



Future Directiveness within the South African Domestic Workers' Work-Life Cycle: Considering Exit Strategies

by Christel Marais and Christo van Wyk

Abstract

The pervasiveness of domestic employment in the South African context gives rise to the question as to why women not only enter into, but remain in, such an undervalued work situation, and whether they are ultimately able to exit this sector. Contextualising the sectoral engagement of domestic workers as a transitional work-life cycle characterised by impoverishment, limited alternatives, acceptance of the work context, and future directedness, with individual transition through these phases determined by a unique set of circumstances, female domestic workers' lived experience of their work-life cycle was explored within the framework of an interpretivist research design. Non-probability respondent-driven self-sampling was employed to select 20 participants, most of whom were representative of families with a long history of sectoral involvement, particularly along the female line. Dense, non-numerical data was generated through in-depth interviewing. Inductive data explication was conducted with the aid of MAXQDA. The findings confirmed the existence of an institutionalised culture of engagement within the sector perpetuated from one generation to the next. Hardship and an urgent need for survival leave many with little option but to enter and remain within the sector. Despite negative societal perceptions of the sector, those within it take pride in their work and view their engagement as an enabling tool to better their future prospects and those of their families. Attempts to exit the sector are unsuccessful due, in part, to a limited formal education and skills repertoire. Domestic workers are thus entrapped within a never-ending cycle of sectoral engagement, with the possibility of exiting the sector remaining merely a dream for many.

Sectoral Context

The desperate plight of domestic workers is a global phenomenon. The call for transformative actions that could culminate in improved employment conditions for this sector of the world's labour force is well documented (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2004; Ally, 2009; Cock, 2011; Cohen & Moodley, 2012; Harzig, 2006; Kethusegile, Kwaramba, & Lopi, 2000; Mangqalaza, 2012; Matjeke, Viljoen, & Blaauw, 2012; Tomei, 2011). Countries across the globe have ratified various conventions of the International Labour

Organization (ILO, 2011, 2013) which guided the proclamation of legislated protection for engagement between employers and domestic workers (Cohen & Moodley, 2012; Tomei & Belser, 2011). Ally (2011), however, stresses the need for this protection to be extended even further, and hence the ongoing need for all sectoral role players to remain vigilant in respect of claims of progress.

Africa is the third largest employer of domestic workers globally. According to the International Labour Organization's global and regional estimates,

this includes approximately 3.8 million female domestic workers across the continent (ILO, 2013). South Africa, in turn, has the highest employment rate of domestic workers within the region, with an estimated engagement of 924 000 workers, of which only 40 000 are male (Stats SA, 2013, p. 31). No national statutory minimum wage currently exists in South Africa. The *Basic Conditions of Employment Act* (South Africa, 1997) does, however, make provision for the proclamation by the Minister of Labour of sectoral determinations in areas of the labour force that are deemed vulnerable.

Characterised by progressive legislative reforms in recent years, the South African domestic worker sector’s minimum employment standards and wages are regulated by *Sectoral Determination 7* (South Africa, 2002, 2013). Even though the stipulated minimum wage equates to less than one US dollar per hour, the sector continues to exhibit a growing trend in employment figures (Smith, 2011; Stats SA, 2014; Tomei, 2011). Sectoral engagement affords lower-income workers an essential form of legislated protection within their employment context (Bhorat, Kanbur, & Mayet, 2013; Sparks, 2011) as opposed to being unemployed and confronted by a general state of impoverishment.

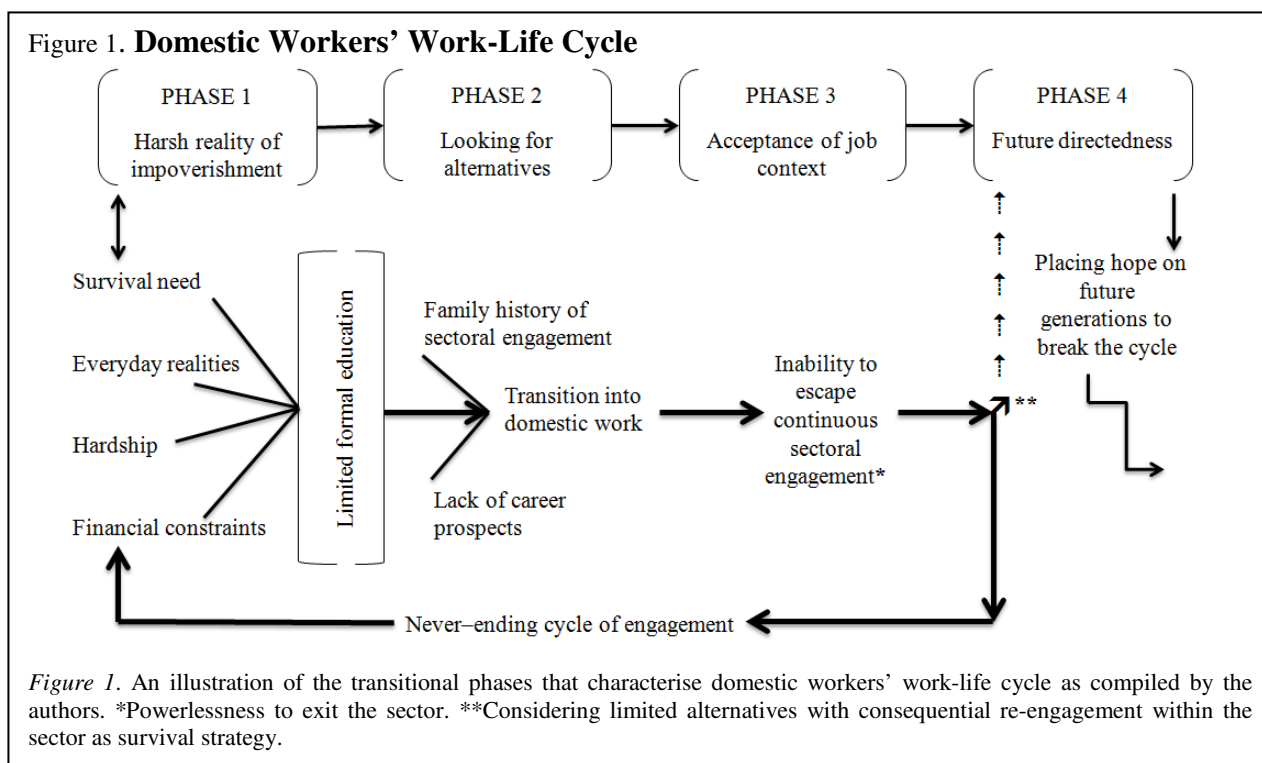
Work-Life Cycle

The ubiquitous nature of domestic work in the South

African context has led to a nationally understood figure of those engaged in the sector (Phillips, 2011). This has largely contributed to their invisibility and undervalued status. Why, then, do women enter this sector in the first instance, why do they remain engaged in it, and are they able to exit this sector if they so wish?

The field literature suggests that life cycles consist of mainly three transitional stages with varying time frames, namely education, work and retirement (Jackson, 2009). To understand the transitional characteristics implicit in this work-life identity, one needs to consider the socially determined ethos that regulates the passage through these various life phases (Jackson, 2009; Rickwood, Roberts, Batten, Marshall, & Massie, 2004). The progression through these phases is unique for individuals and influenced by not only their historical, economical, political, cultural and work contexts (Lloyd, Roodt, & Odendaal, 2011), but also social, psychological and personal variables, as well as family circumstances.

Work identity can be defined as the product of individuals’ exposure to and interaction with diverse elements within their immediate environments and work contexts. Applying a nonlinear process, we are able to contextualise the work-life of domestic workers as a transitional cycle characterised by a lack of choice and continuous engagement, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Marais, 2014, p. 73) and elaborated below.



Phase 1 – The harsh reality of impoverishment

Poverty is a common denominator in the lives of domestic workers. It not only refers to a personal lack of financial means, but extends to a general state of impoverishment as a sectoral trademark. One can thus speak of a pathology of poverty (Appio, Chambers, & Mao, 2013) which is brought about by domestic workers' everyday realities, extending into a dire need to survive. These everyday realities constitute a collective hardship brought about by the domestic workers' circumstances. Hardships include aspects such as the cost of living, the death of a parent or primary caregiver, becoming a child-headed household, being the sole breadwinner, being a single parent, or unemployment, to mention just a few. Domestic workers often find themselves without a social support system. They are often deprived of a social and family life, all of which intensifies the rationale for sectoral engagement (Phillips, 2011).

Poverty is cited as the primary reason for young girls initially entering the sector (Blagbrough, 2008). This is due in part to the early termination of education in the case of a large section of the South African youth. According to Rautenbach (1999), previous political dispensations have resulted in decades of neglect and mismanagement that have deprived the country's Black population of opportunities and left them uneducated. This general lack of formal schooling limits career prospects not only during people's initial career phases but also during the later stages of their work engagement.

Phase 2 – Looking for alternatives

The domestic worker sector is characterised by generational engagement – the daughter taking over from where the mother took over from the grandmother. Impoverished circumstances aid this almost unnoticed transition of many young girls into the sector as a way of institutionalised existence. Because these young girls often enter the sector at an early age as a means of survival, they are further deprived of education opportunities, which serves to perpetuate their impoverished sectoral engagement (Bourdillon, 2009; Dinat & Peberdy, 2007). Considering that labour potential is deemed their greatest asset (Bardasi & Wodon, 2010; Mkandawire-Valhmu, 2010), entry into the sector could be viewed as an act of self-empowerment when confronted by the harsh realities of unemployment. The transition into domestic work as occupation implies entering a world of work that is characterised by low wages and low status, potential exploitation, an individualised employer-employee relationship, the need to relocate from rural to urban areas, and isolation from family. Nevertheless, despite these realities, domestic work still provides a point of entry into remunerated employment for tens of thousands of women.

Phase 3 – Acceptance of job context

Work engagement is a fundamental aspect of adult life and identity (Adams & Crafford, 2012; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Work is also often the principal – albeit not guaranteed – route out of an impoverished existence for many individuals of legal working age (Newman, 2011). Domestic work provides a source of income that supplements the family's income or, in some cases, constitutes the sole income source of the extended family (Bourdillon, 2009; Kethusegile et al., 2000; Tsikata, 2011). There is, however, a noticeable lack of choice when considering the reasons for sectoral engagement. People often have to make a difficult choice – either to work as a domestic worker in order to earn at least something, or to face the consequences of unemployment and the inability to meet their basic needs. This entrenches their work-life cycle even further and perpetuates their continuous engagement. There is consequently a general sense of entrapment and an inability to escape the sectoral context. This amplifies the dependence upon others to survive (Zungu, 2009) and leads to an intensified sense of powerlessness.

Phase 4 – Future directedness

The forward-looking orientation, as implied by positive psychology, suggests that the ability to hold on to hope and optimism for the future, despite tough times, is the key to a satisfying future (Bushe, 2007; Froman, 2010; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Domestic workers, like those employed in other fields, also actively desire improved employment conditions. Their lack of more than basic formal education, however, limits their opportunities to obtain employment outside the informal sectoral context. This nevertheless does not prevent them from sourcing alternative employment within the sector in an attempt to secure better employment conditions. Although sourcing other employment within the sector constitutes a short-term perception of their employment future, this does not amount to an exit strategy, but rather to a re-entry into an existing cycle of engagement.

Retirement is described as a standardised stage in any employee's life cycle (Jackson, 2009). For domestic workers, retirement may be fraught with many problems, one of them being financial constraints. Post-employment life (Phillips, 2011) may be characterised by hardship and an impoverished existence. In order to meet their basic needs, re-entry into the sector may thus be considered in the post-retirement phase of their lives. Although sectoral engagement enables domestic workers to earn a living, the cyclical nature of this sectoral engagement is, however, often perpetuated and foisted onto future generations due to an array of social, political and economic circumstances.

Aim of the Study

The researchers' primary purpose was to explore individual women's subjective perceptions of their own experiences as they relate to the world of domestic work as social phenomena. The shared multiple lived realities experienced by the participants within their specific social existence remained central as we endeavoured to uncover and interpret the complexities of the meaning-making associated with the human experience (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013; Fox & Bayat, 2013).

Method

Research design

The study design is situated within the interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994/2013; Hammond & Wellington, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 1974/2013; Loseke, 2013) and focused on the intersubjective world of participants' everyday life (Barber, 2014). Influenced by the work of Alfred Schütz (1962, 1932/1967) (cf. Cunliffe, 2011; Denscombe, 1998/2010; Gallagher, 2012), the need to explore and understand the interplay between individuals' assignment of meaning and their actions became the central focus.

Phenomenology, as an approach, explores both the deeper meaning participants ascribe to their lived experiences and the process whereby they make sense of their world (Creswell, 1994/2014; Lichtman, 2014, pp. 114-115). Moreover, since participants' subjective and existing experiences of their lived reality tend to influence their actions, it is necessary to view the world through the eyes of the participants in order to understand both their experience of and response to this reality (Cardwell, 1996/2007). A post-positivist, qualitative, explorative, appreciative and descriptive phenomenological research design was therefore selected as most appropriate for this study.

Contextualising recruitment procedure

Initial recruitment efforts were directed at gaining access to, and establishing rapport with, a target population generally described as a vulnerable sector of the labour force. For this purpose, 2000 leaflets were personally distributed at taxi ranks, on public transport and in passing within the geographically demarcated area of the study. Aiming to create a subjective interest in the study among potential participants, the researchers provided interested parties with an opportunity to make an informed choice based on the information contained in the recruitment leaflet. It is important to note that no domestic worker was approached at her place of employment due, in part, to the sensitive nature of the individualised employment relationship and a voiced fear of job losses. Most responses related to the need to obtain employment or access legal advice related to

labour issues within the sector. This "real-life" recruitment approach, as described by Deschaux-Beaume (2012), resulted in potential participants volunteering their availability telephonically and, in the process, establishing an initial interviewer-interviewee relationship (Punch, 2009, 1998/2014). Non-probability respondent-driven self-sampling was employed to purposefully select participants based on their willingness to participate in the study and engage with the researchers (Daniel, 2012; Schensul, 2011; Seale, 2012), their membership of the identified sector (South Africa, 2002) and their firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. Despite the diversity and initial outsider status of the researchers, we were able to establish rapport with the participants by adopting a trusting and respectful approach.

Participants in the study

Twenty Black female domestic workers participated in the study, ranging in age from 27 years up to the age of 59 years. Their age of first entry into the sector varied from as young as 13 years for a child without primary caregivers at the time to as old as 35 years for an adult who had previously been employed outside the domestic worker sector. The average level of formal education reported by the participants was grade six, which is equivalent to a primary education. One participant had never received any formal schooling. The majority of the participants came from a family background that bore testimony to previous generations' involvement in domestic work, on the part, especially, of their mothers or grandmothers.

Empirical data collection

Data generation efforts were focused not merely on collecting data but on establishing an analytically engaged conversation around the participants' lived experiences, with the aim of jointly co-constructing meaning (Bloch, 2007; Gibson & Brown, 2009). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to access the participants' voices (Franklin, 2012; Silverman, 1993/2011). A non-prescriptive interview guide was developed and refined during a pilot study (Gillham, 2010; Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Encouraged to share their life stories without fear of judgement, participants discussed issues around broad metaphorical questions (Englander, 2012; Layder, 2013).

The need to allow multiple participants to share their meaning-making simultaneously required us to consider the sense of collectiveness and support among members of the target population while refining the interview format. This approach should not be confused with focus group or multiparty interview approaches. A combination of 12 one-on-one and four simultaneous (two-on-one) interviews were conducted. The distinct voice of each participant

was noted during the interview as well as in the resultant transcripts. In some cases, a friend – a fellow domestic worker – happened to accompany the participant to provide moral support, but these individuals did not opt to share their meaning-making experiences and they were therefore not noted as participants. Data saturation was reached during the fourteenth interview. Each interview concluded with a de-briefing conversation.

Data explication

A naturalised approach to data transcription resulted in detailed verbatim written accounts of the shared meaning-making process (Layder, 2013; Tilley, 2003). This resulted in a rich, dense and non-numerical foundation for the actual coding process (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). By studying the transcripts, our insight into each participant's views and opinions grew (Bloch, 2007). An open inductive coding approach was applied, which enabled the generation of codes from the data (Hammond & Wellington, 2013; Harding, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 1984/2014; Silver & Lewins, 2014).

Transcribed data was uploaded onto and explicated with the assistance of MAXQDA 10 (MAXQDA, 2010; Schutt, 1996/2012). This aided in establishing a detailed audit trail to enhance the dependability of the study. As emerging qualitative researchers, we became aware of the seemingly never-ending nature of coding: implying the need to read, reflect, code and recode – a total immersion – until all categories were saturated (Bazeley, 2013; Creswell, 1994/2009; Tesch, 1990). In-vivo open coding was applied during the initial stages of explication. Theming of the data was followed by a more eclectic coding strategy while progressing to the second cycle of coding. Focused axial coding resulted in the identification of themes within the data (Saldaña, 2009/2013). One of the main themes that emerged during the analysis related to the domestic workers' work-life cycle, with the following three sub-themes emerging from the data: sectoral context, reasons for entering and remaining in the sector, and, finally, future directiveness.

Ethical considerations

Research engagement is guided by a complex interplay of moral principles (Howitt & Cramer, 2005; Steane, 2004). This "epistemic imperative" of science is "neither optional nor negotiable, but intrinsic to all scientific enquiry" (Mouton, 2008, p. 239). Ethical principles, as an essential aspect of research governance (Barbour, 2008), were therefore interwoven into each phase of the research process. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was sought in writing and granted by the North-West University, South Africa (FH-SB-2011-037). Voluntary informed consent (Corbin & Strauss, 1990/2008) was obtained

from all participants. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were maintained (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994/2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 1996/2009).

Findings

Sectoral Context

Institutionalised culture of engagement within the sector

The participants' lived accounts of their path into their current occupational context confirmed an institutionalised culture of engagement within the domestic worker sector. The point of entry was often as a young girl assisting an older female family member while she conducted her daily duties in the house of her employer. All participants confirmed that their mothers, and in some cases other female relatives, were engaged in domestic work. In many cases this eventuated in a smooth transition of employment from the one generation to the next for the employer.

Often cited as the driving force for entry into the sector were either family hardship due to a lack of means to satisfy their most basic needs, or the loss of parents. In many cases, the initial point of entry was on a farm in a rural area. Being in search of better employment opportunities was given as the reason for later re-location to urban areas. Dependence upon themselves to make ends meet amidst trying circumstances was clearly voiced. Domestic workers described their circumstances as impoverished and a constant battle to survive. Sara, for example, stated categorically, "*We do not survive*". In several cases, this meant that the women had to find a way of supplementing their income. Two major approaches were noted in this regard. Firstly, it was found that participants could access credit facilities with relative ease, but, at the same time, they were unable to repay their loans on a regular basis; and, secondly, engagement by some in entrepreneurial activities provided a supplementary source of income.

The relationship between compensation, actual workload and financial obligations was a constant refrain throughout the participants' accounts. They generally characterised their engagement in the sector as "hard" but "better than nothing". Eliza expressed her feelings in this regard as follows: "*When we are working as domestic workers, sometimes it's painful to work for somebody who doesn't treat you well, but because you need the money to raise your children, you must work, you must do the domestic work ...*". The overall perception shared by the participants was that being a domestic worker equates to hardship.

Societal perceptions of domestic work

Both society in general and the communities within

which the participants live tend to regard domestic work as a degrading profession. Thus, in a sad voice, Elise stated, *"If you ask them, 'Where do you work?' 'I don't wash somebody's panties, you know!' It's like that, so which means they are better than you ..."*. Amina, when talking about the future of her children, said, *"... the young youth, they say, 'I can't wash panties for me and for another lady'. That's why, yes. Because everybody you've got a friend that's not working, you're working. After this she come to you, she ask you a money, but if you tell her, 'Go to find you a job', she say, 'I never work for a domestic worker, no. I can't.'" Expressing her feelings about these comments, Elise said that *"... it breaks my heart ... I'm just telling them it's a job. There's nothing you can do, but it's a job ..."*.*

Career "Choice"

Despite being confronted by negative societal perceptions of domestic work, participants viewed domestic work mostly as a job just like any other. They went as far as to indicate that they take pride in the work that they do on a daily basis. Participants' lack of choice was cited as their main reason for being domestic workers. In this regard, their limited formal education was often mentioned as a stumbling block in their attempts to secure alternative forms of employment. Emilia explained it as follows: *"... for me is too hard to be a domestic worker I have no money, I want to work ... I'm working as a domestic worker because I've not found a work ..."*.

Participants were grateful for the enabling properties of their engagement in the sector. Connie said, *"... that is why I go to be a domestic worker – to work for my child ..."*. Similarly, Sammy said, *"... if you work as a domestic worker, your child can eat, they have clothes ..."*. Participants provided accounts of how the income they received – albeit limited – enabled them to care for and help others, including the church and burial societies they belonged to. These accounts are indicative of an interrelatedness within a broader social context, a form of Ubuntu and caring for one another that transcends Western cultural norms. Being obligated to take care of their families, and in many cases extended family members, participants were constantly aware of their need to just survive. This refers to the satisfaction of the most basic human needs which all depend on finding sufficient financial resources. Most participants described themselves as sole breadwinners faced by daily struggles to survive. Belinda said, *"... every month I'm suffering ..."*, while Anne attributed her own struggles for the most part to *"... problem is only money exactly ..."*.

Even in those cases where participants described their employment conditions as being less than favourable, their obligation to satisfy their children's basic needs

remained a priority. The inability to fulfil these needs due to the high cost of living and the low-income range of the participants was voiced repeatedly. The cost of education for their children and transport costs made additional demands on an already very limited monthly budget.

In addition to the financial and physical hardships endured, participants also spoke of the emotional strain they experienced because of their employment context. Eliza summed this up when she said, *"... it's painful to work for somebody who doesn't treat you well, but because you need the money to raise your children, you must work, you must do the domestic work, although you work with a broken heart every day ..."*. Anne extended this notion by characterising domestic work as *"... difficult work there because you don't learn so much. ... Yes, and it's hard because, if you work for a madam, she can tell you what to do. You can't say no ..."*. Feelings of guilt were also expressed by participants due to their inability to balance commitments related to their family life with those of their work life. Rita expressed this frustration as follows: *"... I don't have time to catch up with my kids I'm not there for them if they need me ..."*. An added dimension to this emotional distress is the issue of trust. Participants repeatedly related accounts of being treated with suspicion as they went about their daily work activities. This treatment fostered a sense of powerlessness and isolation enhanced by fear and their inability to express their feelings in this regard.

Future Directedness

Participants voiced a dual concern about the future. Although the initial conversational focus was on themselves and their work context, their shared actions also indicate a desire to effect improvement in the future prospects of their dependants.

Exploring aspects related to the domestic workers' perceived futures, we were confronted by a sense of hopelessness and inability to envision a positive old age. Trapped in the here and now, Anne hopelessly uttered the words *"... there is no future ..."*. In most cases, this was attributed to the inability to secure alternative employment due to a lack of appropriate training. Only one participant noted that she and her husband were actively working towards making financial provision for their old age. Amina, although still young, openly admitted, *"... I can't save money, eish ..."*. Most participants were in denial about the impending realities associated with retirement. They accepted it as a given that they would have to work until they died. Some even alluded to the possibility of "double dipping" during this stage, that is, claiming social security benefits after the age of 60 while remaining employed.

Breaking this cycle of entrapment was a priority for participants when they talked about their children's futures. They regard education as a way out, and thus access to education and the completion of school for the next generation is an ongoing commitment and acts as a driving force in their daily work tasks. Parental challenges in this regard did not relate only to accessing sufficient funds to pay school fees, and in some cases higher education enrolment, but also to motivating their children to learn from their own circumstances and to take ownership of their own futures. Connie complained, "... *our children are so lazy ...*", while Ann doubted that there would be a future for her child, despite her efforts, because "*he is involved with the wrong friends ...*". Elise wished for her children "*...to go to school to learn, so that they can do better for themselves ... like living the life that they want, driving the car that they like*". Amina cherished a similar desire for her daughter not to have to live the life she had but rather to "*... finish school, go to university, get a right job and a nice life ...*".

Discussion

Society has for decades refused to acknowledge domestic work as real work (Ally, 2005). Ueno (2010) describes the "discredited status" of domestic workers as a contributing factor when considering a future identity for women in this sector. And yet, domestic workers are significant contributors to and enablers within the world economy. Witbooi (2011), chairperson of the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), is thus adamant that domestic work should be acknowledged as "decent work", and that those who are employed within the sector should be regarded as "workers like all others". At the same time, it is recognized that domestic work is, to a large extent, "work like no other" (Mundlak & Shamir, 2011, p. 289). According to Sparks (2011), legislative reforms have enabled domestic workers to shed the servant label and be recognised as workers with employee status like all other workers. Yet, despite regulatory efforts aimed at improving the overall position of domestic workers, the broader community still perceives working within the sector as undervalued, low paying and largely invisible in nature (Griffin, 2011; Smith, 2011; Tomei, 2011). While domestic work is admittedly often undervalued, it is nevertheless acknowledged to be an important source of employment (ILO, 2013).

The global prevalence of poverty (Hughes & Haworth, 2011) is the major reason for engagement in the sector. A generational lack of financial means and the fight for survival act as the main driving forces for many women when they contemplate any future work engagement. Although low levels of formal education limit career options, the high rate of unemployment makes domestic work an option even for educated

women within the South African economic and labour context. Domestic workers are frequently confronted by less than favourable employment conditions, as they are confined to an individualised employment relationship. Their actions thus need to be purposefully directed towards breaking the cycle of poverty (Harzig, 2006). Silence is usually the only option they feel they have if they wish to remain employed. Confrontation or engagement with the employer regarding their employment conditions is usually not a realistic option for domestic workers, as this is overshadowed by the fear of losing their jobs. Voicelessness, due to a prolonged internalisation of feelings, was noted even among those participants who spoke of a positive experience within their own employment contexts. Nevertheless, as researchers we were not prepared for the depth of the raw emotions participants shared with us.

Work engagement constructs the identity of a person over time (Bothma & Roodt, 2012). Personal life experiences therefore both directly and indirectly influence the development of constructs that affect individuals' work-life identity (Rickwood et al., 2004). In the South African context, this not only was, but still is, especially relevant in the domestic worker sector. Woolman and Bishop (2007, p. 595) have labelled engagement in the domestic worker sector as an "ineradicable feature of the South African landscape". Prolonged exposure to an impoverished existence, characterised by a lack of choice (Mbigi, 2005), often makes it almost impossible for domestic workers to shed this identity and change their lives. Consequently, despite efforts on the part of the domestic worker to exit the sector through securing an alternative form of employment in the formal sector, she usually remains entrapped in a never-ending cycle of engagement from an early age. Grant (1997) maintains that the plight of domestic workers is an anachronism – a chronological anomaly – perpetuated from one generation to the next. This tendency further entrenches the general sense of disempowerment brought about by exposure to contextual hardship (Cock, 1980a, 1980b; Fish, 2006; Nduna & Jewkes, 2012).

Domestic work is thus not seen as a bridging occupation in South Africa, but rather as a dead-end job (Delpont, 1994; Makanga, 2010), with sectoral engagement characterised by a sense of entrapment or state of dependency. The occupational choice of female African domestic workers tends generally to be a manifestation of the socialisation process they were exposed to as young girls (Blackett, 2011; Cock, 1980a, 1980b; Flood, Hoosain, & Primo, 1997; Moya, 2007; Seedat, 2006). Despite the numerous enabling properties of sectoral engagement, the challenge lies in the need not to perpetuate the current work-life cycle by foisting it onto future generations. The

participants projected their hopes for the future onto the next generation – their children. Providing them with access to education opportunities that will positively impact the rest of their lives (Assaad, Levison, & Zibani, 2010; Phillips, 2011) is regarded as an enabling tool, one that has the potential to break this never-ending cycle of sectoral engagement.

Recommendations

The recommendations flow from the findings presented above. The need to align workload and compensation levels was mentioned during all the discussions with the domestic workers. This implies a re-assessment of stipulated minimum wage levels by the Department of Labour in order to better the employment conditions of domestic workers. The inability of domestic workers to actively prepare for their post-employment life also necessitates proactive social security legislation that will enable them, in conjunction with their employers, to make provision for their retirement. The sectoral outcry demands the action of all role players to empower young girls by providing them with education opportunities as an alternative to early entry into the domestic worker

sector. In this regard, consideration could be given to introducing a developmental mentoring programme to assist domestic workers with guiding their children in their career choices, and thereby enabling access to not only secondary education but, ultimately, to tertiary education, in an attempt to break the cycle of generational engagement within the sector.

Conclusion

In this paper, we framed the various work-life phases that characterise the domestic worker sector by reflecting on the sum total of the participants' shared life experiences. It is evident that domestic workers are confronted by a variety of everyday realities which are not conducive to helping them satisfy their basic human needs. The need to survive often leaves the domestic worker with no choice other than to take on domestic work and continue working as a domestic worker for as long as she is able to. Domestic workers are disempowered by both limited alternative employment prospects outside the informal sector and prolonged exposure to the unique sectoral context, which makes the possibility of ever exiting the sector "but a dream" for many.

Referencing Format

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About the Authors

Christel Marais
Department of Human Resource Management
Vaal University of Technology, South Africa
E-mail address: christel@vut.ac.za



Christel Marais is a Senior Lecturer at the Vaal University of Technology in South Africa. She holds a PhD in Labour Relations Management. Her areas of interest include minimum wages, sectoral determinations, vulnerable employees, empowerment and positive employment relations. She is passionate about research as a subject field and purposefully works towards instilling similar attitudinal commitment in her students' research engagement. Dr Marais has published in academic journals, presented papers at international conferences, and loves to travel.

Christo van Wyk
School of Behavioural Sciences
North-West University, South Africa
E-mail address: Christo.VanWyk@nwu.ac.za



Christo van Wyk is an Associate Professor of Labour Relations Management in the School of Behavioural Sciences on the Vaal Triangle campus of the North-West University in South Africa. His research focuses on labour relations management and positive employment relations. Professor van Wyk lectures in the fields of conflict management and labour market principles. He also serves as an industry consultant on labour related issues.

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