

# The Pacifying Power of Wages in the Domestic Work Domain:

## The Case of Tubungu, Eswatini



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### Abstract

Historically, scholarship on domestic work in Africa has characterised the sector as oppressive. As an integral part of the oppressive nature of the domestic work domain, this article investigates the contradictions associated with the admirable act of employers paying their domestic workers more than recommended minimum wage in Eswatini. Previously known as Swaziland, Eswatini is a small, interlocked country between South Africa and Mozambique. The country's recommended minimum wage for domestic workers is E 1,246.00 (USD 73.20) per month. Interviews were conducted among ten live-in domestic workers from Tubungu, Eswatini, who earn E 3,500 (USD 205.63) or more per month. This article relies on in-depth interviews to establish the dynamics at work in this act of constructive remuneration. The study's findings challenge the assumption that higher paid wages in

the domestic sector are always a well-intentioned and successful achievement of one aspect of the 'decent work' agenda. Findings show that higher wages subtly increase domestic workers' tolerance of employers' disregard of other working conditions. This is at the expense of the domestic workers' well-being and pacifies their ability to challenge their employers about other working conditions as their entitlement. The study shows how both liberating and oppressive experiences, not just oppression, coexist within the domestic work landscape in Eswatini. This points to an interesting ambiguity in the domestic work field. Finally, the study shows how these contradictory oppressive and liberatory experiences both inform and sustain domestic work in the country. This is in a context where women are part of a labour market with high unemployment, with domestic work being a convenient source of employment for less-skilled labour.

## Conceptual considerations

Conditions of domestic work reveal that poor wages are prominent among other conditions that make this sector generally oppressive. Hence, efforts have been made to regulate minimum wages in most parts of Africa, including Eswatini. There are, however, other dynamics that impact the lived experiences of domestic workers, among which are wages that are far above the nationally recommended minimum, and which are regarded as fair by those workers. The goal of this article, therefore, is to investigate how domestic workers' positive experiences of receiving a higher wage are ambiguous and contradictory when wages are regarded as the sole indicator of decent work, while other working conditions that workers are entitled to are disregarded. Decent work for domestic workers recognises domestic workers as workers entitled to a range of rights that define their respectable working and living conditions just like any other employee and promotes the recognition of their social and economic value (ILO, 2011). These conditions are regarded as an acceptable measure of domestic workers' well-being.

Exploring the dynamics at work in the relationships between employers and domestic workers, which is characterised by a 'fair wage', is a departure from the voluminous domestic work literature that focuses primarily on low wages within the paid domestic work sphere. It captures the positive aspect of receiving a higher wage and highlights the ambiguities and contradictions associated with such an act. Summarily, this article aligns itself with broader scholarly efforts that seek to make sense of pervasive oppression in domestic work. Building on Bourdieu's (1989: 23) assertion that, in order to change the world, one must change the practical operations through which groups are produced and reproduced, I argue that, in order to change the persistent oppression inherent in domestic work, one must understand how domestic work is configured. I contend that the domestic work sector is informed by an interplay between both constructive and destructive encounters. Given how the coexistence of constructive and oppressive experiences hinges on knowledge construction on and about the sector, the study offers knowledge and possible direction in understanding how the pervasive oppression in the domestic work sector is possibly configured.

This follows how discourse underpins the ideological foundations of legal instruments and the formulation of policies. This would be useful information to policymakers and legal practitioners who seek to improve the oppressive conditions in the sector.

The focus on the interplay between constructive and oppressive experiences in domestic work is inspired by Rodriguez's (2010: 7) assertion that, while domestic workers' lived experiences are marked by exploitation, degradation, and oppression, they also attest to experiences of strength, hope, love, and empowerment. Ray and Qayum (2009: 3) invite us to consider how privilege and oppression dialectically produce and reproduce relations of servitude. The study regards benevolent or above-average wages as constructive and a liberating experience in the lives of domestic workers (Barua, Waldrop and Haukanes, 2017: 486).

This article reflects on ongoing research done in paid domestic work, with a particular focus on female domestic workers who have migrated to Matsapha, Eswatini's industrial area and economic hub, to look for work. The significant role they play in their families – that of financially supporting themselves, other family members, and their own children in particular – cannot be overstated, as many households continue to rely on meagre wages earned from domestic service for basic survival (Miles, 1996: 81). Domestic work is one of the most accessible types of work, requiring only nurturing skills and minimal education. As a result, despite being one of the lowest-paying occupations in the country, domestic work remains an appealing domain and a gateway into the urban economy (Miles, 1996: 84).

The article begins with a discussion of the general labour climate in Eswatini, and then discusses the social status of domestic workers in the country. The particularities of higher-than-average wages are theoretically explained. Finally, the lived experiences, as well as perceptions of work, of the domestic workers selected for this study are explored.

## **The domestic labour climate in Eswatini: The main push and pull factors influencing domestic work**

Eswatini is an important and interesting country to study because little research focusing on domestic work exists. Sixty-nine percent of the slightly more than one million people in Eswatini live below the national poverty line, of which 25% are extremely poor (World Food Programme, 2022). According to the Human Development Index of 2019, Eswatini is one of Africa's slowest-growing economies and, in recent years, economic growth in the country has stagnated owing to mounting fiscal challenges (Policy Brief, 2020: 3). Eswatini has an unemployment rate of 41%, one of the highest in the world (World Food Programme, 2022). Unemployment and underemployment are common, even among college and university graduates. Very low wages, harsh working conditions and violations of the minimum wage regulation are the norms (Laterza, 2016: 589).

Eswatini is also one of the countries in southern Africa with the lowest female labour force participation rates (Schwidrowski, Kangoye, Imai and Yameogo, 2021: 2; SADC Gender Protocol Barometer, 2018). According to the Global Gender Gap Report, the country ranks 148<sup>th</sup> out of 189 (UNDP, 2020). That is, compared to men, Swazi women have less access to resources and economic opportunities (Schwidrowski et al., 2021: 2). Historically, this is the result of the colonial restructuring of the country's labour market, which prioritised men's employment while discouraging women's land ownership and participation in paid employment. Women's participation in paid labour was limited to seasonal farm labour and domestic work in colonial towns, while men's employment in the South African mines increased (Miles, 1996).

During the post-colonial era, there has been a shift in the country's economic structure, marked by the increased participation of women in agriculture in rural areas as well as in paid employment, particularly in urban areas. However, with the unpredictability of climate change, the rural economy has not been reliable (BTI, 2022: 18). Consequently, women's participation in the labour market has been steadily on the rise. More women are entering the workforce as professionals, and the economy's move towards exports, particularly in the manufacturing sector, has

provided attractive employment opportunities (Miles, 1996: 82). Notably, women increasingly participated in the textile and clothing industries in the early 2000s. Laterza (2016: 580) attributes the demand for female labour to the establishment of Taiwanese-owned factories. The latter took advantage of Swaziland's inclusion in the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA), thereby creating new manufacturing jobs.

The increased demand for women's participation in paid employment in contemporary Eswatini, particularly in urban areas, combined with a degradation in the rural economy, set in motion the wheels of unprecedented rural-urban migration (Miles, 2001: 107). This has had far-reaching consequences for the country's urban population. It has also changed the patterns of labour division in rural and urban households, as more women who lack competitive skills and those who are qualified but unemployed, found work in the domestic work sector (Laterza, 2016: 580). In recent years, the collapse of the garment and textile sector, historically Eswatini's primary economic source of growth, has pushed many women in the country towards the informal economy, particularly paid domestic work (Brown, 2006: 4).

### **Paid domestic work in Eswatini**

Women make up a disproportionately large section of the domestic workforce in Eswatini. Nearly every household, especially in the urban and peri-urban areas, in the country employs a domestic worker, although the precise number of domestic workers in the country is unknown due to its informal nature. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021: 30) and the most recent United Nations Worldometer (published in April 2022), 6.6% of Eswatini's one million inhabitants are domestic workers. This makes the country the sixth-largest employer of domestic workers in Africa. Women in Eswatini have been drawn to domestic work primarily as a necessary survival strategy to support their families (Miles, 1996: 66; Tsikata, 2018: 2).

However, the country has not ratified the Domestic Workers Convention of 2011 (No. 189), and working arrangements are informal and verbal. Consequently, domestic workers experience poor working conditions, are fearful of and experience victimisation, dismissal, and even abuse by employers (Southern

African Litigation Centre, 2019: 16). Domestic work in Eswatini is characterised by low pay, long working hours, poor living conditions, and exploitation. According to Bhorat, Kanbur, and Stanwix (2015: 14), Eswatini's minimum wage is among the lowest a worker in the lower-middle-income category can be paid for their work. The government's non-ratification of the abovementioned convention also implies that domestic workers' employers are not compelled to contribute to the National Social Security Scheme, neither are workers covered by the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1983 (Southern African Litigation Centre, 2019: 5).

It is with good reason, then, that scholars have portrayed domestic work in Eswatini as oppressive. Miles' (1996: 81) study highlights the difficult experiences faced by domestic workers in the country. This is not to say, however, that there are no cases in Eswatini where domestic workers are treated with dignity and paid more than the recommended minimum wage. This study investigates this subsection of domestic workers. In particular, it explores the ways in which an ostensibly 'fair wage' not only speaks to, but also participates in, domestic workers' oppression.

### **The legal status of domestic work in Eswatini**

The post-independence period, in most African countries, promised a transition from oppression to freedom and leaders aspired to ensure the welfare of their people and create better jobs for all (Tsikata, 2018: 3; Marais and Van Wyk, 2015: 2; ILO, 2013: 1). As shown in other countries such as South Africa and Namibia, the ratification of the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention of 2011 (No. 189) improves the working conditions of and promotes workplace rights for domestic workers to some extent. Although Eswatini is yet to ratify the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention of 2011 (No. 189), domestic workers in the country are protected by state-level/legal provisions, such as the Employment Act (1980) and the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act (2005). However, there remains a need 'to establish clear directives on how the Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration Commission (CMAC) should respond to reported cases' (Eswatini Human Rights Report on Domesticating UN Human Rights Treaties, 2019: 189).

### **Selected labour laws and state-level provisions for Eswatini domestic workers**

“ This study investigates this subsection of domestic workers. In particular, it explores the ways in which an ostensibly 'fair wage' not only speaks to, but also participates in, domestic workers' oppression. The post-independence period, in most African countries, promised a transition from oppression to freedom and leaders aspired to ensure the welfare of their people and create better jobs for all ”

#### **i) Wages**

Eswatini, like most other countries, has a government-mandated minimum wage. According to s15 of the Regulation of Wages (Domestic Employees) Order, 2022, the recommended minimum wage is E 1,246.00 (USD 73.20) per month. Employers who fail to pay this minimum, the order states, may face criminal prosecution. However, the enforcement of this law is poor and whether employers and/or employees pursue – or are even aware of – this ruling remains questionable (Eswatini Human Rights Report on Domesticating UN Human Rights, 2019: 189).

The minimum wage regulation also recommends a minimum wage of E 71.00 (USD 4.17) per day or E 10.60 (USD 0.62) per hour for all other domestic workers, which include house attendants, children's nurses, gardeners, herdsman, and laundresses. If an employee performs more than one job, the employer must add 28% to the domestic employee's wages (s15 of the Regulation of Wages, Order 2022). In any event, failing to pay wages is a criminal offence (s64 of the Employment Act of 1980; Southern African Litigation Centre, 2019: 3).

#### **ii) Working hours**

According to s13 of the Regulation of Wages, Order 2022, employers must provide an attendance register documenting the time employees work overtime, on

Sundays, and on public holidays. Employees must also be given a pay slip detailing how their wages are calculated and inspectors can request to see these records at any time (s21 of Wages Act, of 1964).

Domestic workers are permitted to work for up to eight hours per day, six days a week, for a total of 48 hours per week, excluding the one-hour meal breaks. Workers are entitled to overtime pay of one and a half times the basic hourly rate, and then double the standard hourly rate if they work on a public holiday or rest day (section 13 of the Regulation of Wages [Domestic Employees] Order, 2022).

### iii) Maternity Leave

According to s14 of the Regulation of Wages (Domestic Employees) Order of 2022, female employees who have been continuously employed by their employer for one year or more are entitled to 84 calendar days (or 12 weeks) of maternity leave; 30 of these days are to be paid. This regulation also provides that domestic workers who are mothers are also entitled to a one-hour nursing break per day for a period of three months after maternity leave.

### iii) Rest days, leave days, and other benefits

Other labour entitlements for domestic workers include one rest day per week as agreed upon between the employer and employee according to the Regulation of Wages (Domestic Employees) Order of 2022. The regulation also provides that the employee is entitled to at least 13 days of paid annual leave at a time convenient for both parties (one day of leave is accrued per month) and the domestic employees are entitled to one rest day a week.

Domestic workers are entitled to a maximum of 14 days of sick leave at full pay annually, as validated in a certificate from a medical doctor, and another 14 days at half pay within a twelve-month period of continuous service (s13 of the Regulation of Wages [Domestic Employees] Order of 2022). Domestic workers are also entitled to paid public holidays. Section 14 of the Regulation of Wages (Domestic Employees) Order of 2022, further states that workers are entitled to compassionate leave with full pay after three months of employment.

### iv) Living arrangements and conditions

Scholarly work on domestic work in Eswatini identifies resistance strategies used by domestic workers to overcome spatial constraints. Some domestic workers choose the live-in arrangement to save money on housing costs (Miles, 1996: 103). Accommodation provided by an employer must be free, well-ventilated and spacious, and access to a functional latrine and ablution and cooking facilities must be provided (s7, s22 of Employment Regulations, 1980). If the domestic worker does not live on the employer's premises and is required to start work at or before 7am and leave after 5: 30 pm, the employer must provide free transportation or pay for public transportation (section 13 of the Regulation of Wages [Domestic Employees] Order of 2022).

### The labour relationship between the employer and domestic worker

Marx's (1982: 15) classical account of the relations of production in waged workplaces and how workers and employers are engaged in a capital-labour relation is a good place to start for a basic understanding of the nature of the employer-domestic worker relationship. According to Marx (1982: 15), the relationship between worker and employer is marked by a structural tension that is sustained by differences in interests.

On the one hand, employers want to benefit from surplus value. One way of achieving this is to fail to compensate domestic workers for their contributions to production, which is considered exploitation. Similarly, the employer may pay the wages while disregarding other domestic rights, which is also exploitative. On the other hand, domestic workers have an interest in receiving, from their employers, a fair return on the investment of their labour. The asymmetrical relationship between the employer and the domestic worker transforms the way both parties behave and interact with one another. The worker, in particular, specialises in being what the employer requires of them. Souralova (2015: 183) claims that the interaction between the employer and the domestic worker is, similarly, an emotionally charged social exchange. Hochschild (1983: 7) expands on this claim, arguing that this exchange is characterised by workers' conscious or unconscious effort to suppress



or sustain their feelings in order to outwardly display an 'agreeable' attitude.

### **Wages as instruments of discipline**

Foucault's (1995: 223) theory of disciplinary power explains how the dominant class or, in this case, the employer, artfully uses disciplinary power and 'schemes of knowledge' to control, exploit, and dominate. According to Foucault (1995), disciplinary power is a positive technique because it is a pacifying form of social control and a positive way of exercising power. Extending this argument, Aldeen and Windle (2015: 3) argue that there is a relationship between 'schemes of knowledge' and social class. They claim that these are manifested as attitudes and knowledge gained through educational experience which differ across social classes. For example, the dominant class might be able to access information that the subordinate class may not have access to or understand.

Foucault's (1995: 16) notion of 'technology of power' seems to apply in this context, in that the domestic worker's primary need for money is met by receiving higher wages, while because of lack of knowledge and power, she remains unable to claim other legal entitlements that might provide more benefits. Hence, the employers' knowledge of such entitlements and selective compliance to these entitlements becomes an instrument of social control and discipline in the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker. Therefore, employers are able to govern domestic workers through enticement, which effectively neutralises the domestic workers' desire to demand other labour entitlements. This does not reduce the benefits of paying higher wages to domestic workers, but it shows that the payment of higher wages may be a subtle, yet calculated, form of exploitation.

It could be argued that some employers subtly repurpose legal frameworks as tools for dictating the terms of labour relations. The employers' power to determine, without properly consulting their workers, how much they should be paid – be it below or above the minimum wage – is largely an expression of the former's manipulation of bargaining dynamics. It is my contention that some employers use their social position as members of the dominant class to

control and subjugate domestic workers' rights in the provisions of a number of legal entitlements identified earlier. As such, the primary research question of this paper is: What are the lived experiences of domestic workers remunerated above the recommended minimum wage in Eswatini?

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to capture the deep-seated dynamics at play in the lived experiences of domestic workers who are remunerated more than the nationally recommended minimum wage in Eswatini.

The study was situated in an upmarket residential township called Tubungu Estate, located in the industrial hub of the country, in Matsapha. The township has over a thousand properties with about seven hundred already built and so the township is an appealing destination for job seekers from neighbouring areas. Live-in domestic workers were chosen for this study because of their proximity to, and close interaction with, their employers. It provided the ideal context within which to study the dynamics at play in their work relations, as well as the state of the working conditions.

Snowball sampling was used to select ten live-in domestic workers who all earn above E 3,500 (USD 205.63) per month. The profile of the sample population constituted only local Black African women, between the ages of 23 and 48. The least educated in this group had reached Grade 7, three participants had reached secondary school, five had completed high school, and one participant had a university degree.

A majority of the participants were first contacted telephonically. Once the chosen participants confirmed that they were 'fairly paid,' participants were requested to be interviewed in person. Admittedly, I encountered some resistance from the participants during our first meetings, but the tension was eventually reduced during subsequent appointments and interviews.

Each in-person interview took the form of an informal conversation in Siswati, the participants' home language. Although each interview was structured

around a research guide with semi-structured questions, conversations were allowed to unfold naturally. The format encouraged participants to express themselves freely and share their experiences, while also allowing further probing. Interviews were conducted at a time of the domestic workers' choosing, which included periods such as afternoon walks with their employers' children, park visits, and their off days.

Analysis commenced with the transcription of the interviews. From these, themes were developed and the interpretation of findings was filtered through literature and theory. While the interviews provided a wealth of information about the domestic work sector, I had to keep a clear focus on the study's interest: the ambiguity in the coexistence of oppressive and liberatory encounters as expressed in the payment of benevolent wages.

Regarding ethics, the domestic workers participated voluntarily. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, as well as of the value of their contributions for academic purposes. Participants were also informed that they could abandon the study at any time and for whatever reason. Participant confidentiality was assured by giving them pseudonyms, making it almost impossible to identify them in this article.

### **Domestic work as a means to an end?**

None of the women interviewed intended to be domestic workers, let alone live-in domestics. Participants described domestic work as a low-paying, unappealing job. Most of them dropped out of school due to pregnancy or a lack of funds to continue their education. Some of them completed high school but did not achieve the required results for admission to universities and other higher institutions of learning.

For example, Zethu (32 years old) dropped out of school in Grade 8 and said that she left school because of pregnancy. She stated that this was, in her father's opinion, a deal breaker in her opportunity to receive an education. She indicated that she had to leave her home to seek employment. With no qualifications, she could only do domestic work to support her child; she could not pursue her education after that. Lwazi (38 years old) expressed a similar sentiment, stating

that domestic work was not on her list of desired jobs. She became a domestic worker because her grades were insufficient to pursue higher education. She said:

*I finished form five but did not get satisfactory results to get to [a] higher institution of learning. I was, therefore, unemployed for a long time, got pregnant and was forced to go look for a job in the firms (Lwazi, 38 years old).*

Lwazi stated that domestic work was a temporary solution until she finds another job. She explained how she was dismissed from the textile industry (firms). But she still had rent to pay, as well as children and a family to support. She was drawn into domestic work due to a shortage of employment opportunities. Domestic work was also found to be a temporary solution for one of the participants who is a university graduate, as she searches for another job. She also mentioned that she knows a few other graduates who serve as domestic workers in the neighbourhood. It is evident from these submissions that the need to survive is the main push factor to the sector.

Interestingly, hairdressing and sewing were discovered to be common skills among these women, as some had previously worked in hair salons and firms in Matsapha. These skills are seen by many as stepping stones to self-employment. Of interest is how there is a possibility that much like domestic work, these skills could be a package of socialisation empowerment for these women growing up, such that they become the default career paths for them in adulthood. Admittedly, the preference for sewing and hairdressing by these domestic workers is an area that warrants further inquiry. However, most of the participants became domestic workers out of necessity, to take financial care of their children and families. The domestic workers' initial unwillingness to be a part of the sector confirms its low social standing and its unappealing nature. It also confirms the prevalent narrative that portrays domestic work as low-paying and thus oppressive.

### **Perceptions of their work: Is domestic work oppressive or not?**

The majority of the participants in this study understood the concept of oppression in relation

to or within the context of wages. Because their wages were comparably higher than those of other domestic workers in Tubungu, none of the sampled domestic workers described their work as unfair. They also compared their monthly wages to the salaries they earned in the past, and not to the nationally determined minimum wage in Eswatini.

All the women interviewed reported earning E 3,500 (USD 205.63) and above per month. They shared the sentiment that they were 'paid well' because they were not only able to cover their financial responsibilities but also had enough to keep up with their stokvel savings. Food for their children and families, school fees, and transportation were at the top of their list of expenses. The concept of a 'fair wage' is subjective and debatable and it appears as if the fairness of the participants' wages was only valid insofar as they asserted it.

The participants' wage expectations were tinged with the belief that Tubungu residents are well-off. This perception can be traced back to before they were hired at Tubungu and it has been maintained because they are paid satisfactorily, as they admit. The perception that the residents of Tubungu are wealthy is drawn from the township's built environment and the cars that the residents drive which show affluence. This sentiment was well captured by Nonhlanhla, one of the longest-serving domestic workers interviewed:

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“ This demonstrates how the employers' payment of higher wages is an expression of the employers' awareness of the need to observe the standard of decent work as a 'scheme of knowledge', coupled with the employer's economic capability as socio-economic power. This awareness is not limited to specific residential boundaries (place), nor is it diminished by migration. ”

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*I've known these people for a long time, and they have money. Take a look at their houses and cars. You can't tell me they can't afford to pay me more (Nonhlanhla, 48 years old).*

Only two of the other participants reported having worked for their employers for three years or less. The remaining participants reported that they had been employed by their current employers for at least four years. It is worth noting that the long-serving domestic workers had been employed by their current employers long before they had moved to Tubungu, and they stated that their salaries had always been adequate. This demonstrates how the employers' payment of higher wages is an expression of the employers' awareness of the need to observe the standard of decent work as a 'scheme of knowledge', coupled with the employer's economic capability as socio-economic power. This awareness is not limited to specific residential boundaries (place), nor is it diminished by migration. The main reason the participants described themselves as not oppressed is based on the perception of themselves as being 'well-paid', thus experiencing a certain level of well-being. It is my contention that, despite the participants' reported adequate remuneration, they are not perhaps aware of how other working conditions could influence the nature of their work, and of how a 'fair wage' alone cannot be a strict measure of their well-being. The participants described their experience of belonging to their employing family as a secondary measure of well-being. As Nonhlanhla pointed out:

*I have been with these people for 13 years, five of them at Tubungu. I won't lie, they've always paid me well and treated me like their own child (Nonhlanhla, 48 years old).*

She quickly added that, during her earlier years with the family, she appreciated her salary more than at present, and that she had not received a raise in recent years. Thuli, another long-serving domestic worker in the sample, stated the following:

*They pay me well. [J]ust that I am tired of this job now. But where else would I be paid this much as I am uneducated? That's what's keeping me here now! (Thuli, 44 years old).*



The accounts demonstrate the challenges of being employed as domestic workers for many years. Those occupying entry-level positions within this group earn salaries that are slightly higher than what they expected, and higher than what they earned in their previous occupations with the same skills. However, domestic workers lamented that their wages had stagnated over time and that they were unable to acquire other similar-paying jobs because they are 'uneducated' or lack formal skills. It can be said that, instead of being a means to an end, domestic work has become a dead-end street for these women, in a sector within which they are locked primarily because they receive slightly better wages than the stipulated minimum wage of this sector.

### **The status of the domestic workers' labour rights**

Participants were demonstrably unfamiliar with their rights as domestic workers in the country. This was regardless of their varied levels of education. Surprisingly, with the exception of one participant, all of them were unaware of the existence of a legal minimum wage. Many of them reported obtaining labour-related information through their interactions with their fellow workmates. Given that their expectation of a minimum wage was informed by other domestic workers' salaries (as decided by employers), there was some alignment between workers' expectations and the nationally determined minimum wage. While this group of domestic workers' wages were on a margin above the nationally recommended minimum wage, which they regarded as 'fair,' disappointingly, three participants also stated that their wages were not paid on regularly scheduled dates. Yet, they seemed to understand that they eventually will receive payment, thus trivialising this inconvenience.

Some of their daily responsibilities include cooking, cleaning, childcare, and any other tasks assigned by the employer. The participants noted that employers also assign additional tasks through verbal agreements. The common thread running through all the workers' testimonies is that they perform almost every type of task aimed at improving the liveability of the employing family. They stated that they were in charge of the general functionality of these households and that they used their discretion in completing other, unspecified tasks. Their typical

workdays start at 6 am and end around 10 pm. Two workers admitted to getting up as early as 5 am when they needed to perform ironing duties. They thus work far longer than the recommended 8 hours per day, six days per week. Their working days are roughly 14–16 hours long, excluding a few hours spent watching television. This confirms Marx's (1982: 15) assertion that the employer-employee labour relationship is characterised by a contradictory structural tension whereby the employer wants to benefit from surplus value and the worker seeks fair returns for their investment in labour. This structural tension is nested within the household where domestic workers perform their labour.

It is clear, therefore, that what the workers perceive as a 'fair wage' is far below what they deserve, given the number of hours worked. They could have negotiated for a much higher monthly wage, had they been informed with the knowledge of their rights as domestic workers, and how their wages are calculated. This also confirms Foucault's assertion that their lack of knowledge is used as an instrument to control. Such control has been internalised by the domestic worker to the point of self-discipline to deliver on the employer's expectation to have the work done regardless of the inconveniences to them.

Two of the domestic workers interviewed live in a separate room outside the main house, while the remaining participants stated that they live in the main house and sleep in their employers' children's bedrooms. Ironically, the two ladies living in the outer room stated that they could not knock off early as they would often return to the main house to assist with chores, later watching television with the family. Although employees are not obligated to do so, the participants believed it necessary to perform household tasks while they remained in the main house.

Unlimited hours of work have adverse effects on the well-being of domestic workers. Most of them admitted to being chronically exhausted because of the size of the houses and their countless tasks. Lwazi said the following:

*Their houses are large as you can see and we are always tired. Worse, they now work from home most of the time. I can't even take my*

*usual daytime naps or watch TV (Lwazi, 38 years old).*

The domestic workers' commitment to having work done for as long as they remain in the main house attests to how they have become an embodiment of the dictates of the employer's expectations without any need for close monitoring by the employer. Instances of an increased sense of surveillance as well as a sense of self-policing have also been reported, particularly when the employer works from home. Furthermore, most participants were allowed to take time off on Sundays but chose not to as Tubungu is inconveniently inaccessible. As a result, domestic workers often find themselves doing some type of housework instead of resting. Their bodies, therefore, have been rendered forms of human capital attached to which are remuneration rewards. Nonhlanhla (48 years old), like many of the other domestic workers in the study, expressed it in the following way: *'They cannot pay me this much and I sit around. After all, if I don't do the work who will?'*

Domestic workers were aware that they are entitled to holidays and off days. Generally, the employer grants these, although in some cases, not as dictated by the law. One way in which some of the interviewed workers subject themselves to exploitation is evident from 44-year-old Lihle's statement: *'I have to ascertain their [the employer's] availability first and whether they have no commitments on the day I intend to be off.'*

On occasion, Lihle's employer requires her to find a replacement during her off days. She describes her reluctance to do so: she fears that her replacement would outperform and thus replace her. Hence, she rarely takes days off. Lihle also admits to using a relative – her safest option – in situations where she really needs time away from work. She attests to impressing her female employer in the week leading up to her off-time: by over-exerting herself, she ensures that there is little work to be done during her absence. Through the above admissions, we see how knowledge of the employer's expectations renders the domestic workers objects of that knowledge that is in turn used to control them. This is displayed in how they employ several ways to impress their employers in order to keep their jobs, including forfeiting some leave days.

Most of the domestic workers also stated that their employers occasionally shout at them as if they were children. This experience, too, they tended to trivialise. However, the fact that they raised how they are infantilised as a concern is a strong indicator of their displeasure with being marginalised. The infantilization can be understood in terms of Barua et al. (2017: 486), where employers cast themselves as custodians of the home, thus treating domestic workers as children under their protection.

The domestic workers admitted, though, that they occasionally tip the scales of power. For instance, most of them admitted to purposefully remaining silent in order to ward off reprimands and get things done their own way. This was well-expressed by Hloni as follows:

*I know when they have plans that would require me to sacrifice my off days. That way, I keep quiet and frown a lot so I make it hard for the madam to even approach me about staying (Hloni, 40 years old).*

Nonhlanhla also admitted to using this strategy, as follows:

*Once I keep quiet for long hours, she is afraid to ask me about anything. That way she resorts to doing some of the work herself, especially cooking and changing diapers (Nonhlanhla, 48 years old).*

These sentiments confirm Nyamnjoh's (2005: 185) assertion that domestic workers are elusively 'manipulative as they are manipulated'. Summarily, it is clear from the domestic workers' submissions that wages are an organising principle of the social relationship between the domestic worker and the employer. The workers interviewed in this study overwhelmingly described their relationships with their employers as non-oppressive since the latter met their financial needs every month with a higher-than-average wage. These findings reveal, however, that the participants consider freedom and oppression as absolutes, and not as evolving processes. It became clear that they viewed themselves as either oppressed or free. The participants viewed their above-average salaries as indicators of freedom and privilege, while ignoring the facts that they do not

see their family regularly, are not paid overtime, and are distant mothers, among other inconveniences. Their financial freedom as a sole indicator of their well-being stems from their perception of such inconveniences as 'necessary evils', as they are rational calculators of advantage and, thus, weigh between evils (Nyamnjoh, 2005: 185; Lemert, 2017: 92). Taking this argument further, Burawoy (1982: 78) contends that 'the deprivations that arise from work realities engender relative satisfactions' that become part of customary meanings attached to work. In this instance, the participants' interpretation of a 'fair wage' as the sole criterion of well-being, despite being misaligned with the decent work benchmark, is one such relative satisfaction.

Many participants' ignorance or selective awareness of labour conditions and regulations, as set out by the law, was noted. As previously noted in this article, the majority of domestic workers were unaware of a legal minimum wage. Their understanding of, and appreciation for, their position as 'highly paid' labourers is based on the dominant narrative that domestic work is low-paying, in relation to their own employment histories as well as comparison with other domestic workers.

Their 'schemes of knowledge,' which in this case entail their appreciation and perception, express the cultural default assumption associated with domestic work as a low-paying sector. This has fuelled and sedimented their view that they are 'privileged' compared to other domestic workers who earn lower wages than they do. Consequently, in order to maintain their perceived 'privilege', they have developed the habit of not demanding or questioning their employers. The concealed demise is that the domestic workers actually produce more than their wage as surplus value for the employer. This underscores the co-existence between different combinations of consent and force or oppression and freedom in the sector (Burawoy, 1982: 26–27).

The domestic workers' lack of awareness of their working conditions and entitlements other than wages has led them to 'recognize no other reality other than that which is available to their ordinary experience', in Bourdieu's words (1989: 15). That is, their perspective on reality is formed based on the position to which they are exposed. They lack access to a wider

variety of opportunities and working conditions as categories of perception (Bourdieu, 1989: 20); this, I argue, underscores their view of themselves as not oppressed. While Bourdieu (1989: 19) asserts that 'nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies', I contend that, had the participants in this study been armed with the knowledge of their rights as labourers, they would have been able to frame and measure their wellbeing in different ways. Being paid a 'fair' wage – seen by the participants as the primary determinant of their job satisfaction – illustrates how 'the visible conceals the invisible that determines it' (Bourdieu, 1989: 16).

Paying employees – especially domestic workers – 'fair wages' is a double-edged sword. Celebrated as a step toward properly rewarding 'decent' work, it nevertheless instils in employees a sense of loyalty and fear. In exchange for a 'fair wage', employees are pacified and remain conditioned to perpetuate their oppression. There is also the legal imperative to be seen as competitive in their work, thus overexerting themselves to impress.

Hence, the 'fair wage' becomes a refined, subtle and 'constructively destructive' form of exploitation. According to Foucault (1995: 16), it is a disguised form of oppression and exploitation, as it is both an apparatus for meeting the needs of the worker and an instrument for exercising social control. Social control is exercised when domestic workers carefully align their behaviours with the expectations of the employer, which disciplines them to keep up with the demands of their work. Hence, employers govern through enticement, effectively neutralising workers' desire to demand other labour entitlements. Borrowing Barua et al.'s (2017: 486) expression, this act is humanitarian and is founded on discourses of domestic workers as vulnerable and dependent. That is, while paying domestic workers more than what their labour necessitates may be well-intentioned and commendable, it binds them to a state of contentious loyalty in which they are unable to demand other rights/entitlements. This is particularly evident given how these women are part of a labour market with high unemployment, and that the majority of them lack competitive labour skills that could translate into decent wages. In addition, employers' selective compliance with legislated working conditions is not just, as Marx asserts, a function of their conscious or

unconscious interest in maximizing profit, but is also a state of affairs that warrants further investigation.

Domestic workers' use of silence to initiate a conversation with their employers and their habit of over-exerting themselves to gain approval attests to how, despite the inherent inequalities between the role players, domestic workers have strategies in place to tip the scales of power in their favour.

In a labour economy characterised by inherent inequalities between the employer and employee, even well-meaning acts can be manipulated to favour the employer. Policy pronouncements and legal frameworks that seek to address the pervasive oppression in the domestic work sector, therefore, must take into account the continuous (re) configurations and transformations of the sector's oppressive nature.

## Conclusion

The migration of women from rural areas to industrial Matsapha in search of employment reveals the extent to which many women are absorbed into the domestic work sector in urban Eswatini. The slow collapse of the country's textile industry in recent years has heightened the allure of domestic work, and Tubungu has emerged as one of the neighbourhoods offering better domestic work opportunities. Whereas the sector is predominantly characterised by low wages, this study reveals the ambiguous coexistence of oppression and liberation at the heart of employers' practice of paying 'high' wages. While such an act is admirable and goes a long way toward meeting the needs of domestic workers (most of them mothers and breadwinners), acts of control and consent are inextricably linked to it. I argue that wages that are higher than the national minimum subtly manipulate domestic workers' ways of thinking, being, and doing, and particularly influence their strategies of survival. Overall, this paper aims to better understand how workers' liberating *and* oppressive experiences intersect, thus perpetuating domestic workers' oppression.

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