

'Employed' or 'Enslaved?'

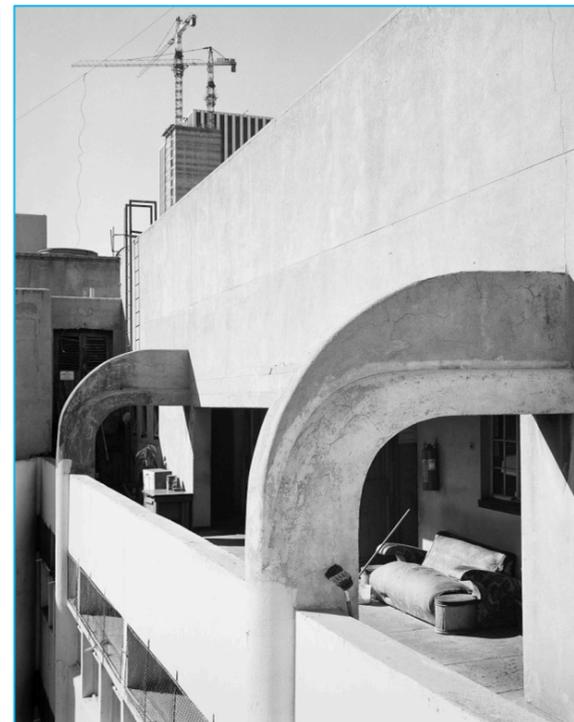
Domestic Workers in Apartheid South Africa

While the domestic service sector has historically employed white women and black men in South Africa, the twentieth century saw the industry become dominated by African women. Subsequently, domestic service deeply oppressed millions of native women by exploiting them for cheap, arduous labour such as cleaning, childcare, cooking, etc. This exhibition will reveal how these women were othered and harshly mistreated within their employers' homes. As a by-product of slavery, the job embodied a distinctive quality of racism as well as misogyny and classism. This exhibition will also show how the triple oppression that black, female domestic workers faced in Apartheid South Africa entrapped them in domestic service.

Urban African Women Servants as Percentage of Gainfully Occupied in 1936

Municipality	Women over	Gainfully Occupied	Per cent in	
	10 years old		No.	Per cent
Cape Town	3,285	1,343	40.88	84.29
Port Elizabeth	10,608	4,434	41.80	91.25
East London	10,426	6,805	65.27	90.58
Kimberley	5,583	2,433	43.58	96.55
Pietermaritzburg	3,560	2,257	63.40	80.73
Durban	12,507	6,539	52.28	84.23
Pretoria	12,888	5,922	45.95	90.90
Witwatersrand, of which	85,065	42,733	50.24	90.61
Johannesburg	49,313	24,781	50.25	91.56
Other Rand municipalities	35,752	17,952	50.21	89.30
Bloemfontein	13,630	5,895	43.25	89.18

The table to the left shows data from the 1936 census, revealing the percentage of money earning women employed in domestic work in different areas of South Africa. This data uncovered that 1936 was the first year African women dominated the domestic service industry over African men. In reality, these figures were likely higher as the data does not include unlawful wages or the unofficial sector.



The above image, captured by David Goldblatt, a South African photographer active throughout the apartheid regime, shows the living quarters of domestic servants. The high contrast and the imposing architecture displayed by Goldblatt emphasises the segregation of the servant's quarters. The separation of workers' living spaces from employers was common during this period, as segregationist policies managed the flow of black workers in and out of cities.

Alienation, Isolation and Abuse in the Workplace

Because every aspect of a domestic worker's life was heavily surveilled and restricted by their employer, the abuse they received at work was all-consuming. With most of their time confined within the walls of their employers' homes or their own living quarters on the property, domestic servants had no work/life separation, much like enslaved peoples or prisoners. As seen in the photograph from Goldblatt, workers' quarters were very separate from the rest of the building. On the outskirts of cities, workers' rooms were often far from their employer's main house at the very back of the garden. 'Madams' who employed domestic servants often treated them with little to no respect, speaking down to them like they would children. They would also give workers new, white-sounding names.

Some workers "put in 84 or 85-hour week(s)" and would receive essentially no time off to see their families or maintain a social life of any kind (Cock, 1980, p. 59). Often, madams would restrict a servants' interaction with the outside world, heavily regulating visitations both in the home and out of it. The intense control employers had over their domestic servants even extended over their movements, with workers often locked in employers' homes to prevent them from leaving. Workers' uniforms made their status visible, segregating them even further from the rest of society. Every part of their life was segregated and controlled, even their meals. Forced to eat from their own plates, kept separately from their employers' families', workers', of course, ate different food such as meat labelled 'dogs' meat' by butchers. There was very little about the job that separated it from enslavement.

How Did Domestic Service Become Dominated by African Women in the 1930s?

The increased employment rates of African women in towns in the early half of the twentieth century suggests that large portions of the black female population were migrating to urban areas. This urbanisation took place rapidly, with thousands of African women migrating from farms to urban towns. In fact, "between 1921 and 1936, while African male urbanisation was 44.9 per cent, for African women it was 245.3 per cent" (Ally, 2010, p. 29). Many of these migrant women sought economic independence for themselves and their children and were keen to escape the patriarchal structure of farm life. The 1930s also saw an increased need for male labour in mines, leaving gaps in the once male-dominated domestic sector. African women fell into domestic service because of their subordinate position in the South African societal hierarchy centred around race, class and gender.

The oppression that African women faced at the hands of this hierarchical structure was cyclical and self-perpetuating. They were often impoverished because they were seen as racially and biologically 'inferior'. Their racial 'inferiority' and low-class status meant they were uneducated and unskilled and struggled to find employment aside from domestic service. As women, they were disadvantaged by less pay, fewer job opportunities and little respect. All of these aspects that established the socioeconomic position of African women worked against one another to limit black women's social mobility, entrapping them in domestic service as, for the most part, they had no other employment option. As a result of African women's 'inferior' socioeconomic status, domestic service was their only means of income. Once they had the job, their social mobility was limited even further, to the point they were trapped in a deeply oppressive industry.

"Apartheid was good for no one, but there was nobody it was worse for than African women" (Ginsburg, 2000, p. 83).

Domestic Workers Fight Back

Although the 1950s saw the formation of many unions that fought for the rights of domestic workers and African women in general, it was really the 1990s that saw the most change for women in domestic service. It was during this period that black women gained some slight political power. Following the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, legislation containing laws specifically targeted at protecting the rights of domestic workers. Post-apartheid South Africa has since seen domestic workers benefit from a "national minimum wage, mandatory [employment contracts] and the extension of unemployment insurance" (Jansen, 2019, p. 68).

During the 90s, domestic workers' unions, such as the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU), gained political traction protecting workers' rights. Other organisations such as the Black Sash and the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) also became increasingly influential in the movement towards equal rights for black South Africans. Black magazines such as 'Drum' and 'SPEAK' revealed the stories of previously voiceless domestic workers, drawing attention to their mistreatment. 'Drum' was particularly influential across the continent, with 240,000 copies distributed to several African countries in 1959.

While the progress of the 90s certainly deserved celebration in terms of domestic service, there was still a long way to go for black female domestic servants. Indeed, racist, classist and misogynistic views are so deeply entrenched into South African history and society that it will take a lot to undo the damage done by the apartheid regime.

DOMESTIC WORK IS SLAVERY

Elizabeth Tehayinca and her daughter Elsie Mbatha have both worked as domestic workers for many years. Elsie has also worked in a factory and now plans to earn her living as a hawker.

Elizabeth works for one employer and commutes daily between Soweto and Johannesburg. Elsie works part-time for a number of employers.

Here Elizabeth and Elsie talk about their lives as domestic workers.

ELIZABETH: Oh, I've been doing domestic work for more than fifty years. Count the years from eleven to sixty-six: it's fifty-five years. I was eleven years old when I started work for this family and I used to look after the little girl - earning a pound a month. That's how I started.

Before, I was a live-in domestic. I did that for a long time, until I had five or six children. My mother looked after the children.

It's worse when you live in. No rest, day and night if they go out at night they want you to come and sit with their children. No pay for that, you see.

ELSIE: Domestic work! You earn peanuts - even when you do a part-time job.

to swallow because you're watching the time.

You get up early, you go to work early - but you come home late. That's what makes people unhappy about domestic work. It's slavery.

I cook for my husband. He's tired from work, lifting up heavy boxes and iron. Sometimes we come in at the same time. He wants his tea. He'll sit down with the paper. You'll be a 'girl' again in the house. He is the boss reading the paper. And that makes you fed up. By the time you go to sleep you're tired.



The above source is an extract from 'SPEAK' magazine, published between 1990 and 1994. The magazine empowers the voices of African female domestic workers by giving them a platform to tell their stories of mistreatment in the workplace, raising awareness for the oppression within the domestic industry. This segment reveals the similarities between domestic work and enslavement, coming straight from the mouths of two domestic servants in apartheid South Africa.

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