

**LABOUR OF BURDEN:
AN ANALYSIS OF
OCCUPATIONAL CHANGE - THE
DOMESTIC WORKER**

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Abstract

Increasingly a number of writers have written about the impact of the service sector on the overall growth and performance of economies. Generally addressing knowledge based industries and their importance for the future of any economy they often overlook the unskilled aspect of the service sector and its importance in providing work for unskilled labour.

Set against this background this paper seeks to provide a historical perspective on the changing nature of occupations and the employment relationship embodied in that occupation. It does so by looking at the role of domestic workers (also known as domestic servants, housekeepers, maids, household technicians) and their employers. Viewed traditionally in a negative light as a "dead end" blue collar occupation with low remuneration, unpleasant working conditions and little opportunity for career advancement, it has failed to achieve the advancement made by other blue collar industries in terms of pay and conditions. This can be attributed due to its solitary nature, lack of collective organisation and semi formal existence ie: lack of registration within the formal employment framework. This has changed in recent times due to a concerted effort by housekeepers to redefine their role to that of an independent service provider.

The nature of work performed by the domestic worker in the early to middle part of this century has been characterised by fragmented tasks completed on a repetitive basis whilst being overseen by the employer. This has evolved into a situation where the work takes on a sub-contracting nature, offering flexibility and specialisation. However this paper argues that this notion of independence may be threatened by the mass recruitment of domestic servants from the Third World. What is evident as a result is that the housekeeper who has attained certain pay and conditions and works independently is now being displaced by cheaper imported labour. This paper then seeks to address some of these issues which have arisen out of the evolution and dynamics of the occupation, and the important implications and ramifications it has for the division of labour within the domestic help economy.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of 'homework' in the 1970s, analyses have directed their attention to both its critical economic import and the gendered context of the nature of such work. These analyses, whilst adding much valuable knowledge to our understanding of 'homework' have generally focussed on the conditions of particular sectors in the economy, in particular, the nature of 'outworkers', 'telework' and the shift to an increasing professionalisation and 'publicisation' of the home. Marilyn Waring (1988) in her work, refocussed this discussion, shifting our attention once again to the largely unrecognised and unaccounted for contribution of women's work to the economy, in particular, their contribution via their activities in maintaining and looking after their homes. These works have generated much discussion in the 1980s but with the onset of economic fundamentalism, these concerns have been swept aside. Be that as it may, the critical role and contribution of this 'domestic' labour has been gaining importance – there has been a proliferation of these services via franchises and/or through individual contracts. In many countries, it has become a major import-export industry and has become a critical part of what Barry Jones (1982) has called the new 'quinary sector'.

The professionalisation and globalisation of domestic services has meant that the role of the domestic worker inevitably experiences a shift in both its practices and its organisation. Characterised by its atomised nature, unpleasant working conditions and low remuneration, domestic work has traditionally attracted into its ranks those from the lower socio-economic ranks of society, in particular, women, the young, uneducated, immigrant and people of colour. It is an occupation generally acknowledged as a 'dead end' job with no career prospects. This is not an uncommon situation as a number of different unskilled and semi-skilled occupations similarly lack career progression. What is however unique about this occupation is, that where a lot of unskilled work has traditionally been afforded protection from governments with the introduction of minimum labour law standards in terms of pay and conditions, the domestic worker has generally not been privy to such protection. This can be attributed to the solitary nature of the work, the lack of collective organisation and its semi-formal existence ie: lack of registration within the formal employment framework. The power asymmetry in the employee/employer relationship compounds the problem (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992).

This paper locates the discussion of the domestic worker in its historical context. It traces the evolution of the nature of domestic work since the Middle Ages, arguing that the nature and conditions of domestic workers have generally been a by-product of the onset of industrialisation. Changing economic context meant that domestic workers have been able to 'negotiate' and improve their terms and conditions, via individual contracting involving day work and piecework. The paper next argues that these advances are, however, being threatened if not undermined by the huge movement of immigrant female domestic workers from the Third World to both industrialised and developing countries. In the process, many of the gains made have been rolled back. More importantly, the domestic servant is now inserted into a new international division of labour where corporate and states' interests intersect. The domestic servant is rendered an 'input' subject to the vicissitudes of the global economy, sanctioned by states' actions and practices. The paper suggests that any redress needs to incorporate an international collective action agenda where direct action and legislative measures are brought to bear on employers, corporations and states.

THE DOMESTIC SERVANT: 'COUNTING FOR NOTHING'?

David Chaplin (1964, cited in Martin & Segrave, 1985:28) defined domestic workers as "direct employees of private families, engaged to assist in household operation... workers with a socially inferior status, paid for goods and services produced in the home of the employer and consumed only by his household and his personal guests". Recent research by Anderson (1997) on domestic workers in Europe suggests that the situation has not changed. When asked what their work entailed, domestic workers responded with

'everything'. Elaborating on this, Anderson points out that this consisted of all household work including caring for children, gardening, washing cars, chopping wood and caring for pets. This is congruent with Coser's earlier and seminal discussion of the nature of domestic work where he had described their work as being 'functionally diffuse', that is, they were required to do all household tasks assigned to them by the master without specialising in any specific tasks (Coser, 1973).

The master-servant relationship has been seen as primarily a primordial one, sanctioned by religion (the master-servant relationship was viewed in similar light to Jesus' servitude of God). The servant's role was to provide for the master's every whim, to carry out tasks considered below the status of his wife and himself, and as a 'live-in', was not to have a life of her own and allow her identity and personality to be subsumed by that of the master's family. The physical reprimand of the servant was common practise if the servant was unruly or did not adhere to orders.

THE ADVENT OF MODERNITY

In his discussion, Coser (1973) however pointed out that the role of the domestic servant would become obsolete with the advent of modernity. He cites in particular two main factors which would impact on this role, these being, the undermining of the traditional religious view of the servant status by more egalitarian philosophies and more importantly, the alternative sources of employment for unskilled labour brought about by the industrial revolution. He also felt that the occupation would have difficulty surviving as it was based on status, strong household ties, non-specific obligations and a blurring of the line between home and work. Such an occupation he felt could not survive in a modern society as no one would be willing to work under such circumstances.

Indeed, as Coser has rightly argued, industrialisation brought in its wake sweeping changes. Better working conditions in manufacturing and industries meant that there was a lack of domestic labour. The supply dimension, changing social conditions, increased urbanisation and the concomitant push by domestic workers for greater autonomy and better terms and conditions resulted in legislative changes, a reduction in work hours and critically, a shift to day work (Romero, 1992).

The shift from 'live-in' work to day work was very significant in the changing nature of the employer/employee relationship. It marks, for the first time, a classification of the work of a domestic worker as an occupation, where place of work is split from the place of residence. This 'occupational shift' enabled the domestic worker greater autonomy and more choices (in terms of leaving her place of employment, threatening to quit and seek employment elsewhere in order to gain more favourable conditions and reduced reliance upon the mistress and her family). This also meant a greater depersonalisation of her relationship with her employer compared to 'live-in' workers who were more likely to be manipulated by employers' personalistic appeals in terms of being 'one of the family'. The day work arrangements are an improvement over 'live-in' conditions in that they loosen but do not end the personalistic relationship between domestics and their employer (Romero, 1992).

Whilst progress has been made, the nature of domestic work, characterised as it is by an individuated relationship and fragmented but standardised and repetitive tasks, meant that domestic workers are and have not been able to bargain collectively in order to achieve better outcomes for themselves. Individuated relationships and informal discussions on working arrangements with their employers meant that employers are generally able to impose and determine working conditions and terms. (Hansen, 1985; cited in Romero 1992).

DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE 1980S: TOWARDS FLEXIBLE SPECIALISATION?

In the 1980s, as the service economy grew and as the demand for domestic labour increased, domestic workers have sought to improve the conditions under which they work by redefining their role. They sought

to eliminate the vestiges of servitude, to depersonalise the work and to establish a business like environment (Romero, 1992). The domestic worker now performs a specialist task whereupon she is paid a flat rate on completion of her task.

The hierarchical structure of her work has also been modified. Her work has been revised in terms of integration between manual and mental tasks; she knows how and what to do without being told. Quality control of her work is built into the cleaning process. She knows when things are clean without being constantly told. She no longer takes direct orders from her employer. When she is hired to clean a house, she views herself 'as her own boss', especially in cases when the hirer is away from home.

The domestic worker has also diversified in terms of whom she works for, and her work arrangements are characterised by their flexibility. Payment is negotiated via an informal agreement according to job and task performed. This enables a clear setting of the parameters of the job. In such situations domestic workers negotiate from a position of strength especially when they have other employment opportunities elsewhere. Domestic workers try to resist employer domination by shifting to non-residential day or 'job work', minimising contact with the employer, having multiple employers, and leaving jobs where they are under constant supervision. Some have sought to develop informal social networks which provide them with informational resources in terms of available jobs, how to negotiate rates of pay, and how to best get the job done, thus helping alleviate the very atomised nature of the work and the lack of formal regulation (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

Domestic workers have come to define themselves as experts providing a flexible but valuable service. By shifting to a professional business relationship between customer and vendor, whether it takes the form of an individual contractor or as contractors/employees for organised business interests such as domestic service agencies (Romero, 1992), they have helped redefine the role of the housekeeper and bring the occupation out of the realm of stigma and deference with which it has been traditionally associated. The move to a business like environment coupled with the increasing demand for domestic help has meant a proliferation of domestic cleaning agencies, often run by domestic workers themselves.

However, the nature of domestic service has not been greatly transformed. Still invoking the gender stereotypes and the role of the women as home carer, the agencies have fostered the creation of a workplace culture based on 'personalism' seeking to control workers with both their dependency and complicity. The standardisation of the work has meant that clients and the workers have lost control over the work processes and as a result a certain degree of de-skilling takes place. Some domestic workers, in their bid to retain some autonomy, have sought to work both as private contractors and as part of an agency in order to get the benefits of both. Despite these changes, for most domestic workers the nature of job work still requires private negotiations in an unregulated and asymmetrical employer-employee relationship and their positions are only marginally better.

THE NEW DEMAND FOR DOMESTIC WORK: HIDDEN AND EXPLOITED.

Despite predictions by Coser (1973) that the role of the domestic servant would become obsolete, present indications suggest the contrary is true. The service intensity of all organisations is manifesting itself in large increases in the demand for services by firms and individuals in all industries (Sassen, 1994). In the home services industry, the overall household cleaning market was worth \$10 billion in the USA in 1992 (Mendez, 1998); in the UK, expenditure on domestic workers in private households in 1997 was about 4 billion pounds, up four fold from ten years ago (Anderson, 1997). This large demand for workers and specifically live-in domestic workers (estimates of domestic workers in Europe are, Spain 600,000, France, 900,000 and Germany between 700,000 and 1 million [Anderson, 1997], official figures put the domestic workers in Malaysia at 70,000 [Chin, 1998] migrant workers in general in the Middle East were 3.6 million in 1985 [Cremer, cited in Chin 1998]) globally can be attributed to a number of factors.

An ageing population in Europe and the West generally, with an increase in older people living alone has meant the creation of a 'caring gap'. These people may need assistance with household chores and being attended to (Anderson, 1997). The demise of the welfare state has also meant that a lot of care services once provided by government is the responsibility of the individual. The burden is shifting to the private sector thus increasing the demand for domestic help whether it is to look after the elderly or young. For governments it is an easier solution to provide foreign domestic workers with temporary work permits rather than spending from the public purse for the welfare needs of its citizens (Anderson, 1997; Chin, 1998; Steill & England, 1997).

This demand is further exacerbated by the increase in dual career families (Chin, 1998; Gregson & Low, 1994). Being in an economic position to do so, couples often find it easier to pay someone to do the work rather than argue over the division of household duties.

The need to maintain and to be seen to be enjoying a particular lifestyle also engenders demand for domestic workers (Anderson, 1997). Employers globally are able to purchase status by hiring domestic help, often from many Third World countries (Chin, 1998; Anderson, 1997). Most of these recruited workers find themselves in an alien culture, living in their place of work and facing very asymmetrical employment relationships (Chin, 1998; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Steill & England, 1997). The sense of isolation, loneliness, powerlessness, invisibility and demanding physical labour help in perpetuating the immigrant female domestic workers' low self esteem and low self worth (Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992).

This situation is further exploited when the domestic worker is an illegal immigrant. For an illegal migrant arriving in Europe domestic service is often the only occupation available apart from prostitution. Illegal migrants, 'hidden' in the domestic household, are subject to severe exploitation. They are paid little or nothing at all, dumped if they become sick, pregnant or too ill to work. There are no contracts, job descriptions or recourse to complaints (Anderson, 1997).

This asymmetry in the relationship, which leads to one party's personality being subsumed by the other can, as Coser (1973) pointed out, only be maintained if it is legitimised. This occurs where those who have been abused or exploited can see no alternative to their present state of dependence and acquiesce in it for lack of choice. This, as numerous researchers have pointed out, is often the predicament of domestic workers from the Third World who find themselves being exploited and abused. They have few alternatives. Minimal employment opportunities back home, the need to work in order to help sustain families back home, being "tied" to an employer (conditions of employment) or to a Domestic Employment Agency (confiscated passport) leave them with little choice.

THE STATE AND THE DOMESTIC WORKER

The movement of these workers does not take place in a vacuum. Governments have sought to promote economic development through different means. In the 1960s, a number of Third World countries adopted export-oriented industrialisation (EOI) policies in order to stimulate development. Movement of capital, inclusive of production processes from the West throughout the developing world sought to take account of cheap labour. Chin (1998) taking this argument further, suggests that a natural extension of this EOI platform is a transaction in low wage workers generally from over supplied cash strapped economies to labour starved first world economies. This movement in people is not new; what is new though is the concerted support by the state for the transnationalisation of the migrant or "guest worker" (including doctors, engineers, construction workers and domestic workers). This has resulted in countries like the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and Indonesia, institutionalising the out-migration of their able bodied productive nationals. A lot of these countries seek to encourage labour-out migration due to the perceived benefits of increased foreign exchange earnings (due to remittances back home) and help in the reduction of unemployment and social dislocation (Chin, 1998). Keen to maintain these labour markets, the responses by labour sending states investigating abuses and exploitation of their female workers, therefore,

tends to be superficial or lacking in sincerity, often arguing a lack of jurisdiction to be able to take substantive action.

Under such conditions, it could be argued that governments in collusion with international Domestic Employment Agencies (DOMs) are complicitous in allowing situations of abuse to continue. These two bodies in partnership often promote the positive aspects of overseas work filtering inappropriate or negative information. According to domestic workers interviewed by Chin (1998), DOMs were proficient at lying to potential migrants and their families. Positive pictures are painted of the work environment, encouraging women to consider a good life overseas, where they are earning money, working in wealthy households with 'nice' employers.

Host governments have also been indirectly involved in this exploitation. Regulations governing the entry of domestic workers into countries is often very prescriptive and does not enable any flexibility or freedom of choice for the domestic worker. For example, Canada's immigration policies allow for foreign domestic workers to enter Canada only as 'live-in' employees in their first two years. Demand is only for the 'live-in' category, which compels the immigrant worker to stay with the same employer regardless of the abuse or exploitation, taking place (Stasiulis & Bakan, 1997; Steill & England, 1997). In Malaysia, state designated short-term contracts (generally two years) deny foreign workers the right to change employers without prior official approval. Often domestic employment agencies will hold on to the domestic workers' passports (illegally), making sure that the domestic worker cannot leave her place of work (Chin, 1998). In Europe, domestic workers are similarly given tourist visas or work permits tying them to a specific employer. They then have no right to change employer regardless of exploitation. Often entering as tourists, domestic workers are promised by employers to have their work status arranged upon arrival but often nothing eventuates for months or years on end (Anderson, 1997).

RACISM, SEXISM AND THE DOMESTIC WORKER

Steill and England (1997) found that the degree to which issues of equity and fairness were adhered to in the domestic employment relationship was based on differentiation of class, race and immigration criteria. The white Anglophone housekeeper, for instance, experienced greater freedom, greater choice and power, allowing for greater symmetrical relationships compared to her foreign counterparts. Anderson (1997) in her study on these relationships notes that in Europe, a preference order exists in terms of race and stereotypes when it comes to the employment of domestic workers. There is a preference for the Filipina and the least preferred are African women from sub-Saharan Africa.

This preference for third world domestic help enables local employers to be more demanding of culturally unrelated employees. One can impose different treatment on individuals who are not 'one of us'. Anderson, for example, points to the example of an African women working as a domestic servant in Greece who was not afforded public holidays as the employer felt that these entitlements were only for Greeks (Anderson, 1997). Similarly, the over representation of immigrant women of colour among domestic workers is explained away as specific natural traits (Rollins, 1985). The cultural and racial hierarchy is, therefore, naturalised and reinforced by culture and economic power. This allows for the rationalising of the subordination of women by other women, rendering the relationship of sisterhood far more complex and dynamic.

BREAKING THE DEPENDENCY?

These new relationships have created and spawned new complex relationships. There is the constant interplay of gender, economic and states' power and to address some of these issues meaningfully, co-ordinated action and pressure has to be applied from action groups/social movements on their governments to address the injustices and abuses taking place.

As a minimum, governments need to set clear guidelines through labour regulations specifying the conditions under which domestic workers are to work and the appropriate pay rates. In a number of countries in the West, there are minimum pay rates for domestic workers who carry out day work. However, for 'live-in' workers minimum rates of pay and entitlements are not transparent. Governments, therefore, need to act to try and enforce minimum conditions. This is important as the lack of legislation relating to live-in domestic service continues to reinforce to employers the belief that they have absolute control over their employees. This is bolstered by the belief that they are the ones providing board and lodging as an extra to payment (Chin, 1998). Unfortunately, with prevailing trends towards an unregulated labour market, there seems to be little inclination on the part of governments to act.

Governments tend to act when there are votes to be gained or when the disaffected start to lobby politically. Unfortunately, domestic workers and especially immigrant workers have very little political muscle when it comes to influencing governments. There are, however, individuals and non-government organisations (NGO) which have taken up their cause. In Canada, INTERCEDE (International Coalition to End Domestic's Exploitation) and the Toronto Organisation for Domestic Workers have been prominent in the fight to improve the rights of domestic workers, regarding employment legislation, access to collective bargaining and the removal of the 'live-in' provision (Brand, 1987; INTERCEDE, 1993; cited in Stiell & England 1997). In the UK, a long running campaign for the rights of overseas domestic workers (KALAYAAN) has aim to expose the abuses and exploitation happening to domestic workers. These NGOs, in the main, seek labour conditions which are nothing more than what is accorded to the permanent citizens of these countries or minimum labour conditions as set out under international covenants.

Under Article 6 of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention on Migration for Employment (Revised, 1949), a country's treatment of immigrants should be no less favourable than that which is accorded to its own nationals. This is in respect of remuneration, hours of work, holidays with pay, membership of trade unions and social security. Article 4 of the ILO Convention on Home Work 1996, talks about equality, in terms of treatment that should be afforded to homeworkers just like other wage earners (ILO, 1999). What is evident is that despite pronouncements and conventions set up by international organisations such as the ILO, little is done in practical terms to adhere or enforce these. In actual fact most First World countries have not ratified these conventions (ILO, 1999).

Employers can also help in improving the working conditions of domestic workers. They have to start providing for greater benefits, increased pay and recognising their rights as no different from that of other workers. According to Romero (1992) and Mendez (1998) the transformation of paid housework has to include appropriate salaries, annual raises, social security benefits, vacation provisions, sick benefits, health insurance and job security. It is not enough to talk about transformation of paid housework without addressing these material conditions.

Relying on employers to voluntarily promote and adhere to such changes is unrealistic; governments need to be pressured via both domestic and international avenues to introduce, implement and monitor the appropriate laws to enable this to happen. An independent authority giving full effect to appropriate penalties for breaches and abuses of domestic workers can also be an effective mechanism for monitoring the rights of domestic workers.

Globally, an effective feminist agenda cannot really succeed without including the plight of all women (Romero, 1992). Often as employees, professional women (who themselves are victims of sexism) seek to shift the burden of sexism. Recent research suggest that unable to negotiate a fair and mutually agreed upon division of domestic labour with their male counterparts, these women are likely to hire domestic workers. In so doing, they help to maintain male privileges and patriarchal practices (Gregson & Lowe, 1994; Rollins, 1985). Therefore, through paid domestic help, professional women employers merely shift the responsibility of the domestic division of labour to other women.

Similarly, concerted action by unions may be required to start to unionise these lower paid workers. Global co-operation and actions to expose abuses and to pressure for effective legislative measures need to be instituted.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to illustrate the changing nature of the role the domestic worker. It has argued that as industrialisation grew apace, the nature of domestic work similarly evolves from a 'live-in' situation to one involving day work or piece work. Some have sought to professionalise their services via business-like operations and arrangements, enabling them greater flexibility, stability, autonomy and better terms and conditions.

As the global economy becomes transformed, domestic work gained greater saliency as an employment outlet for many and involves a growing globalisation of labour. These globalisation trends are a double-edged sword. While on the one hand, it enables women from Third World countries to gain some economic independence and contribute to national economies, it also dislocates them from their bases rendering them as sources for exploitation. For First World women, the import of such labour may result in the erosion of much hard-fought gains and advances. Politically, this issue becomes a vexatious issue for feminism. It pits women against women and brings into question some aspects of contemporary feminist practices - the issues of class, race and 'colonialism/imperialism'. For social theorists and activists, the issue calls for an integrated, practical and internationalised agenda able to synthesise disparate global social forces, movements and organisations.

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