

Between sisters

Soweto bosses and domestic workers

Previous studies show that African domestic workers experience their black employers as arrogant and mean.

Xoliswa Dilata looks at the relationship between Sowetan middle-class employers and their domestic workers and concludes otherwise.

There are just over a million domestic workers in South Africa, accounting for 7.3% of total employment. About 10% of these are hired by black people. As an area that is largely occupied by African women the increased entry of African employers adds an interesting dynamic in the domestic work sector.

Despite much literature on domestic workers, there has been little focus on the relationship between African domestic workers and their employers. Studies have tended to focus on the racial divisions that exist in the employment relationship between domestic workers and their white employers and more recently on domestics new legislative rights and how these rights have led to the shift from working as servants to becoming workers. The main arguments here are that these rights are only paper improvements as in practice not much has changed for domestic workers.

Scholars have also focused on the rich black elites of Cape Town, Grahamstown and the northern

suburbs of Johannesburg and have argued that these black employers are seen by their domestic workers as the worst employers. These black employers are often described as arrogant and mean.

The interest in the relationship between African employers and their domestic workers comes from the speculation that this relationship is different to that of the traditional white employer and African domestic worker. For instance, it has been speculated that some black employers have pre-existing family relationships with their domestic workers, either on the basis of blood maybe a family member from the rural areas or because they share the same clan name.

This article looks at the relationship that African domestic workers have with their middle-class African employers in various suburbs of Soweto.

BLACK EMPLOYERS' GUILT

This relationship between black working-class domestics and black middle-class employers has difficulties and challenges for both

parties. Common racial backgrounds and class inequalities challenge both parties. For the employer this challenge takes the form of guilt and fear and for the employees a sense of common blackness makes them have higher expectations of the employment relationship.

The employers enter the employment relationship with deep-seated feelings of fear and guilt. This is a fear that stems from their need not to treat their domestic workers in the same manner that their mothers were treated in the white suburbs.

Employers expressed a need to create an equal relationship with their domestic workers so they do not feel like they are being exploited. Employers manage this by entering into the relationship on an informal basis. They don't establish the relationship as an employment relationship, with rules that need to be followed.

Employers expressed the complications around setting boundaries, and in asserting their role as employers, as a result of this. These African employers experienced an uncertainty and guilt over having to give orders to another, and therefore exercising power over a 'sister'. A bourgeois guilt. Employers said that they felt the need to be lenient and to make the domestic worker feel at home.

This need to be different from white employers was so important to African employers that they refused to refer to domestic workers as 'workers' and preferred the word 'helper'. They argued

that 'helper' was more dignified than 'maid' and showed that they respected and valued their domestic workers, as if they are in a partnership trying to take care of the household together.

One of the employers interviewed said, "The word 'maid' reminds me of our mothers in the suburbs. The word is derogatory and brings down people. It takes us back, to remember where we come from. 'Helper' is more dignified it shows that you respect her and value her. There is a sense of similar identity with this person. You feel for this person, she is almost like a sister or mother."

INEQUALITIES REMAIN

However despite these expressed desires by black employers to create a harmonious relationship, conflicts arose and stereotypes repeated themselves.

The employees entered the relationship with a preconceived idea of how they should be treated, expecting and hoping that their African employers would treat them differently and that shared racial identities would benefit them. This resulted in employers complaining that their domestic workers took them for granted and did not apply the same amount of effort that they would if they were working for a white employer.

For example, one employer said, "The domestic workers would be so meticulous when working for white or Indian employers, working over the limit. But with us it is not like that. We want to treat them properly like our sisters, but they see us like fools and not work properly but expect a full salary."

Further findings into the nature of the employment relationship

and the interactions between black employers and domestic workers revealed that much of the structural inequalities in the sector remain in tact.

Employers still insisted that their domestic workers be live-in workers even though in certain cases the domestic worker had her own accommodation. This produced a situation where the domestic worker was unable to be a mother to her own children, sending them to grandparents or relatives instead.

Being a live-in domestic worker often meant that workers lived inside the house with the family instead of having a backyard room. This generated a feeling of always being on duty and under constant watch.

The inability to get 'offs' (time off) was another familiar problem for the domestic workers as it limited the ability to sustain their lives away from work.

Furthermore, most of the domestic workers were still being paid much less than the legal minimum wage as set out by Sectoral Determination 7 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. The current minimum wages for domestic workers is R1 166.50, however most of the domestic workers in the study earned between R800 and R1 000 per month. Many did not seem aware of the minimum wage and easily accepted R800 because it was the standard salary for most domestic workers.

Low levels of unionisation and representation also persist. Eunice Dhladhla from the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (Sadsawu) said that the union is having difficulties in terms of membership as some of the domestic workers did not want to

join the union, while others only sought out the union when experiencing conflict with their black employers.

The union, furthermore, is still predominantly represented in former white suburbs. There has been only limited success in recruitment of members from the townships, leaving many workers there unprotected by the union.

CONCLUSION

The study showed the ambivalence at the heart of the domestic employment relationship. African employers wanted to establish a relationship where the domestic workers felt like part of the family and felt like they were equal to their employers. On the other hand, they wanted an employment relationship where the domestic workers followed their instructions and maintained their status as workers.

At the same time the domestic workers expressed a realisation that even though their employer had changed from white to black, inequality and exploitation had remained the same. This realisation often led to African employers being labeled as the 'worst employers' because domestic workers entered the relationship with the hope that the employers would treat them differently because they were 'sisters'. LB

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