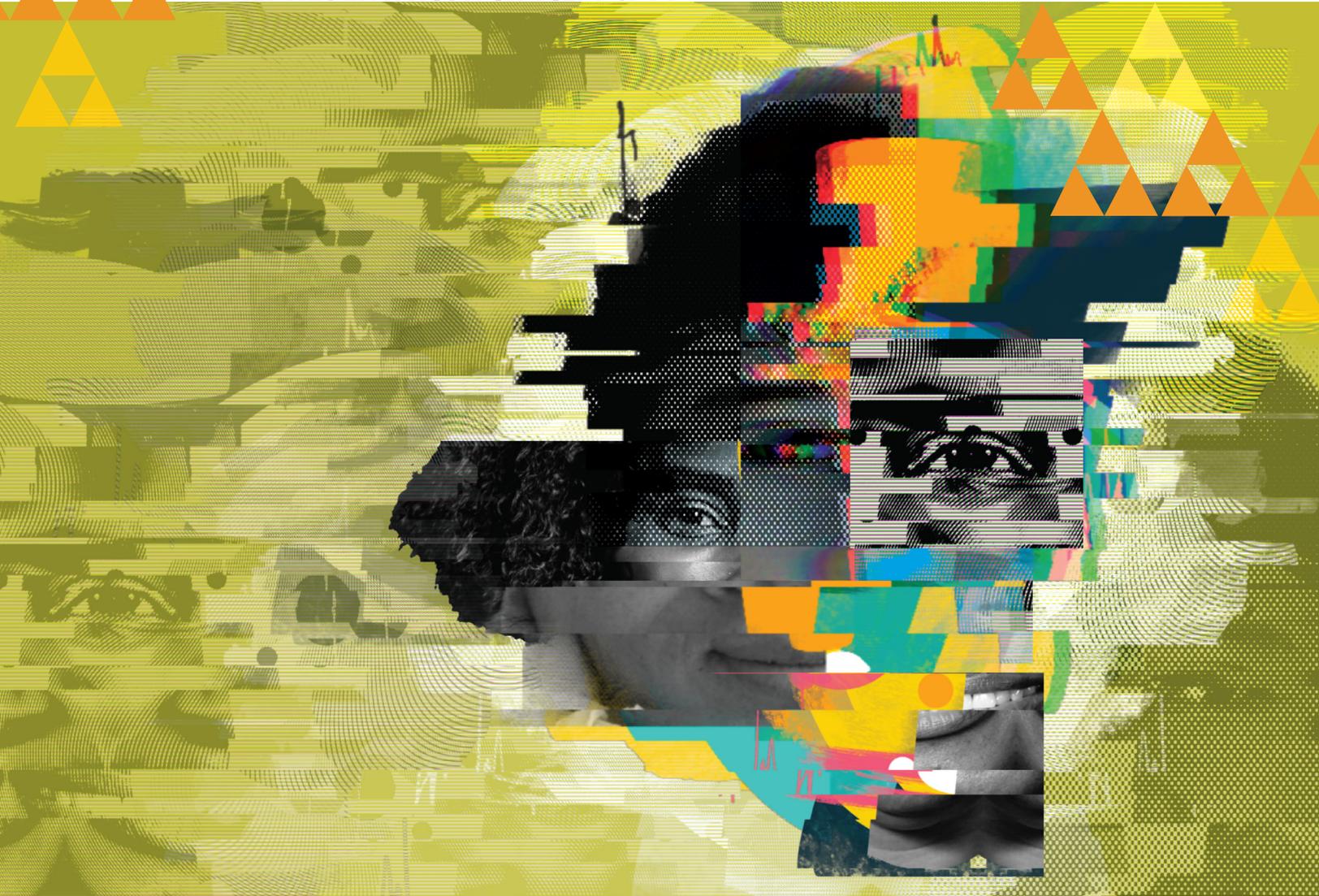


SPOTLIGHTING DOMESTIC WORKERS

REPRESENTATION IN FILM & TV



**NATIONAL
DOMESTIC
WORKERS
ALLIANCE**

USC
Annenberg
School for Communication
and Journalism
Norman Lear Center
Media Impact Project

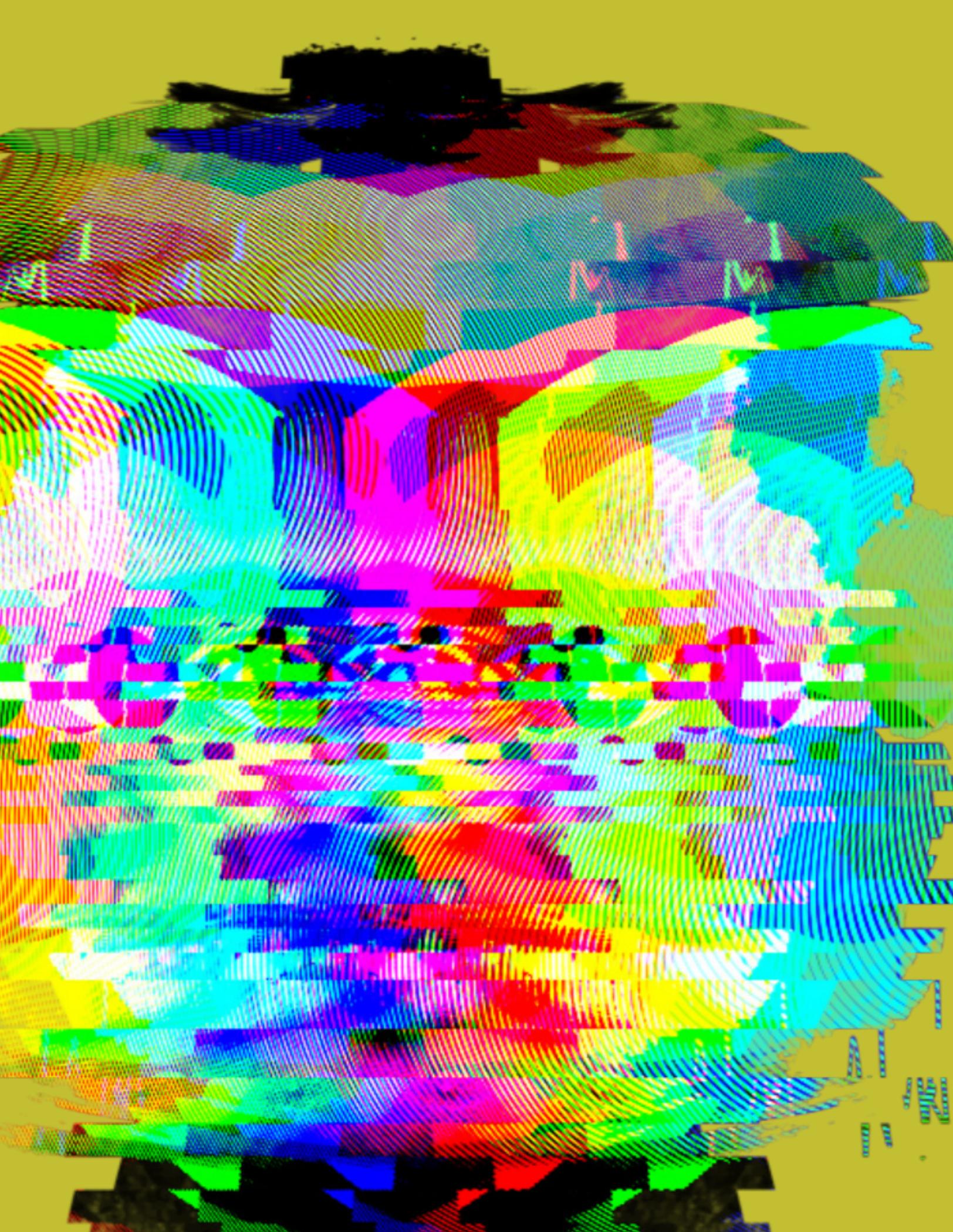




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INTRODUCTION

Domestic work is the work that makes all other work possible.

Within our homes, we care for loved ones, and receive care ourselves. We care for our belongings and create a space for respite.

There are more than 2 million domestic workers in the United States. These are the nannies that take care of our children, the housecleaners that bring order to our homes, and the care workers for seniors and individuals with disabilities, who ensure our loved ones can live with dignity. Despite doing the work that enables our society to function and our families to thrive, domestic workers are often the least valued. Their work is done behind closed doors, their contributions, humanity and struggles hidden from view.

Alfonso Cuarón during his Best Director Academy Award winning acceptance speech for *Roma*, a tremendous film about an indigenous domestic worker Cleo said: “As artists, our job is to look where others don’t.” Yet for far too long, the entertainment industry has either overlooked domestic workers or depicted them as one-dimensional characters without agency, and frequently steeped in harmful stereotypes rooted in racism, sexism, and classism.

Telling authentic and complex stories of historically underrepresented communities has never been more important. Domestic workers are on the cutting edge of the most pressing social issues of our time – from immigration, to labor rights, to gender and racial justice. Our objective for commissioning and releasing this report is to establish a baseline for domestic workers on screen – where they are, where they aren’t, their representation, and the substance of that representation. We hope this report will start conversations – on the history of domestic workers on screen, the real world impacts of that representation – and inspire new stories in film & TV that depict domestic workers as the heroines they are.

Rachel Birnam, *Cultural and Entertainment Partnerships Manager* &
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National Domestic Workers Alliance

**NATIONAL DOMESTIC
WORKERS ALLIANCE**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) partnered with the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project to commission a research report that establishes a baseline for representations of domestic work in scripted entertainment from 1910–2020. This report includes two phases of research: a **frequency analysis** of domestic work keywords and a **content analysis** of 100 domestic worker characters.

KEY FINDINGS

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS: KEY FINDINGS

- 47,000 mentions of domestic work keywords in film and TV scripts since 1916.
- Hollywood continues to use the term “maid” significantly more frequently than “housekeeper.” The preferred term “house cleaner” is largely invisible in scripted film and TV.
- “Nanny” is the most frequently mentioned child care keyword.
- Keywords describing homecare workers appear significantly less frequently than house cleaning and child care terms.
- Qualitatively, domestic work keywords typically appear in content about affluent people (e.g., *Downton Abbey*), content about domestic workers (e.g., *The Nanny*), and police procedurals (e.g., *Law & Order: SVU*).
- 1 in 3 domestic work keyword mentions were pejorative terms, the most commonly used being “servant.”
- “Caregiver” has been rising in usage since the 1980s.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF 100 DOMESTIC WORKER CHARACTERS:

- The majority of domestic worker characters were white (69%) and female (94%).
- 25% were identified as immigrants in dialogue.
- 57% of domestic worker characters were house cleaners, 22% home care workers, and 21% child care workers.
- Child care workers and white domestic workers had the most dialogue.
- Domestic workers, and particularly non-white domestic workers, were portrayed as lower in competence than other characters (as indicated by language complexity).
- A qualitative analysis of dialogue spoken by domestic workers in small and medium roles found they discussed a variety of topics including romance with their employers and serious crimes.
- White domestic workers were overrepresented in our sample (69% overall, 60% U.S. titles), while non-white domestic workers were underrepresented (13% Latine, 12% Black, 4% API). However, in the U.S. today, 42% of domestic workers are white, 29% are Latine, 22% are Black, and 6.3% are API (Wolfe et al., 2020).
- White domestic worker characters had more dialogue than the domestic worker characters of color.

NDWA ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As you develop storylines, consider how race & ethnicity are impacting characterizations.

White domestic workers were not only overrepresented on screen (69% vs 49% in reality), they were given more dialogue than characters of color. They also won the most prominent spots on screen, holding 83% of large and 80% of extra large roles. When women of color did speak, they were portrayed as lower in competence than their white peers.

It's not quantity, it's quality of representation.

While visibility is important, if it lacks depth and substance, it further stereotypes domestic workers as silent figures on the periphery. Think twice before placing a domestic worker in the background of the frame, instead feature domestic workers in prominent and developed roles. When developing this domestic worker characters, consider their full lives outside of the workplace. These women are more than the product of their labor, they are mothers, wives, sisters, girlfriends, grandmothers, heroines overcoming insurmountable challenges and young women coming of age.

Home care is the future of work.

Home care work is on track to be one of the fastest growing work sectors in the country.¹ And yet, home care is mentioned vastly less frequently on screen than child care and house cleaning. We need to see more stories about care – something we all give and/or receive at some point in our lives. When depicting home care workers, consider the real life demographics of this workforce: 61% of home care workers are people of color, 87% are female and 21% are immigrants. (see footnote 1)

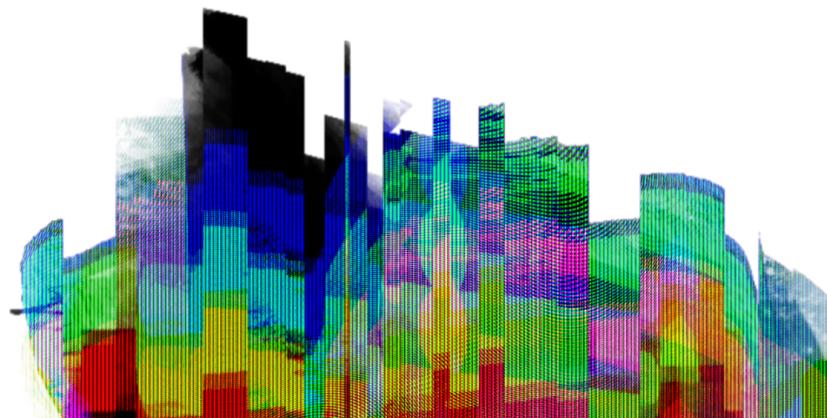
Reimagine the future by portraying a society where domestic work is respected.

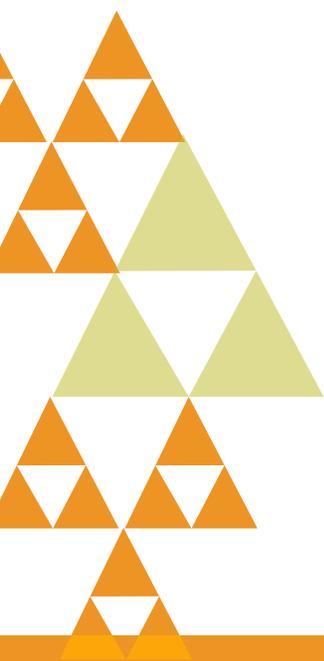
One in three domestic worker mentions were pejorative terms, with “servant” being the most commonly used. Instead of telling domestic worker stories that spotlight injustice, trauma, and inherent disrespect, consider telling stories that illustrate the value domestic workers provide to our day to day lives, the skills they bring to their work, and portray these jobs with dignity and respect.

Consult with domestic workers when developing storylines and characters.

Given the nature of working within individual homes and the historical devaluing of this work, domestic workers have not had the opportunity to speak for themselves in terms of representation. In order to create an accurate and nuanced depiction, it is important to speak directly with the community. The National Domestic Workers Alliance can provide expertise and access to authentic stories and factual information. Please reach out to us for assistance, insights and collaboration.

¹ https://www.domesticworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/WEAF_HCBSNational_v92.pdf





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