

Health & domestic work

not necessarily look forward to 'payday'.

Siphiwe: 'It's worse on pay day, because then I have to decide what to do with the money. I end up having a headache'.

It is interesting how many people usually look forward to payday, however, the women experienced increased stress when they received their low salaries. The Department of Labour stipulates that every domestic worker who works at least 27 hours a week should earn at least R1,491.86 per month. In addition, domestic workers are not supposed to work more than 40 hours per week. But many of the workers in the study worked more than 50 hours per week and earned less than R1,491.86.

It would be expected that these women experience such working conditions as exploitative. This is compounded by the fact that none of the women belong to any domestic worker organisation. This makes it hard for them to exercise and demand their rights as workers. In cases where women attempted to challenge their conditions of employment or unfair dismissal – they had to do so individually because they are not part of a collective effort that might enable them to successfully change their conditions. Due to low wages, unfavourable working conditions and consequent exploitation, the women are subjected to a range of negative health issues. ¹⁸

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Domestic work causes health issues like stress, high blood pressure, swelling feet and sometimes flus.

Tshidiso Tolla explores health problems amongst domestic workers in rural Mpumalanga.

It is evident that with time domestic workers experience health problems such as high blood pressure and stress due to long working hours, the nature of their jobs and low pay. A study by Hickson and Strous revealed that due to exploitation and feeling that they are not good enough, domestic workers might lose self-esteem and this may impact badly on their mental health. Many of the women said that due to their work load and low salary, they often found themselves being stressed about how to make ends meet.

Siphiwe: 'Due to the low pay, my blood pressure would rise, because now I'm stressed about money and what to do with the money'.

In addition to feeling stressed and complaints about high blood pressure, most of the women complained about the cold water they use every day which causes joint pains especially in their hands. They often have flu due to constantly working with cold water.

Precious: 'Most of the time the joints in my hands are painful, sometimes my hands go numb and sometimes they get swollen'.

Fezile: 'The frequent flus are due to the cold water'.

Although the women complain, unfortunately in house-hold chores one cannot successfully do their job without using water. In addition, most of the women spoke of having back-pains and swollen feet, which were due to long working hours of cleaning, washing and moving heavy things around the house.

Sithembile: 'My feet get swollen, and then I have to walk barefoot'. Sometimes she walks long distances to work with swollen feet and often without shoes. At one point it was unbearable and had to quit her job. In addition, she also had to stand the whole day at work and walk back home again. However, it is not only her who quit her job due to illness.

Nonto: 'Due to the work, having to work with cold water and moving heavy things, I got sick and then I quit my job'.

Quitting jobs due to illness is often a temporary measure for the women who have no other source of income. At some point they resume because they have children to support. Nonto: 'After quitting my old job, I had to go work at the farms, because sitting at home was not helping. I could not just sit there and watch my children starve'.

Women were burdened with taking care of their families, often including unemployed husbands, and this kept them in exploitative working conditions. According to Mkandawire-Valhmu, the employment of women is said to remove women from health hazards of poverty. However, the women in the study still experienced ill-health despite being employed.

In cases where there were husbands or partners present, many were not working and relied on the women's income. Sylvia: 'I have to work and provide for my children and husband, since my husband is not working'.

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RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYERS

The relationship between domestic workers and their employers is one characterised by inequality. This allows exploitation of domestic workers, argue Hickson and Strous. According to Anderson, in order for employers and employees to have a successful relationship, they have to 'bond'. However, the dynamics of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers may be difficult given the class inequalities that define the relationship.

Besides initiatives taken by the women in the study to build and maintain a good relationship, employers maintained a distance. This was usually evident when employers addressed workers. The women maintained that most of the time there was no communication especially from their employers.

Phindile: 'I know my boss by

now, when talking to her I can tell if today she is willing to talk or not'. She mentioned that she has grown immune to her boss's moods. When asked how this made her feel her response was: 'When I greet her in the morning and notice that she does not want to talk, I just get straight to my work'.

It is evident that employers controlled how much and when to communicate with their workers. When they did not feel like talking they tended to restrict their conversations to one-word answers and this was a sign to the worker not to engage further.

Fezile: 'You greet her and she just says fine, nothing more...'

Although employers did not communicate well with their workers, the workers attempted to be open and talked to their employers whenever something troubled them - at work or at home. This shows that communication between workers and employers was one sided.

Banele: 'Usually I tell the wife if there are certain things that bother me, at work'. She adds that she speaks to her employer whenever something happens that she feels uncomfortable with. In one instance she complained when asked to do an unreasonable job of washing her employer's husband's underwear, which she deemed unacceptable and degrading. Most of the women felt that, by communicating openly with their employers, they maintained a good working environment for themselves. Furthermore, the women also believed that by talking they freed

themselves from being oppressed.

Siphiwe: 'I sat down with her and asked not to work on Saturdays because I get really tired, and having only Sunday off, I do not get to rest properly'.

For Siphiwe this proves that by talking workers can solve some of the issues they might be facing at work. She wanted weekends off to look after her young children and take care of things at home. Most of the women said that in order to work satisfactory jobs, workers should talk of the things that bother them. In line with this, Siphiwe described an incident where she literally cried in front of her employer because she felt her employer did not understand her problem. 'Sometimes when telling my employer about my problems: I literally cry'.

Siphiwe characterised her relationship with her employer as close, open and caring. According to Beck, in exploring the relationships between workers and their employers, employer's views of their workers ranged from invisible to family like reporting that they seek intimate relationships with their workers. This might have been the case with Siphiwe and her employer, whereby their relationship was that of sisterhood.

However, according to Bell, if an employee feels cared for and loved in her work-place, she will supply high quality care and labour. But it might be hard for domestic workers who view themselves as part of the family and cared for to exercise their rights. This is because it has been noted that employers have misused their care



Tea time: Making tea for the employer.

and love for domestic workers, arguing against legislation that benefits domestic workers.

Usually when the women talked to their employers about things that troubled them, employers would respond positively. However, this was not always the case. A few of the women revealed that sometimes when they talked to their employers they got no response.

Sithembile: 'Ever since I asked her to not work one weekend per month, she has not responded... Maybe she does not want to, because if she did, she would have given me one weekend off already'.

Prudence: 'Even if you do talk to him nicely, all he ever says is mmh ok... There is nothing else that he is going to say nor will there be any actions taken on your request'.

The women concluded that their employers were uncomfortable

with their requests, because they did not respond to them. This unresponsiveness could also be interpreted as a way of maintaining their power over employees.

Although women saw lack of communication from their employers as a problem, many still felt that they were well treated. For example, they said that there were no restrictions with food; they ate what everyone was eating.

Thembeni: '... I eat anything that everyone else is eating, whether eggs or Russian sausages'.

Nonto: 'She treats me well, she does not shout at me when I make myself something to eat and she does not get angry'.

The fact that she could eat anything proved to Thembeni that they saw her as part of the family. Both women describe their relationships with their employers

in terms of food. They feel that because their employers do not have a problem with them eating anything in the house then their relationship is good. According to Archer, the issue of food provision is an important one, because it helps define the relationship between the employer and employee. It may fulfil an ideological function of inducing feelings of gratitude and faithfulness on the worker.

In addition, the women revealed that their employers gave them some food and clothes to take home, and thus their employers treated them well. However, according to Dilata, employers gave food and other things to their workers because they knew that they were underpaying them. The one-sided gift giving reinforces power differentials between employers and domestic workers and places workers under a further sense of obligation.

In contrast Chin asserts that the offering of gifts may be a way of employers trying to instil a sense of appreciation from domestic workers. By amplifying the faults of other employers, this implies that the domestic worker has a good position with them and would be foolish to go seek work elsewhere and risk bad treatment.

Being open and communicating openly with employers made the women's work easier, because then they understood and knew what is expected of them. Therefore, all the women said they preferred open communication. However, some of the women were bolder and franker than others. A relationship between two people of unequal socio-economic statuses may be hard to maintain. However, because the women were open and had the ability to communicate well with their employers, they strived to maintain a good relationship. This may have been influenced by the fact that language was not a barrier to communication, since all the women in the study worked for employers who spoke the same language as them.

Building a relationship based on open communication is one of the ways in which the women tried to fight for what they believed in as well as deal with some of the challenges they came across. Considering the private and isolated nature of the domestic service, it is important that workers find ways to cope and deal with their situations at work.

FUTURE

Domestic workers have better dreams for themselves and their children for the future. Despite their current living conditions the women had positive hopes for the future. This was seen through willingness to educate their children in the hope that they would change the situation at home.

Phindile: 'When I get paid I buy some building materials... when my children get paid they buy too'. Although Phindile struggled to survive while her children went to school and had no house to sleep in, at the time of the interview her children were helping her build the house she had always wanted. According to Lycklama the major reason why most women enter domestic work is to provide for their children and secure their future by sending them to school.

Regardless of the fact that the women were uneducated, they wanted a better education for their children. Nqedile: 'I paid for my children's education from primary... up until university. The other one is working now'.

However, the issue of money made it difficult for the women to send their children to universities. Sending a child to university might mean that the rest of the family lives in extreme poverty. The women found it hard to focus on other things in their homes for as long as their children were still in school.

Says Siphwi: 'At the moment I cannot do anything... my son is in university'.

The women in the study perceived their lack of education as the reason why their job options were narrow. Most of them had either worked on farms, in shops or as domestic workers.

Sylvia: 'All my life I have been a domestic worker, I will never leave this job... I am not educated'. Furthermore, most of the women perceived their lack of education as one of the reasons why they were sometimes subjected to abuse by their employers.

Fezile: 'It is hard working as a domestic worker... but because we are poor we have no other options'.

To the women, having positive hopes for the future meant that they had to work hard in order to

improve their current situations through making sacrifices to educate their children. The reason they were so eager to educate their children may be because the women understood that their current struggles were due to lack of education. Thus they described entering domestic work as a way of coping with poverty.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study show that while all the women in the study were working in the same area where they were living; they still had difficulty finding time to spend with their families and children. They struggled to maintain a social life because they were always at work. According to Phillips, the significance of being a mother gave particular meaning and influenced women's involvement in domestic work. However, at the same time the structure of their work separated these women from their children. In addition, the findings show that many of the women did not derive any form of satisfaction from their jobs. However, they were still grateful that they had jobs and they could use the little money that they earned to support their families.

The study is important because it explores domestic workers' experiences of domestic work, and how these women attempted to balance their work and personal lives. The study also shows how the participants understand their lives as well as the meanings they derive from their work. However, the findings of the investigation are only experiences of rural domestic workers in a particular village and in order to fully understand the dynamics of employers and domestic workers in rural areas, future research should focus on the experiences of rural employers who hire domestic workers. ■