

The Best Kept Secret: Violence against domestic workers

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Introduction

South African society is permeated by violence. This violence is not only confined to any one sector of society but is woven into the entire fabric of the social system. Political violence, violence in the workplace, an ever-increasing rate of violent crimes and the high incidence of rape, women battery and child abuse are indicators of this. Many thousands of people are living in fear. They have withdrawn behind burglar bars, guard dogs, alarm systems and neighbourhood patrols. The number of guns in the homes of mainly white South Africans have also increased dramatically.¹ More than half of the white homes have got guns.² As the availability of these weapons increases, so does the number of firearms that are reported to be missing or stolen; yet to become potential murder weapons in the interracial conflicts, in the home and on the streets.

As the problem of violence in South Africa unfolds, the domestic arena is increasingly used as a setting for uninhibited expression of rage, anger and frustration suffered in the wider society.³ Even though these emotions may originate outside the home, they often cannot be expressed in their places of origin since such an expression would lead to such social sanctions as dismissals from jobs, or arrest and prosecution resulting from "unlawful" acts. Expressing these emotions within the confines of the home is thus relatively safe since it is effectively hidden from the public eye and the risk of social sanction is much lower than for similar behaviour in a public setting.

Violence in the home

Even though the terms "violence in the home" or "family violence" has been used to refer only to spousal and child abuse, other forms of violence such as sibling violence, parental abuse and "granny bashing"⁴ have been reported. Crosscutting these forms of violence is the distinction between sexual and non-sexual modes. While the former will include such acts as marital rape and incest, the latter largely involves the direct use of physical aggression against other household members. This often involves slapping, hitting, pushing or throwing an object at another person.⁵

A further distinction must also be made between physical and non-physical/psychological violence. As Gelles (1972) has noted, to focus on violence in its physical form should not eclipse the existence of other forms of psychological violence in the home.

Data on the incidence of violence in the home, however, remains difficult to obtain. Apart from being a sensitive and personal area to explore, many of the offenders do not admit to committing acts of violence. Similarly, victims and onlookers such as neighbours and relatives are reluctant to talk about their respective experiences or observations.⁶ Overcoming the problem of under-reporting thus remains an inherent difficulty.

Violence in the home is not a new phenomenon. For many years, the issue of the homestead as a violent setting has been subjected to "selective inattention".⁷ This "selective inattention" to the topic of family violence has resulted in a myth that violence in the family was either rare or traceable to some pathology in the family itself. More recently, this myth has been challenged by a number researchers. Gelles and Straus (1979) revealed the family as one of the most violent social institutions with the exception of the police and the military. This study found that one out of every four murder victims in the United States was the product of intra-familial conflict.⁸

Apart from this research, the emergence of family violence as a social problem has been particularly influenced by public sensitization to social and political events and especially as a result of the growing women's movement.⁹ Furthermore, the children's rights movement which ran parallel to the women's movement also heightened public awareness of violence in the family.

The family members who are most likely to become victims of violence in the home are the least powerful in the family and in the society, i.e. women and children.¹⁰ The traditional superior-subordinate relationship of men and women, or adults and children allows for the use/abuse of power by those in superior status. Lystad (1986) has argued that in such a society, there is an implicit approval and support for the use of violence on the part of husbands against their wives and children. Thus, while violence is condemned in other settings, it is tacitly accepted in the domestic arena. The notions of domestic privacy and the norms of paternal dominance has thus helped to make violence a sanctioned activity within the family.

It is argued in this paper that to fully comprehend the meaning of domestic violence, one has to pursue the origins of the tensions both in the wider social relationships as well as within the power relationships in the home. In the current South African context, the broader societal tensions can be traced to the uneasy political and socio-economic atmosphere and the fissures which this causes in social relationships. The tensions that result in inter-racial violence, the despair that has led to an increasing rate of family killings, the high incidence of political violence and the deprivation which

has led to a soaring crime rate – all these sources of uncertainty, fear and frustration lie at the root of the redefinition of relationships within the home.

For much of white South Africa, in a time of political upheaval, their greatest fear is of the "enemy within" – those domestic workers, gardeners, etc. who have easy access to them and their children. The increasing incidence of the white "baas" coming home to beat up a domestic worker, is therefore not only a barometer of fear, but an indication of the frustration generated by a feeling of loss of control in the political and socio-economic environment.

Violence against domestic workers may arguably be presented as a barometer of the fear, frustration and ultimately aggression produced by the state of civil war in the country.

"Part of the Family" – Insider/Outsider status of Domestic Workers

In South Africa, domestic service remains the single largest source of employment for black women, apart from the agricultural sector. Roughly 89% of domestic workers are women and of these 88% are black.¹¹

Clearly, in many white South African families, housekeeping depends largely on the skills and hard work of domestic workers. Yet, domestic workers are not, in a real sense, part of the households they serve. Their position within these households is largely shaped by the structures which control the distribution of power and resources in South Africa.¹² The traditional relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa is that of master and servant; a relationship in which the white master is socialized into the dominant ideological order while the black servant is perceived as inferior.

Even though domestic service provides one of the most significant inter-racial contacts that whites encounter, the interaction is experienced in extremely asymmetrical terms. Domestic workers are subject to practices of inferiority such as "servant's rations" and "servant's blankets" which are synonymous with cheap products of inferior quality. The inferior living quarters and the prohibition on using facilities such as same plates, toilets and bathrooms underline their subordinate place in the household.

The attitudes of most of the employers (68%) in Cock's study¹³ towards their domestic workers, reflect racial inferiorization. They accepted the subordinate role of blacks and believed that the latter are inferior to whites in their personal qualities. The following are some of their comments:

They are very mentally inferior. They don't think like us ... you only get the odd one with a bit of intelligence.¹⁴

They are black and we're white ... you can't compare us.¹⁵

Yes, they've just come out of the trees. I mean, they are at a lower stage in the evolutionary ladder.¹⁶

They need guidance all the time.¹⁷

Overall, the relationship between domestic workers and their employers is intensely paternalistic. This paternalism is seen by Cock (1980) to have two central implications: firstly, it generates a sense of power and superiority in the employer, and secondly, it consigns the worker to a dependent and powerless position. Domestic workers are totally dependent on their employers not just for wages, but for basic necessities such as food and accommodation. This dependence both reflects and reinforces the structural location of black women in South African society.

By virtue of being female and black, the average domestic worker finds herself at the convergence of two structures of dominance, namely race and sex. She is at the bottom of the ladder of apartheid; she is oppressed because all blacks are oppressed and because she is a woman.¹⁸ Such oppression makes her vulnerable to exploitation. This exploitation is evident in her low wages and long working hours, her performance of monotonous household tasks, the lack of paid holidays, lack of benefits such as maternity leave, pension fund and compensation for injuries, as well as her deprivation of social and family life.

While some of the domestic workers are part of the urban working class, many of them are from impoverished rural backgrounds with little or no schooling. For the rural, poor and illiterate migrant coming to the city, domestic service seems to provide an ideal solution to the problems of unemployment and lack of accommodation. Driven by poverty and the lack of employment opportunities in the rural areas, these domestic workers are forced to earn some money to support their families – even if it entails being separated from them. Their very desperation makes them all the more vulnerable. Their need to keep a job, no matter how bad the conditions, forces them to remain in situations of extreme exploitation with no recourse to legal protection.

Domestic workers, unlike other workers in the factories, offices and mines, are not protected by any of the Acts of Parliament that offers a form of protection to these workers.¹⁹ These Acts control matters such as wages, hours of work and other working conditions. The most common form of recruitment in domestic work is by word of mouth, the terms and conditions of employment are rarely recorded, thus leaving the domestic worker unprotected in cases of later disputes. This feature of subordination of the worker and lack of protection, makes domestic workers vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal, deductions from wages for breakages or lost property, evictions from the backyard rooms, withholding of wages by the employer and many other unfair labour practices.²⁰

Since there are no regulations controlling these matters, the contractual relationship between the worker and her employer is determined by the common law. This law has been identified by Flint (1989) to be inadequate in that it reflects, as well as reinforces, the inherent inequalities between the employer and the employee. Haysom and Thompson (1986) also describe the common law contract as having freed the employer of any binding legal obligations concerning his/her employees.²¹ Their criticisms are rooted in the assumption that a contract is voluntarily entered into by equal participants who both agree on terms of contractual exchange. This assumption, however, does not apply in the case of domestic workers. They are hardly in the position to dictate terms of employment contract requirements. As Delport (1990) puts it, employers often have the sole and exclusive control over

conditions of employment. Entering into a contract could therefore not be in the interests of domestic workers, but to their detriment.²²

It is therefore apparent that despite their position as "insiders" in the private realm of the domestic world of the white families they serve, domestic workers remain "outsiders" – their exclusion being based on the racial prejudices which they suffer in the South African society. Although they are contractual workers under the common law, domestics are excluded from any real legal protection in South African law. Although they appear to be an integral part of the white household, this is usually at the expense of their role within their own families. For all these reasons, domestic workers can appropriately be described as "insiders" with "outsider" status in both the domestic and the legal arenas of South African society.

In response to domestic workers' plight, the South African Domestic Workers Association (SADWA) was launched in 1981. In 1986, SADWA then became the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU) affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). This union is however not entitled to registration under the Labour Relations Act. Protection against victimisation on account of trade union membership is as a result lacking.

Unprotected by legislation and desperate to maintain a regular source of income, domestic workers are forced to suffer in silence because of such fears as loss of income or accommodation. In this way, they are trapped in a situation of inequality and immobility within which they are subject to extreme exploitation. It is this notion of being trapped in this system of inequality and exploitation that has raised the question of domestic service as an "institution". Studies (Cock, 1980 ; Otto, 1990) have shown how domestic service shares some common institutionalizing effects as prisons, mental hospitals etc.

Domestic work as an institution

Every institution has "encompassing tendencies".²³ The encompassing character of each institution is symbolized by the extent to which social interaction with the wider social environment is prohibited.

In a total institution, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a pre-arranged time into the next. The whole sequence of activities are imposed from above by a system of explicit rules and officials.²⁴ This applies to many domestic workers. Their lives are to a large extent controlled by their employers. The employers set the wages, decide on the schedule of tasks to be performed every day and compile other rules that may even impinge on the worker's decisions over what to do in her private life. All these rules are formulated according to the employer's preferences, often at a disadvantage to the worker.

Furthermore, "inmates (of institutions) typically live in institutions and have restricted contact with the world outside the walls".²⁵ Clearly, this applies to many live-in domestic workers. In many households, they are denied contact with the outside world and suffer extreme isolation. Firstly, entry into their workplaces is restricted by high walls, guard dogs, alarm systems and locked security gates. Secondly, many of them live in backyard rooms, separated from their family and friends. Visitors are either

prohibited or they are allowed on certain days or hours. After work, the live-in domestic workers retire to the isolation of their rooms. Very often, they are not free to do as they please during their leisure time or to go out whenever they feel like, as they may be called in at any time to do some extra work such as serving tea to "madam" and her visitors in the evenings. As one domestic worker stated:

I knocked off at around six in the evening but they could call me two or three times in an evening to wash the dishes, polish the kids' school shoes, to iron a dress that madam wants to wear the next day or to correct something that they think I have not done properly.²⁶

Just like in other total institutions, the private territories of the domestic worker's self are violated; the boundary that she places between her being and the environment is invaded, privacy is non-existent. For the live-in domestic worker, the place of employment is at the same time a sphere of sleep and recreation. Thus, she lives a life in which sleep, work and play are done in the same place, and under the same authority. Under normal circumstances, these activities are done in different settings, with different co-participants under different authorities. Domestic service therefore obscures barriers between work and private life.

Total institutions also involve a process of depersonalization. Goffman refers to this as a "mortification of the self". This often takes the form of stripping the inmate of his/her name and/or property. According to Goffman, loss of one's name can be a great curtailment of the self. Once the inmate is stripped of her name, some replacements must be made by the establishment but these take the form of standard issue. In the case of domestic work, standard name replacements such as "sissy" or "girl" are used to address the worker. In other cases though, the worker is addressed by her first name. Very often, African names are unknown to the employers and in some cases English names may be given to the domestic worker for the convenience of the employer. This is often accompanied by statements like:

It is very difficult to remember these names.²⁷

Only 10% of the employers in Cock's study knew their domestic worker's full Xhosa name. The importance of knowing the domestic worker's African name is illustrated by Mphahlele (1967) in his short story of "Mrs Plum".

What did the girl next door call you? Mrs. Plum asked me the first day I came to her. Jane, I replied. Was there not an African name? I said yes, Karabo. All right, Madam said. We'll call you Karabo, she said ... I knew so many whites who did not care what they called black people as long as it was all right for their tongue. This pleased me, I mean Mrs. Plum's use of Karabo; because the only time I heard the

name was when I was at home or when my friends spoke to me.²⁸

Depersonalization can also be in the form of the standard issue of uniforms and food.²⁹ Cock (1980) argues that the domestic worker's uniform externalises her position in her social order. Similarly, the "servant's rations" which are of inferior quality or are simply "left overs" which the employer considers unsuitable for her family's consumption, also indicate the domestic worker's subordinate position within the white family.

Another form of depersonalization also takes place through the invasion of the domestic's environment. This often takes the form of room searches that the domestic is forced to endure either routinely or when "trouble" arises. In these cases, it is the search that penetrates the private reserve of the individual and violates territories of her self. An example of this sort of invasion to domestic service is illustrated by the following incident drawn from the SADWU records:

During December 1988, a live-in domestic worker came back to her room at 20h45 from her sister's place. On arrival, she found her employer and a friend inside her room conducting a search. The employer showed her what she believed to be a piece of glass, which she (the employer) claimed to be diamond. The worker was accused of having stolen the employer's earrings and diamond ring. The employer pushed the worker out of the room and locked it. The latter had to go and sleep at her sister's place. The next day the worker went to her employer's place to collect her belongings and was refused access. Later that evening she was picked up by the police at her sister's place and spent the night at the police station. She made her first appearance in court the next day. It is, however, not clear as to what charges she faced; she was granted bail and the matter was postponed.³⁰

Goffman too, notes that differential power relationships are fundamental to the maintenance of control over inmates in total institutions. These power differentials are reinforced by the language of control/subordination.

Inmates are often required to punctuate the social interaction with staff by verbal acts of deference such as saying 'sir'.³¹

Most domestic workers are required to address their employers as "master/baas" or "madam/missus". This often extends to children in the employer's family, who may be

addressed as "kleinbaas" or "kleinmissus". Domestic workers, on the other hand, are often addressed in terms reserved for children and inferiors. The domestic worker is usually a "girl" and the gardener a "boy". The use of "girl" implies that the domestic worker is a perpetual child who is in need of guidance and supervision.

This also corresponds to what Goffman refers to as "indignities of speech" endured by and required of the inmates in a total institution. Examples of these indignities are verbal or gestural, e.g. the employer addresses the domestic worker by obscene names or talking to her as if she were not present. Goffman goes on to argue that:

corresponding to the indignities of speech and action required of the inmates are the indignities of treatment others accord him.³²

Examples of this in the domestic arena are: domestic workers being made to enter and exit by a side/back door or sitting in the backseat behind their employers in an empty car. Whatever the form of these indignities, the individual has to engage in activities whose implications are not compatible with conceptions of the self.

Even though much of the nature of domestic work involves close contact between the employee and employer, in many cases the relationship is characterized by a form of social distance. In the best relationships, the employer may show a genuine human feeling and be viewed as a source of support especially in helping the domestic worker to free herself from the discriminatory constraints which bind the lives of black people.

She is always sore about the way the white police beat up black people; about the way the black people who work for whites are made to sit at the Zoo Lake with their hearts hanging, because the white people say our people are making noise for them on Sunday afternoon when they want to rest in their houses and gardens So Madam writes to the papers to let others know, to ask the government to be kind to us.³³

In the worst of relationships, the employer is viewed as an exploiter whose indifference is characteristic of white people in general.

She was a white woman like any other, friendly but detached, as though I simply was not there. I could not imagine myself ever talking to her on equal terms. I knew what her life was like, but she never placed herself in my position They know nothing about the domestic life of servants, nothing about their problems, nothing about how

we lived, what we believed in, what we thought. They didn't care. For them, we did not exist.³⁴

On the whole, live-in domestic workers, like inmates in an institution, are forced to live within the confines of "white mansions" with little interaction with the outside world. This restricted access coupled with lack of legal protection makes them not only vulnerable to exploitation but to violence as well. For many years, domestic workers have not only been victims of psychological violence but physical and sexual violence as well. This violence has however been hidden by the private nature of crime in the domestic arena.

Forms of violence against domestic workers

Physical violence

Physical violence against domestic workers is not a unique product of our time and place. The literature on domestic servants in pre-industrial Britain has been found by Cock (1980) to contain many accounts of servants being subjected to physical abuse. Evidence also indicates that domestic workers in many other 20th century colonial societies were also subject to physical "punishment" for "wrongdoing" and such misdemeanours as "cheekiness".³⁵

In South Africa, violence against domestic workers can be linked to the prevailing culture of violence characteristic of the apartheid system. The ideology of racism creates a sense of power and superiority on the part of the white employers. This superiority may, if threatened, be validated through such means as violence. Being black, female and a servant within the white household makes the domestic worker an easy target for aggression.

Physical violence against domestic workers is presently reported to be on the increase. Union officials express great concern at the growing incidence of cases, especially of physical assaults, flooding their offices. They identify the country's current uneasy political atmosphere as one of the reasons for this increase. As the education officer of the South African Domestic Workers' Union (SADWU) puts it:

Since the start of the unrest in 1984, we've had a terrifying increase in the number of domestics assaulted by their employers. Domestics often bear the brunt of their employer's frustration.³⁶

Similarly, accounts of violence against domestic workers with the prevailing political climate as the cause have been reported in the media. A recent article entitled "Racists beat black women in Carletonville: Domestics under siege" read as follows:

Life has been hell for Carletonville domestics since petty apartheid raised its ugly head in the mining town. Racial hatred is running high in the Conservative Party stronghold.

Domestics have become defenceless objects for *verkramp*te whites' frustrations since township blacks have refused to bring business to white-owned shops in town. The humiliating life of verbal abuse by both their *groot* and *klein* baasies has been nightmarish. They wish the intense hatred and brutal attitudes of the conservatives – which only compare with those of the Ku Klux Klan in America – is a passing dream.³⁷

One victim of such physical abuse worked as a domestic worker in Brakpan in 1987 earning R50 a month. She was assaulted by her employer for refusing to remove a dog's mess from the kitchen floor. She stated:

I had long finished my house work and Piet's children repeatedly played in the kitchen with dogs against my orders to them to play outside. When 'madam' returned home from work, she ordered me to clean the kitchen, which I did. But I refused to clean up the mess, and said her children should do it.

When Piet came home later, he gave me the same orders. I told him it was not part of my job. He called me a 'kaffir' and other insulting names. I demanded my salary for the 10 days I'd worked and notice pay, and told him I would not go before he paid me. He then punched me all over and kicked me in the eye.³⁸

The next day the assaulted worker went to hospital and reported the matter to the police. She stayed with her friend who advised her to contact the local Black Sash office which then referred her to SADWU. She never went to court and the employer was never convicted despite having a record of other previous assaults.

In another incident, one domestic worker reported at the Black Sash offices on Monday 16, 1990. She has been working for her employers for the past six years. During this time, her employers were on holiday and their parents were staying in the house while they are away. The employers' son-in-law came to the house to visit. On the same day, she (domestic worker) had opened the back door after cleaning the kitchen because she wanted the floor to dry. The old lady came to ask her why she had left the door open as it was cold. While the domestic worker tried to explain why, the old lady started swearing at her, calling her a "bloody kaffir". The son-in-law came to the kitchen and kicked her on her chest, face and limbs. She was chased out of the house. She had bruises all over her body, swollen eyes and can't hear properly in one ear because of the assault. A charge has been laid with the local police station and the domestic worker was also referred to Campus Law Clinic.³⁹

Discussions conducted with SADWU organizers in the Johannesburg, Pretoria, Brits and Vereeniging regional offices also revealed several incidents of physical violence. Amongst others, two gardeners in the Vaal area were allegedly been beaten by their employers; one for wearing a Mandela t-shirt and the other for keeping a Mandela poster in his backyard room. Other reports included incidents of assault by the employer in the presence of the police or assault by the police who have been called in by the employers to "assist us in getting this cheeky maid out of our premises".

Clearly, the partiality of the law in South Africa gives some license to this violence. In many cases, the offenders have previous records for assault, but they are neither convicted nor charged. In her book, *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing illustrates the racism and the partiality of the law that protects the offender in such cases. In this instance, the "madam" expresses her attitude to the worker after assaulting him with a whip across the face.

It made her furious to think that this black animal had the right to complain against her, against the behaviour of a white woman. If this native had gone to the police station, she might have been cautioned since it was her first offence, by a policeman who was a European.⁴⁰

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is defined as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature".⁴¹ Most other attempts at a definition refer to verbal and physical advances of a sexual nature and/or propositions to engage in sexual relations. Conduct which constitutes sexual harassment ranges from innuendo, inappropriate gestures, suggestions, hints or physical contact without consent, with rape being the worst form of sexual harassment.⁴²

Depending on what form it takes, sexual harassment violates the right to integrity of the body and the personality which belongs to every person. Sexual harassment in the workplace can create social problems including labour turnover or absenteeism. If the worker does remain on the job, other problems such as low morale, extreme dissatisfaction and inefficiency may result. These in turn tend to reinforce sexual stereotypes of female inadequacy.⁴³ In this way, sexual harassment in the workplace constitutes discrimination because it subjects the worker to adverse employment conditions that have nothing to do with job performance and/or qualifications.

Although there is very little literature on sexual harassment in the workplace in South Africa, this does not imply that no such harassment takes place. There is a reluctance on the part of the victims to complain or institute legal action. The reasons for not reporting are numerous; the society regards sexual harassment as a "joke" and a victim who complains or institutes action against the employer may be regarded with suspicion and distaste.

In the case of domestic service, sexual harassment is characterized by an unwelcome imposition of sexual requirements in the context of extreme inequality of power in the master-servant relationship, combined with a desperation to keep the job on the part of the worker. Domestic workers may be seen as people whom their employers can use for anything and everything. The worker faces a dilemma in that if she accepts the advances, she may suffer humiliation and an impairment of her dignity. On the other hand, if she refuses the advances of her employer, as in incident described below, she may be dismissed.

An adult female, a live-in domestic was employed by a male in Bellevue. Some time in 1989, her employer arrived at his house and found her in the kitchen. He touched the domestic worker in the region of her private parts saying that her "thing" is big. The worker then took exception to this act, got angry and walked out of the kitchen. When the employer noticed that she was cross, he chased her out of his premises with a firearm. He locked the domestic worker's room and the gates.

The domestic worker then reported the matter to the police. Two days later she was accompanied by the police to get her belongings. On arrival, the employer refused to release the worker's possessions alleging that she had stolen certain of his belongings.

This matter was reported to a lawyer who instructed the police to accompany the worker to collect her belongings and should the employer fail to release same, a charge would be laid against him. The employer subsequently released the worker's belongings.⁴⁴

In another case a domestic worker that I interviewed reported the following:

I had just started to work for a family in Jeppestown. My master was not working far and he used to come during the day. When I was working, he used to follow me around and touched my breasts and private parts.

What did you do when the "master" did this to you?

Nothing, I was afraid of him. When he was home, I spent time working outside.

Did you tell anyone about it?

No, I was scared, and people would not believe my story. I was even afraid to tell madam because she would be angry with me and she may even shoot me. I have heard of people who are shot because of these things.

Did you stay in the job?

I only worked for a month. I only stayed to get my pay. They gave me R180 and I left, I never went back to them.

Once again, discussions with SADWU officials revealed a number of incidents of sexual harassment of domestic workers. These included numerous reports of some male employers parading naked in the house when their spouses were not present. Other reports were of rapes or attempted rapes, as well as instances where the employers used tactics such as increased wages to persuade domestic workers to have sex with them. Some male employers are reported to leave for work in the morning with their spouses, only to come back during the day to demand sex from the workers.

As a result, numerous domestic workers reported that they were worried about their safety in the backyard rooms. Some of them complained that they were not provided with any security or keys for their rooms and that this provided easy access into their rooms at night by their employers.

According to SADWU organizers, many of the victims of sexual harassment only reported such incidents a long time after the event. Furthermore, where they do report in time, they often disappear and never come back to follow-up the case. A number of the victims have disappeared very shortly before they were due to make court appearances. The reasons for this offered by SADWU organizers include: workers' fear of their employers and losing their jobs, financial problems and lack of understanding of court procedures – many of them hope for and demand immediate solutions to their problems, and failing which, they become discouraged and stop coming forward. All these factors make it difficult for the union to follow-up the cases and institute actions against such employers.

Despite the above problems, SADWU continues to challenge such harassment towards the workers. As Florence de Villiers, general secretary of SADWU, Cape Town puts it:

Domestic workers are sexually harassed because some white employers think they can do whatever they want with these women because they are black. We know of endless numbers of cases where women are beaten up if they don't give in to their employers and others are sacked and made to leave the premises immediately without pay We feel strongly that this issue needs attention because it happens so often and has been going on for so long.⁴⁵

Verbal abuse

Sexual and physical harassment are, however, not the only harassment that domestics encounter in the workplace. Many people, particularly blacks and women, often experience verbal abuse. This abuse may take the form of ridicule, jokes about mistakes, use of derogatory labels such as "kaffir" and the emphasis on the "stupid behaviour" of the worker.

This form of harassment is common in domestic service. On entering a place of work, domestic workers are often put under pressure to function in an unfamiliar workplace culture. This culture is largely based on the norms and traditions emanating from white expectations governing acceptable behaviour. Domestic workers who enter the workplace, therefore, not only have to learn to manage their insecurities about their effectiveness as workers, but they must also handle their insecurities as workers in a predominantly white environment. The pressures that the worker is put under, and the insecurities that he/she suffers, are well captured by Doris Lessing in her book *The Grass is Singing*.

He was a native straight from his kraal ... he was unable to understand her, and very nervous She showed him all over the house ... explaining to him how things should be done in her now fluent kitchen kaffir He had never seen forks and knives before She expected him to know the difference between a pudding plate and a dinner plate She stood all over him while he laid the table That night at supper he laid the table badly, and she flew at him in a frenzy of annoyance The next day at lunch, the servant dropped a plate through nervousness, and she dismissed him at once⁴⁶

Workers are frequently called stupid because they are not acquainted with the names and uses of kitchen articles, whereas it is simply ignorance from not having seen or used them before. According to Cock (1980), "stupidity" is a class-based stereotype which in South African society assumes a racial form. Thus, the attitude of employers to their domestic workers may largely be influenced by the belief that blacks are inferior to whites. This belief is well illustrated by some of the responses of the employers in Cock's study. Most of the attitudes reported indicated racial inferiorization of their workers.

They've got a long way to go in evolutionary terms. Putting them in European clothes doesn't make them civilized.⁴⁷

A native is a funny thing ... they're lazy. They don't want to do extra work ... so they pretend to be stupid.⁴⁸

On the whole they are stupid ... raw. They've got no brains.⁴⁹

Similarly, the responses given by domestic workers themselves gave an indication of the effect of verbal harassment and racist treatment.⁵⁰

She talks to me as if I was a stupid child ...

She shouts at me like ... I don't know what. I won't say like a dog because she likes her dogs and cats.

Shindler (1980) also found that employers who have labour saving devices in their homes were reluctant to allow domestic workers to use the machines for fear of them being damaged.⁵¹ Inbred racism has led these employers to take on some of the household tasks themselves, often accompanied by statements like:⁵²

Blacks do not understand machines.

Blacks are generally uneducated so if I let her use my washing machine she will only know how to break it.

To be continually told that you are stupid when you are trying to do your best, seems to be the most common form of harassment that domestic workers have to endure. Apart from being seen as stupid, domestic workers are also portrayed as lazy. Laziness is described by Memmi (1974) as a common trait in racial stereotypes especially in colonial societies.⁵³ It is used as a rationalization for the payment of low wages and for inequality in the society. Memmi further argues that the colonized are never characterized in an individual capacity, but as an anonymous collectivity. This is reflected by statements such as:

They are pretty good servants as far as they go, you know, but they are all lazy when it comes down to it. You have to make, sure they don't get away with too much. Everything has to be locked away of course – you can't trust them.⁵⁴

In some cases, when the verbal or intellectual abuse becomes too difficult to bear, workers may leave and look for other employment. This option is, however, not readily available to many domestic workers. A loss of a job often implies loss of accommodation and great suffering for the worker's family. As a result, the domestic worker may choose to endure the abuse in order to have a place to stay and money to send to her family.

The following is one domestic worker's account of the verbal abuse that she, together with the gardener, suffered. In the passage below, she describes, (in the employer's words) how the latter always expected her husband to intervene whenever she "reprimanded" the workers.⁵⁵

Ek praat met daai man, daai kaffir buitekant ek se vir hom hy moet gou klaar maak, hy antwoord my. En jy sit hierso. As ek met hom praat jy moet ook praat. Jy kan nie stilbly laat jy die ding dink hy is 'n wit mens. Gaan praat met hom.

Kyk hierso, Jan, hoekom as die missus met jou praat jy antwoord haar?

"Nee baas, ek het nie die missus sleg gepraat. Is die missus sy praat met my baie sleg, sy praat met my nie mooi." Dan klap die baas die man met 'n klap en hy druk hom met 'n vinger in sy oe.

Kyk hierso, as die missus met jou praat jy moet nie antwoord nie hoor jy. Ons sal jou wegjaag hierso. Jy moet gou maak, jy moet daai dam skoonmaak. Ons betaal jou genoeg geld; daai R100 ons gee jou nie vir niet nie.

The domestic worker went on to imitate her employer's complaints about herself:

Sy ook, ek wil nie met haar praat nie want ek sal haar klap gee. As ek met haar praat, sy gee my nie antwoord nie, sy bly net stil.

Hoekom gee jy nie die missus antwoord nie?

Nee baas, hoe kan ek die missus antwoord gee want as ek die missus antwoord gee die baas en die missus gaan met my baklei.

Ja, jy moenie jou gat wip by die missus hoor. Jy moet stilbly as die missus praat. As jy wil nie werk, dan moet jy loop.

The domestic worker's silence in the event of verbal abuse might be viewed as "muted ritual of resistance".⁵⁶ The domestic worker thus employs, a mode of adaptation that enables her to maintain her personality and integrity intact.

Despite the verbal abuse, the above worker continued to work for her employers for eight years. The following is her description of her duties and the eventual reasons for her dismissal:

Vir agt jare ek het swaar gewerk. Hulle ma was siek, dag en nag ek was 'n nurse. Ek het hul ma gewas, opgepas, kos gegee, ek het haar in die lewe gehou met die oxygen. Ek het nie rus gehad nie, ek kon nie eet. Ek het die huis skoongemaak, groot vensters skoongemaak, ek het gewas, gestryk, ek het gekook en ek was 'n nurse vir agt jare in daai huis.

Ek het huis toe gegaan, my ma was siek en hulle het alles geweet. My ma het doodgegaan. En toe ek terugkom hulle jag my weg. Ek het nie eens 'n sent gekry wat ek so swaar gewerkhet. Toe ek hul ma opgepaas was ek goed. Nou agterna, toe hul ma dood is, is ek nie goed. Ek is dan sleg en hulle jag jy weg soos 'n hond. Al daai agt jare het ek vir niet gewerk, vir R50 maand. Daai familie wat ek so baie goed dinge vir hulle gedoen nou hulle jag my weg en hulle se ek is 'n kaffir meit.

Unfair dismissals

Union officials also report an increasing number of arbitrary dismissals in recent months. The reasons for these dismissals are varied and range from illness/injury of the worker, to workers accused of theft, and one was dismissed for practising witchcraft by harbouring a *tokoloshe* in her backyard room. Some of the workers interviewed reported having suffered extensive verbal abuse and even dismissal following Nelson Mandela's release. Some of these workers related how they were quizzed by their employers over their attitude and disposition towards Nelson Mandela. On indicating that they supported him, they were either subjected to extensive verbal abuse or had some money deducted from their wages and were told "to get the rest from Mandela". Others had their food supplies withheld and some were even dismissed.

One domestic worker who was dismissed after working for her employers for five years gave the following description of what her employers said:

Dit help niks dat julle lief wees vir Mandela want hierdie wet van hom is nie goed nie. Ons is goed vir julle, ons wit mense. Ons gee julle kos, ons gee julle kamers om te slaap en ons gee julle baie geld. Waarvoor is julle dan lief vir n kommunis. En as julle agter hom aangaan en alles luister wat hy praat, julle gaan swaar kry, agterna hulle gaan julle doodmaak.

Kyk hierso, hierdie wereld is die wit mense se wereld. Ons gee julle alles, julle kort met niks, julle sukkel nie, waarvoor is julle dan lief vir daai man. Hy is mos 'n 'bobbejaan'. (Mnr) De Klerk het daai 'bobbejaan' gaan haal agter die trale. Hy is die kaffirs se koning, hy gee vir hulle die reg om te lewe in hierdie wereld van ons. En kyk wat maak hy nou, hy vat die

'swartgat kaffirs' hy sit hulle binnekant die parlement. Ons sal nie laat die 'kaffir' baas wees oor ons nie, nie 'n 'kaffir' nie.

Several other domestic workers were dismissed after injuries at work.

Mirriam broke her ankle on her way to work on October 19, 1987. Her husband, who was with her, fetched her employer of two and a half years. Her employer then fetched her from the bus stop. "She then dumped me in my room and she said she would see to my leg the next day. She must have forgotten about me. I asked my husband to tell her the next morning my leg was swollen. She said 'OK' and took her children off to school.

My husband got permission from his work to take me to the Hillbrow Hospital, where I was admitted and discharged the next day. I spent three days in my room without food or a visit from my employer. She came on the fourth day and complained she was miserable. There was nothing I could have done as I was bedridden, my leg had been plastered and I had been laid off work for five weeks.⁵⁷

A few days later Mirriam received a letter from her employer telling her to "please be out of the room by 12 noon on Sunday". She also complained that Mirriam failed to at least offer to do some work, since this was the time when she (the employer) was not well and her daughter was writing her matric exams. Mirriam went home, all she could recover through SADWU was R 272,44 in lieu of leave and notice pay.

Another domestic worker gave a similar account of dismissal after being injured:

On one Friday, I was busy doing washing in the laundry when I fell and injured my knee. I then asked madam to take me to hospital and she only gave me two aspirins and she said I will be fine tomorrow. The next day my knee was swollen and madam refused to take me to the doctor. I got a lift from a delivery man who came to deliver something for madam. He was reluctant to use the factory car to take me to hospital but he felt sorry for me. I was admitted for two days and was discharged on Monday. Madam never came to see me, she even did not phone to ask about me.

When I got discharged there was no-one to take me to my room. My leg was in bandages and I was using the crutches to walk. I hired a taxi and paid R7. 50. The doctor said I should rest for a week and she wrote madam a letter to tell her about this. I went to work on Tuesday and gave madam the letter. She read the letter and threw it in the bin. She said she does not want to see bandages in her home. She said I was exaggerating and that I was able to do my work. Despite the pain, I left the crutches in my room and tried to work on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday I was supposed to go to hospital for check-up and to take the crutches back. I told madam and she said it was not her business and I should not come back. When I demanded money she told me not to make noise for her. With a very sore heart, I packed my belongings, left them in the care of my friend who was working nearby and went to hospital. When I came back I had to travel to my relatives in Mamelodi because my friend was not allowed to sleep with a visitor in her room. She lent me some money to go to Mamelodi. I don't know where will I get money to feed my children and pay for their school fees. It hurts to go home empty-handed like this.⁵⁸

Conclusion

While the psychological violence that domestic workers suffer as a result of intensive exploitation has been documented, the physical and sexual harassment has been a "best kept" secret hidden by the privatized and institutionalized nature of domestic work.

For South Africa, violence against domestic workers is, at least in part, rooted in social inequalities of power and rights between individuals of different races, sexes and classes. By virtue of being black and female, with no legal protection and no political rights, domestic workers tend to become immediate targets of aggression in the white household. These workers will remain victims as long as apartheid, sexism and the cycle of violence continue to pervade our society.

The inclusion of domestic workers under employment protection legislation would appear to be one important solution to this problem. Legislation is needed to protect domestic workers not only against exploitation but against race discrimination. Also

included should be developed laws and policies that protect women against physical and sexual violence.

While changes and adaptations to the law may offer some protection to domestic workers, they do not, however, offer lasting solutions to the institutionalized working conditions and inherent violence which domestic workers are exposed to. Just as the roots of domestic violence are traceable to the dynamics and tensions of the wider society, so too must lasting solutions be sought both within and outside the domestic environment. Social and political changes based on a redressing of the imbalance in power – between people of different race, class and gender is the only true solution.

If we are to properly address the plight of these hidden victims of violence, politicians, social workers and other social scientists as well as members of community organisations both within the family and beyond its boundaries need to combine forces to find solutions to this problem.

Notes:

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³ Gil, DG. Socio-cultural aspects of domestic violence. In Lystad, M. (ed). *Violence in the home*. Brunner/Mazel Publishers, New York. 1986: 128.

⁴ Renvoise, J. *Web of violence: A study of family violence*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978.

⁵ Gelles, RJ. *The Violent Home: A study of physical aggression between husbands and wives*. Sage Publications, London, 1972: 24.

⁶ Lystad, M. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Family Violence: An overview. In Lystad, 1986, xi.

⁷ Gelles, RJ. Violence in the American Family. In Martin, JP (ed) *Violence in the family*. John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1978: 169.

⁸ Gelles RJ & Straus, MA. Violence in the American Family, *Journal of Social Issues*, 1979, 35: 15-37.

⁹ op cit, Gelles, 1978: p171.

¹⁰ op cit, Lystad, 1986: xiii.

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¹³ Cock, J. *Maids and Madams: A study in the politics of exploitation*, Raven Press, Johannesburg, 1980.

¹⁴ *ibid.* Cock, p162.

¹⁵ *ibid.* Cock, p163.

¹⁶ *ibid.* Cock 162.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Weiss, R. *The Women of Zimbabwe*. Nehanda Publishers, Harare, 1986: 7.

¹⁹ Benjamin, J. *The Legal Position of Domestic Workers*. Submissions to the National Manpower Commission, 1982.

²⁰ Flint, S. "The Protection of Domestic Workers in South Africa: A comparative study." *ILJ* 1988, 1-15:187-201.

²¹ Haysom, N. & Thompson, C. "Labouring Under the Law: South Africa's farmworkers." *ILJ* 1986, 7:218-240.

²² Delport, E. "Domestic Service in South Africa and Britain: A Study in Applied Comparative Law." *UNISA*, Pretoria, 1990:32.

²³ Goffman I. "Asylums", Penguin, Harmondsworths, 1968.

²⁴ *ibid.* Goffman, p36.

²⁵ *ibid.* p7.

²⁶ Personal communication with domestic worker.

²⁷ *op cit.* Weiss, p62.

²⁸ In Mphahlele, E. *In Corner B.*, East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1967: 166.

²⁹ *op cit.* Goffman, p19.

³⁰ See South African Domestic Workers Union Records, 1989.

³¹ *op cit.* Goffman, p22.

³² *ibid.* Goffman, p22-23.

³³ *op cit.* Mphahlele, p176.

³⁴ *op cit.* Weiss, p60.

³⁵ *op cit.* Cock, 1980, p98.

- ³⁶ Quoted in True Love Magazine, March, 1987:50-51.
- ³⁷ Quoted in the Sowetan, May 2, 1989.
- ³⁸ In op cit. True Love, p50-51.
- ³⁹ See Black Sash Records, 1990.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Lessing, D. *The Grass is Singing*, Michael Joseph, London, 1950: 147.
- ⁴¹ van der Merwe, L. "Women and Sexual Harassment", *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 1982, 3&4: 101-1-3.
- ⁴² *ibid.*
- ⁴³ *ibid.* P102.
- ⁴⁴ op cit. SADWU records, 1989.
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in Russell DEH. *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*, Basic Books Publishers, New York, 1989: 176-177.
- ⁴⁶ op cit. Lessing, p80-82.
- ⁴⁷ Cock, 1980, p162.
- ⁴⁸ Cock, 1980, p162.
- ⁴⁹ Cock, 1980, p162.
- ⁵⁰ Cock, 1980, p97.
- ⁵¹ Shindler, J. "The Effects of Influx Control and Labour-saving Appliances on Domestic Service." *South African Labour Bulletin* 1980, 6, 22-33.
- ⁵² *ibid.* Shindler, p31.
- ⁵³ In op cit. Cock, p137.
- ⁵⁴ Quoted in op cit. Weiss, p62.
- ⁵⁵ Personal communication with domestic worker.
- ⁵⁶ In op cit. Cock, 1981.
- ⁵⁷ Quoted in op cit. True Love, p51.
- ⁵⁸ Personal communication with domestic worker.