

Is migrant domestic
labour a modern form
of slavery?



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In the twenty first century, employment of domestic workers is entirely universal. They carry out tasks such as child-rearing, food provisioning and preparation, cleaning, laundering and other homemaking tasks. Most of this invisible work throughout recorded history has been considered to be outside of production, either unwaged or so poorly paid it cannot serve to reproduce the labourer. However, domestic work, traditionally undertaken by women, is social reproduction, and is necessary to sustain productive labour. Marxists believe that social formations arise from the dominant mode of production and necessarily reflect and reproduce that mode in order to continue it through time. In a capitalist system, the reproduction of both the means of production and the forces of production must be ensured, otherwise production will cease and the system will flounder. The global capitalist economy has altered the social reproduction over the past three decades and many wealthier sections of society in developed countries now pay woman from poorer countries in the developing world to care for their children and carry out their domestic requirements. This migration for work in domestic service occurs on international, regional and rural-urban scales, and has become a major mechanism by which Third World women are incorporated into the waged labour market. However, the widespread phenomenon of the contemporary ‘maid trade’ (Momsen, 1999: p. 9) possess a number of disturbing similarities to the slave trade of the 16th to 19th centuries. Maids experience violence, are highly vulnerable and have limited access to political, social and economic citizenship rights. This causes them to become ‘frustrated or defeated by the awesome power of the state to restrict or prohibit their capacity to belong to the imagined community of the nation’ (Mitchell et al, 2003).

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In order to assess whether migrant domestic labour is a 21st century form of international slavery, it is necessary to recognise the reasons for its occurrence: the capitalist economy. Globalised capitalism has changed the face of social reproduction worldwide over the past four decades, enabling intensification of capital accumulation and exacerbating differences in wealth and poverty. During the 1960s and 1970s, feminist theories labelled housework as the great equaliser of women. Whatever women did, they all did housework, and if there were some women who hired others to do it they were a privileged few. All women were workers and their home was the workplace. This work was unpaid and unsupervised. Since then, the demand for domestic help has altered considerably. During the 1960s, the dual career family emerged as a new family form (Gregson and Lowe, 1994), but one that could only function if there were surrogates to take over the wife's domestic role. In addition, for many countries the 1980s saw the demise of the social contract as a result of neoliberalism, privatisation, and the fall of the welfare state. The result was a reliance on private means of securing and sustaining social reproduction characterised by an increase in hiring of workers to cope with childcare and eldercare. This is usually done by women, and has clear class, race and national components.

Many women immigrate from Third World countries in search of work in the First World. The increasing global wage gap is a powerful incentive for the move. In addition, migrants can also receive more security in the developed world, having access to a variety of jobs, which is a crucial factor in the instabilities that globalisation creates. In 1996, over half of those who legally emigrated to the United States were women (Hochschild, 2000). The majority

of these female migrants found work as domestics. The burden of middle-class working mothers in the rich North is reduced at the expense of increasing the burdens of these servants immigrating from the developing world, who are often also mothers themselves. Immigrant workers must rely on the help of others to care for their own children. In this global care chain, poorer women raise children for wealthier women while still poorer women raise their children. Parrenas (2001: p. 86-88) describes this 'globalisation of mothering' by detailing how one domestic worker relies on a paid domestic worker to care for her children in the Philippines as she takes care of the household work of a professional woman in Italy. Although it is important to recognise that the employer is not directly responsible for this separation of mother and child, the situation does possess similarities with separation of slave children from their mothers during the slave trade.

Many migrant workers are illegal, as in the case of Paraguayan women working as domestic servants in Buenos Aires, or they are largely undocumented, as in Singapore (Momsen, 1999). They choose to work as live-in domestics because it is an occupation which provides a place to live for newly-arrived immigrants, and it is least likely to be checked by immigration authorities. Cox and Watt (2002) carried out a survey of domestic workers in the Hampstead area of North London, and the women sampled were all employed on an informal basis. The consequence of this was that these immigrants have no legal rights to basic requirements such as sick or holiday pay, or health and safety cover. This arrangement was highly beneficial to employers as they had no responsibility for their employees. Furthermore, in receiving countries, state policy often treats

foreign domestic workers as no more than a form of commodified labour to be bought and sold in the open market (Yeoh, and Huang, 1998). In Singapore, foreign workers are largely seen as 'a buffer to even out the swings of the business cycle' (The Straits Times, November 17, 1988, quoted in Yeoh and Huang, 1998) and are subject to repatriation during periods of economic downturn such as the 1984/5 recession when 200, 000 workers were sent home (Salaff, 1990). This treatment cannot be equated with slavery, but nonetheless it is exploitation of financially less advantaged people and reinforces the domination and control of one group over another.

Migrants who work in domestic services experience a further lack of basic rights in the way in which their employers have a significant degree of control over their movement. For example, the employer often exerts power over the worker by holding their passport to ensure their good behaviour. This means that the worker's liberty is severely restricted and her movements controlled by her employer. In addition, while employers do not 'own' their workers, in the United States, the visas given to domestic workers require them to only work for the employers who sponsor them. If they leave the employer they are liable for deportation. The actual experience of the worker in this sense may therefore, be similar to that of a slave (Anderson, 2000).

Domestic workers are increasingly recognised in the international community as among 'the most widely exploited and most vulnerable to abuse and violence' (Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997: p. 32). Violence against domestics is hard to quantify, but incorporates a variety of types including physical violence, poor living conditions and overwork. The most severe violence towards domestics was highlighted in May 2015 when Indonesia
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announced that it would stop sending new domestic workers to 21 Middle Eastern countries after two Indonesian women were executed in Saudi Arabia (France-Presse, 2015).

Poor living conditions are also witnessed and are characterised by a lack of food and privacy. In Canada, thousands of migrant workers gain access to the country via the Live-in Caregiver programme. This is a visa programme designed and implemented by the Canadian federal government, to create a supply of domestic workers at rates affordable to middle-class Canadian families. The vast majority of domestic workers come from the Philippines and since 1984 this origin has accounted for over 60 per cent of migrant workers (Pratt et al, 1998). The programme stipulates that the migrant domestic worker must live in their employer's home. Some employers fail to provide a lock for the door and respect the worker's room as a private space. The insecurity of their own room means that domestic workers cannot properly claim a place, and it communicates to them their lack of rights and the transitory nature of their 'stay' in Canada (Pratt, et al 1998). Hunger is also a problem for some domestic workers. If starvation is not really the issue, their diminished status is communicated and absorbed through food restrictions. Beyond the shortage of food, some domestic workers also feel a great awkwardness about introducing their own cultural food habits into the house. This lack of privacy and food alone cannot be claimed to be a form of slavery, however the relationship that it creates between employer and employee does have parallels with the control and power exerted over slaves by their master during the slave trade.

A major feature of the exploitation of domestic workers occurs through the restricting, controlling or even striking out of the maid's day of rest. A survey by Yeoh and Huang (1998) on migrant domestic workers in Singapore found that 28.4 per cent of the maids have no day off at all, about one third have one day off per month, and just over 10 per cent have one day off per week. Pratt, et al (1998) describes the discomfort felt by Filipino domestic workers in Canada, within the rest of the house when their employers were home, because of feelings that they must continue working and a sense of being scrutinised. Domestic workers are also subject to non-payment or a reduction in wages. Furthermore, the management of these companies find ways of shaving off nearly an hour's worth of wages a day, such as time spent travelling from house to house and unpacking equipment. It can be suggested therefore, that domestic work is a form of economic slavery.

Suggestions that migrant domestic labour is a 21st century form of international slavery particularly come from the nature of the work they must carry out and also physical violence that they are subjected to. For example, domestic workers are often told to scrub the floor twice daily with a toothbrush and stand to attention while the employer is out. Anderson (2000) illustrates the horrific treatment migrant servants all too frequently face. She gives details of a 15 year old girl from Burma who was sold by her parents and taken to Bangkok where she worked 18 hour days, cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, massaging her employers and sleeping on the floor in a store room. She was required to do this for 5 months without pay. The girl attempted to escape, but was brought back at gunpoint. In other

cases, male employers have been found to rape and sexually abuse migrant workers.

Migration for work in domestic service, although having deep historical roots, has been reinvented in the last three decades in response to the global spread of neo-liberal economic policies and the increased paid employment of women. It has now become a transnational activity, in which women leave their native land to work for a short period in a foreign country, in order to support the families left behind. Much of this work is done by racialised minorities and those whose legal status is precarious (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). These groups are therefore, highly vulnerable and their treatment by the middle- class has led to claims that migrant domestic labour is a 21st century form of international slavery. This is highlighted through the separation of mother and child, a lack of basic rights and the abuse of power and control over employees. However, it must be recognised that these experiences are not uniform within and between countries. Many domestic workers are well treated and lead happy lives. Moreover, it has been argued that while some worker's experiences may be similar to those of slaves, the mechanisms of power exercised over them are different. The legal limitations on the power held over migrant domestic workers in the 21st century are generally greater than those that were held over slaves.

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