantageous for employers which also plays a role in their lack of collective involvement with the migrant domestic workers' movement. Recognition for domestic work as decent work would, in material terms, at least require a structurally higher hourly wage and receiving the same benefits as other employees, which means that some employers would no longer be able to afford to outsource. Many employers outsource precisely because it is cheap; in principle, they could perform the domestic tasks themselves, but this would take time away from other activities such as paid work and other caregiving responsibilities they have. More valuation for domestic work must be accompanied then by a restructuring of paid productive work and unpaid reproductive labor (care and domestic tasks) in society, re-centering reproductive labor to prevent the second shift in the household for female employers.

From informalized and personalized to formalized and publicized practices of solidarity

Based on these findings I conclude that the personal ties that Triandafyllidou & Marchetti (2015) and Ciccia & Roggeband (2021) see as promising for fostering solidarity between female employers and migrant domestic workers, and for alliances between the feminist and migrant domestic workers' movement, do not necessarily lead to collective solidarity. The personal ties are complex because of employers' affective tensions about their complicity in the poor legal and social position of the migrant domestic workers they employ, which conflict with their feminist and equality values as they outsource in a system characterized by devaluation, deregulation, and privatization, leading to affective dissonance. Employers' affective dissonance tends to paralyze rather than inspire collective political action (Hemmings, 2012), as demonstrated by the distancing practices from the collective issue of the devaluation of domestic work. To manage the affective tensions, they are addressed within the employment relationship, resulting in informalized and personalized individual practices of

solidarity. These practices can but do not necessarily improve the personal circumstances of the migrant domestic workers they employ, nor do they address the social position of migrant domestic workers outside of the employment relationship or the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work. For the *informalized and personalized individual practices of solidarity* to benefit both migrant domestic workers in the employment, as well as those in other people's employment they should be transformed into *formalized and publicized individual practices of solidarity*. This entails making formal (clear agreements about good payment and working conditions) individual practices of solidarity public. By repeatedly speaking out against poor employment practices and making formalized individual practices of solidarity public, the devaluation of domestic work can be addressed. This bridges the gap between the private/individual and public/collective spheres of solidarity by making individual solidarity a part of the public sphere. However, it does not appear, as Federici (2016) already suggested, that we can expect that a common collective movement will emerge in the near future between migrant domestic workers and female employers. The paralyzing effect of affective dissonance, dealing with affective dissonance within the private employment relationship, the position of privileged irresponsibility based on epistemic ignorance, and the double privatization (both institutional and social) of domestic work, hinder the transformation of employers' individual practices of solidarity into collective ones.

With these findings, this research contributes to the conceptualization of feminist solidarity in the context of outsourcing domestic work, exploring both how individual solidarity is formed within the employment relationship and how the employers' position complicates collective solidarity with migrant domestic workers. Further research is needed to examine the circumstances that contribute to the paralyzing effect of affective dissonance and to the position of privileged irresponsibility which allows employers to distance from formal individual practices of solidarity as well as from collective actions to address the devaluation of domestic work. This is crucial for understanding how collective solidarity can be achieved. This research provides some initial insights, such as the double privatization of domestic work and the politics of guilt from employers, but they should be explored further. Furthermore, a group that has been scarcely mentioned in this thesis provides a relevant suggestion for further research: men. By not including men in this research, a perspective on how men view individual and collective solidarity with women and migrant domestic workers in particular, is missed. This leaves the question of whether and how men can be in solidarity with both. Even though there are differences between national contexts in domestic work policy, a trend of deregulation and privatization is noticeable in many other European countries. Therefore, the suggestions and findings of this thesis are not specific to the Dutch context (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010).

Key insights and recommendations

Based on the findings of this thesis, I would like to conclude with key insights and recommendations for policymakers, employers, and feminists.

To begin with policy adjustments for policymakers: improving the legal and social position of migrant domestic workers requires revising the exclusionary *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis*. In shaping a new regulation that gives domestic workers the same rights as other workers, it is crucial not only to consider the working conditions of domestic workers, which the current regulation lacks, but also to involve migrant domestic workers in the process. Their expertise and experience working in precarious conditions must be heard by policymakers, especially since their work takes place in the isolation of private households. Furthermore, the position of undocumented domestic workers should be considered, for whom a form of documentation is needed to perform their work safely and to meet their needs, such as being able to open a bank account and obtain health insurance.

To answer the question posed in the introduction "What can employers do?", joining the migrant domestic workers' movement is of course one option, but publicly promoting good employment practices and addressing poor employment practices can also improve the position of migrant domestic workers. Fundamentally, good employment practices include clear agreements about fair payment and good working conditions. Employers should at least meet the obligations set out in the *Regeling Dienstverlening aan Huis* but ideally provide the benefits that other workers receive, given the exclusionary nature of the regulation. In shaping the employment relationship, it is also important to listen to how migrant domestic workers prefer to structure the employment relationship. As experts, they have a clear vision of this. A personal relationship of assistance is not the ultimate solution to dealing with discomfort in the employment relationship and should always be accompanied by formality and professionalism which include clear (written) agreements preferably in the form of a contract.

To continue with feminists. Federici (2016) argues that the collective common movement between female employers and migrant domestic workers should focus on ending the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work, which requires feminists to recognize that this is indeed a common problem that affects both parties in different ways due to power imbalances and marginalization. Furthermore, migrant domestic workers should be seen as allies with experience in organizing a movement from a place in which workers are isolated from each other by working in private households. Migrant domestic workers do not want a politics of guilt from feminists, but recognition that a lot can be learned from them in making a movement.

Anderson (2000), Federici (2016), and Fraser (2017) all conclude that the struggles of the transnational self-organized migrant domestic workers call for a restructuring of productive and social reproductive labor, re-centering social reproductive labor by challenging its devaluation. Currently, the

self-organized migrant domestic workers are still at the forefront of this effort (Federici, 2016). With the idea in mind that moments make up a movement, it is necessary to collectively redefine what we see as decent work by being less isolated and private, and more public and vocal about addressing the institutional and social devaluation of domestic work, showing solidarity with the migrant domestic workers advocating for their rights.

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