# 'God Gave us Legs to Walk!':

## Mobility and Social Networks Among a Group of Rural Domestic Workers in the Vicinity of a Coastal Town in South Africa

By Marizanne Grundlingh

## Abstract

Domestic work is a major source of income for many Black African women in South Africa. The experience of domestic workers is mainly shaped along racial and class lines – this is a result of the remnants of the legacy of apartheid, where many Coloured and African women were dependent on employment in the domestic work sphere. This article considers the experiences of a group of Coloured female domestic workers in a coastal town in South Africa. Drawing on ten qualitative interviews, I show how their experiences are framed around issues of mobility – this includes moving to work and moving at work and the consequences of immobility in the world of work. Most research that deals with issues of mobility in domestic work focuses on migration patterns. This novel approach to understanding the notion of mobility for domestic workers contributes to the existing literature on domestic work in South Africa but extends the conceptualisation of movement beyond migration patterns. The article also makes a much-needed contribution to understanding the experience of domestic work in rural settings in South Africa. This is done by exploring the coping strategies that the participants employ to support themselves and their families. Networks and family ties form an essential component of the financial and emotional survival of this group of women. The role of social capital is also investigated as it plays an important role in forging trust and reciprocity among participants of this study.

## Introduction

Paid domestic work is a fundamental employment sector in South Africa. While there has been a decline in the employment of domestic workers since the Covid-19 pandemic, it is estimated that there are still approximately 800,000 people, mostly Black African and Coloured women from marginalised and poorly-educated backgrounds, employed as domestic workers (Quarterly Labour Survey, 2022). Apart from these race, class and gender characteristics, migration trends and the influx of domestic workers from other African countries, especially from Zimbabwe, have also contributed to the current intersectional nature of the domestic work landscape in South Africa. Early influential sociological analysis on the political and gendered nature of domestic work by Jacklyn Cock (1980) highlighted the exploitative nature of domestic work during the apartheid period and paved the way for understanding the complex intersectional nature of domestic work in the South African context. Since then, research on domestic work has been guided by themes that relate to gender (Gaitskell et al., 2010), labour regulation (Jacobs et al., 2013), outsourcing (Du Toit, 2021; Du Toit and Heineken, 2021), migration (Jinnah, 2020), and cultural identity (Bonnin and Dawood, 2013), among others. These studies point to the fact that domestic work accounts for the sustained livelihoods of many women and, therefore, an analysis of their lived experience in the workplace is of paramount importance.

The aim of this article is to add to these conversations by focusing on the mobility of, and the use of social capital by domestic workers. Hence, the primary goal of this study is to explore the experiences of a group of Coloured domestic workers with reference to their mobility and use of social capital in a coastal town in South Africa. In addition to this, the paper also considers the coping strategies that the participants employ to support themselves and their families and how social capital aided their financial and emotional survival. The structure of this paper is as follows: First, a brief background to domestic work in South Africa is provided, followed by a discussion on the research setting and methodology of this paper. Next, the findings and concluding remarks are presented on the issue of mobility and social capital.

## Domestic work in South Africa

There is a plethora of research on domestic work that considers the lived experiences of Black African women in the domestic sector. Research on domestic work in South Africa has explored the working conditions, employment relations between employers and domestic workers, and the legislation's effect on the paid domestic work sector (see, for example, Ally, 2010; Cock, 2011; Gaitskell et al., 2010). These studies have demonstrated how domestic work remains a vulnerable occupation for women, despite interventions from the state. There is, however, limited research on Coloured women's experiences of domestic work in rural areas of the Western Cape. Scholarly work on women's experiences in the Western Cape has related to issues of the family (Levine, 2013), alcohol abuse (Croxford and Viljoen, 1999), and motherhood (Kruger, 2020). Van der Waal's (2014) edited volume considered wealth, work, and transformation in the Dwarsrivier Valley, but did not focus on the role and experiences of women in the domestic sphere. Ena Jansen's (2016) book *Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature* considers how urban domestic workers have been represented in South African literature. Although the book provides a synopsis of the representation of the experiences of domestic workers through text, it does not consider their everyday lived experiences around mobility and coping.

Another major theme prominent in the literature around domestic work is the issue of labour relations and exploitation in the post-apartheid era (Ally, 2010; King, 2007). For example, Shireen Ally's (2010) book *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State* provides a good overview of paid domestic work and its political implications in post-apartheid South Africa. Ally (2010) demonstrates how the shift from informal to formal labour relations in the post-apartheid period has both positive and negative consequences for domestic workers. In addition, King's (2007) work shows how the maternalistic employment relationship between employers and domestic workers increases opportunities for dependency, control, and

exploitation. More recently, Du Toit's (2020; 2021) research considered the growing trend of outsourcing and domestic housecleaning companies. His analysis shows that labour legislation is a key deciding factor when choosing to make use of a company as opposed to employing domestic workers privately. In addition, Hunt and Machingura (2016), Vallas and Schor (2020), and Sibiya and du Toit (2022) also revealed how the gig economy undermines proper working conditions for domestic workers who supply cleaning on demand for middle-class households. What these studies point to is that outsourcing or the gig economy does not improve the working conditions for domestic workers and that the domestic work sector remains characterised by exploitation, poor pay, and inequality.

Regarding research that deals with issues of mobility in domestic work, most scholarly work tends to focus on cross-border migration patterns (see, for example, Jinnah, 2020; Griffin, 2011; Momsen, 2003; Makina, 2013). These studies consider the movement of mostly immigrant women to South Africa from neighbouring African countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi and the various push and pull factors that influence their decision to move to South Africa. While these studies provide a good overview of migration patterns of domestic workers, the long-distance migration trend is not relevant to this study as all the participants of this study have lived nearby the coastal town for their entire life. What is unclear in these studies is the experience of moving to and from work and how domestic workers experience movement at work. This article takes a micro-level approach by considering mobility as it relates to moving between home and work and the implications of movement at work. This approach to understanding the notion of mobility for domestic workers contributes to the existing literature on domestic work in South Africa but extends the conceptualisation of movement beyond migration patterns and practices for labour.

**The setting and methodology of the study**

One needs to contextualise the experiences of the participants of this study in relation to the spatial and geographic location of the town. The town, with approximately fifty white permanent households, is situated in the Southwestern District of South Africa and is mainly a holiday destination for white households. Holidaymakers usually flock to the town

during the summer holidays and this is usually the period that domestic workers of this study are in most demand by families.

The town is situated 40km from the nearest urban area and there are minimal industrial or commercial operations in the vicinity of the town. Several farms surround the coastal town and all the participants of this study lived on farmlands near town. These farms are mostly used for sheep and cattle farming. Some, but not all, of the participants had worked or have family members who worked on the farms where they live. Most women have an informal rental arrangement with farmers in the area. Their houses are simple structures, sometimes made of wood, and lavatories are situated outside the house. Not all households have access to water and are reliant on the municipality to deliver water on a regular basis. The farm area is on the outskirts of the town and many of the women live five to ten kilometres from the town where they work. There are also no public transport options in the vicinity of the town and domestic workers need to walk to their employers' homes.

All the women speak Afrikaans as their main language and self-identify as Coloured. Adhikari (2009) makes the important point that 'part of human social existence is that people self-reflectively create, maintain and revise their perceptions of who they are, and how and why they espouse the values and identities they do, and that social identities are by their very nature contested and unstable.' The

> 66 This article takes a micro-level approach by considering mobility as it relates to moving between home and work and the implications of movement at work. This approach to understanding the notion of mobility for domestic workers contributes to the existing literature on domestic work in South Africa but extends the conceptualisation of movement beyond migration patterns and practices for labour. 99

conceptualisation of the term 'Coloured' in this paper is informed by understanding race as a contestable and social construction.

This spatial segregation is reminiscent of South Africa's political past where most of the Coloured and Black African population lived on the outskirts of urban areas and their movement to and from the urban areas was monitored by the pass system. Although the system of apartheid formally ended in 1994, the legacy of apartheid's structural inequalities – especially as it relates to housing and spatial segregation – is still prevalent. Hamann and Ballard (2021) argue that it is not possible to separate social and spatial inequalities from each other or from racial segregation in the South African context. This is relevant if one considers the spatial and racial segregation evident in the living and working patterns of the town. The participants of this study know each other and come from a tight-knit community where there are generations of interconnectedness through family ties and living arrangements. There is still a distinct sense of separation, both spatially and culturally, between the women who live on the outskirts of the town and the inhabitants of the town. The race and class divides are evident, as the women seldom make use of the beach facilities of the 'White' families and sometimes feel 'unwelcome' in institutions such as the church. This experience is reminiscent of a historical past that often saw Coloured women pushed to the margins of society.

Concerning the methodology, this paper took a qualitative approach to study the lived experiences of domestic workers in a coastal town in South Africa. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with women over a three-month period. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to select participants who had worked in the domestic sector of the town for at least two years and who agreed to partake in the study. All the participants were over the age of eighteen years. By means of thematic analysis, the themes that emerged from the data related to issues of mobility, coping mechanisms, and social support.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the author's institutional affiliation. Participants voluntarily participated in the study and all participants were ensured confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants. In addition, the location and name of the town will remain undisclosed to further protect the identity of the participants. Below is an overview of the profile of the participants of this study.

**Table 1: Participants' Profiles**

| Pseudonym | Age | Years of experience as a domestic worker |
|---|---|---|
| Mimmi | 48 | 25 |
| Gill | 24 | 2 |
| Dana | 41 | 21 |
| Maria | 50 | 31 |
| Shelly | 35 | 12 |
| Niena | 43 | 10 |
| Katie | 56 | 30 |
| Selma | 32 | 6 |
| Tia | 53 | 10 |
| Jane | 55 | 15 |

**Mobility and immobility**

All participants of this study live on the outskirts of the town and get to work by foot or the occasional transport opportunity with farmers in the area. Most of the time they leave their homes in the early hours of the morning and walk to work. The walk takes them along a dirt road to join the tarred road that leads to town. The five- to ten-kilometre commute forms part of their working routine but also contributes to their physical exhaustion after a long day of physical labour. Mimmi is 48 years old and has done domestic work in the town for several households. She is reliant on work opportunities in town to sustain herself and her three children. Mimmi is estranged from her husband and she is the sole breadwinner for her family. Mimmi explained how she finds the commute to work in the following way:

> My legs take me to work and back. I am reliant on them to get me to work come sunshine and rain.

It is especially difficult to get to work on rainy days as you get to work drenched and tired. Our type of work is also very physical. You need to move furniture, wash windows, sweep and mop. I do take tea breaks but can feel if I work in five houses per week that my body takes the strain. I need to be mobile to do my work but moving to and from work and the nature of the type of work I do is very demanding on my body (Mimmi, 48 years old).

Mobility for Mimmi is, therefore, twofold. On the one hand, she is moving to work by walking, and on the other hand, she is moving at work to do the chores set out for her. Although the nature of the movement varies in that when she walks, it is to get to a destination and when she is at work, it is to complete a task, both forms of movement create physical exertion that contributes to her experience of work.

Not all participants, however, felt that walking to work was detrimental to their well-being or work ethic. It seems that there are social benefits of walking to work. Shelly is a 35-year-old mother of two and explained that the commute to work is an opportunity for her to catch up on news from her friends. The fact that she walks may have physical consequences, but the time spent walking also has social value. Shelly elaborated:

> Yes, I walk to work, but we have become used to this. If we want to go anywhere, we walk. We do not Uber, or Taxi or use the bus as the people do in the big towns. We walk! God gave us legs to walk. When we walk to work, we often have time to catch up on what is happening in each other's lives and gossip. You know small towns love a bit of gossip and walking to work gives us the time to do this (Shelly, 35 years old).

Although the walk to work may have physical consequences there are clearly intangible benefits of walking to work together. One of these is the opportunity afforded to gossip. Besnier (2009) argues that gossip enables people to make sense of what surrounds them. According to Besnier (2009), 'Gossip enables us to understand "politics from below", particularly from the perspective of those whose voice is rarely heard in public or from the perspective of those that are deemed "not to matter"'. A micro-analysis of the meaning of gossip is not part of the scope of this paper, but one can argue that many women who are part of this study are marginalised in society in different forms: as women working in a patriarchal society, as Coloured women who have historically been excluded from the structures of society as the result of apartheid, and finally as workers in the domestic work sector where exploitation is often the norm. The intersectional nature of oppression which is framed by class, race, and gender is particularly apparent in the world of domestic work (Cock, 1980). Gossip for these women could be one way in which they raise their frustrations, and the walk to work affords them this opportunity.

The fact that many participants walk long distances to and from work also affects the quality of work some participants felt they could master. Gill, one of the younger participants aged 24, explained that she often decides to start with the work that is more physically demanding (such as washing windows and mopping) first to ensure she has enough energy to complete the remaining tasks. She explained:

> Getting to work on foot does influence how well I can do my work. I make a decision to start first with the work that I know is exhausting. I will wash the windows first and move on to cleaning the kitchen and sweeping. This works for me as it leaves me with enough energy to do a good job, but also not feel totally exhausted by the end of the day (Gill, 24 years old).

It seems that the movement and mobility of the participants are also monitored once they get to work. The nature of their work requires that they move into the private spaces of houses – that of bedrooms and bathrooms. Many participants explained that during peak holiday times they are required to be at work and move around at work during the time that the inhabitants of the house are at the beach or going to town. Dana (41) explained how her movement is managed in the following way:

> When I work during the holidays I often need to find out when would be the best time for me to be in the house. Holidaymakers do not want me *under their feet* to clean. Sometimes I feel I am invading their privacy if I am sweeping up sand from the beach whilst they are having breakfast. My movement at work is therefore determined by

> " Several scholars have noted that the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker is often imbued with contradictory and hidden meanings. These hidden meanings relate to servitude, vulnerability, and exploitation in the workplace. Grossman (2004) makes the salient point that domestic workers are often 'silenced' not through verbal communication, but through hidden meanings. "

who is in the house. I work better when I am alone in the house as I can move where I want without feeling I am in the way (Dana, 41 years old).

This movement of the participants at work is, therefore, dependent on the movement of the holidaymakers. This point speaks to the limited agency participants have in firstly decision-making on the mode of travel to use to get to work and secondly having the freedom to move around freely when at work. Several scholars (Cock, 1980; King, 2007; Grossman, 2004; Du Toit, 2020) have noted that the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker is often imbued with contradictory and hidden meanings. These hidden meanings relate to servitude, vulnerability, and exploitation in the workplace. Grossman (2004) makes the salient point that domestic workers are often 'silenced' not through verbal communication, but through hidden meanings. In this case, the participants are silenced by the control of their mobility by the employees in terms of when an opportune time is to work. This impedes their movement at work but also speaks to the power relationship between employer and domestic worker.

Cock's (2001) article on 'invisible work' shows how the work that women do, especially in the domestic sphere, is often devalued as there is sometimes no or very little payment associated with chores. In a capitalist society, work that is valued has a high monetary return. Invisible labour is deemed as work that is done but goes unnoticed or is just expected to be completed. One could argue that the movement of the participants of this study (in terms of when an opportune time is to clean the house) reinforces the idea of invisibility. They need to be physically invisible, and domestic work itself is deemed invisible as it is associated with minimal payment. It seems that work needs to get done in an almost ephemeral or invisible manner when the occupants of the house are not present. Jane reiterated this point:

> We are needed but we are not allowed to be seen. When I clean a house and the people are in the house I need to move around as if I was not there. If I clean the house when people are not in the house and they return it is as if a magical fairy mopped, cleaned and washed the dishes. I get irritated when they come back from the beach and walk into the house that I have just mopped with their sandy feet. It is as if they cannot see that it has just been cleaned. I feel sometimes my work goes unnoticed, but it is all we have (Jane, 55 years old).

Yarmarkov (2016) has shown how the notion of 'invisibility' influences domestic workers' perception of their self-identity. Blumberg (2016) makes the salient point that different social spaces perpetuate the feeling of being invisible and reinforce ideas around surveillance for domestic workers. One could argue that Jane's experience of not being seen is twofold as she feels that both the work she has done, like mopping up sand, and her movement around the house, are rendered invisible. This leads to a feeling of frustration and feeling that the work goes unnoticed. This has significance for her sense of self and the value she adds to the world of work.

Another theme that emerged related to domestic work was that of immobility. Domestic work is reliant on a body that is able to do work of a physical nature. The participants of this study, therefore, need to be in good physical health and uninjured to perform their work. The issue of immobility because of health or injury was a prominent theme that emanated from the analysis. Maria is 50 years old, and she has been employed by one of the permanent residents of the town for over 30 years. She explained that she is concerned with her ailing health and finds it difficult

to walk to work and be physically active at work. The relationship she has built up with her employer over the years has seen her being fetched by car from her home, but it was clear that Maria is aware that her immobility at work (due to health reasons) will have a detrimental effect on her ability to maintain a stable income. Maria elaborated:

> I have been working for 30 years and have realised that my body becomes more tired the older I get. I have health challenges, and this influences how fast and effectively I can work. I use to only go in to work two days a week and could get it all done, but now I need to go in four times a week to do the same work. I am getting slower and my movement at work is not what it used to be. I worry about this because if I can't move, I can't make money to support myself and my family (Maria, 50 years old).

Clearly, for Maria, her physical health is directly linked to her ability to do her work effectively. The issue of health and injury on duty influences the ability of the participants of this study to maintain an income. A concerning fact is that many domestic workers in South Africa do not have written contracts with their employers (Du Toit, 2020). Although there has been an emphasis on regulating the rights of domestic work through The Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 (which stipulated hours of work, leave and rest periods, and mandatory obligations on the part of the employer) and the Sectoral Determination 7 (SD7), the domestic work sector is largely still unregulated. The SD7 aims to control and implement minimum standards of employment for paid domestic workers. However, none of the participants of this study had an employment contract with their employees or an agreed pension plan. This implies that domestic workers in this study are disposed to the possibility of employer control and exploitation.

In this regard, Blackett (2011) makes the important point that 'the absence of meaningfully enforced labour legislation implies that domestic workers remain dependent on any particular individual employer's sense of fairness rather than a commonly established legal norm valuing the worker's societal contributions and her inherent human dignity.' This raises questions around how injury on duty is dealt with and how 'fairness' of the employer influences the

ability to continue with work. It also draws attention to the lack of union representation or collective agency for domestic workers in rural areas.

Niena, a 43-year-old mother of two, had the unfortunate incident of hurting the ligament in her right foot whilst cleaning one of the houses in the town. She explained how she was stepping off from a step ladder and twisted her foot sideways. This injury incapacitated her movement and her employer assisted in covering the medical costs to deal with the injury. Niena was, however, unable to work for three months over the very busy holiday season – a period that she relies on to ensure she secures an income for the rest of the year. She explained her frustration with being immobile during this period:

> Hurting my foot was the most frustrating experience. I could not work as I was on crutches. This came at a time when I had secured work at three houses over the December holidays. I was in tears, as I needed that income to pay my children's school fees and pay the debt that I had at a clothing store. I had to work but could not work because I could not move. Although my employer helped with covering the fees to deal with my injury, the fact that I could not do work was very stressful. Sure, I got time to rest, but I could not make money (Niena, 43 years old).

Evidently being immobile in the domestic work sector has detrimental consequences on the ability to secure an income. Niena's immobility directly affected her financial status at home and added to the personal frustration she experienced by not being able to sustain her family. Despite the issues of immobility, domestic workers showed various coping strategies in difficult times.

**Coping strategies and social capital**

The participants interviewed for this study knew each other and coped during times of financial distress by relying on each other. They were instrumental in providing information to one another on when and where work is available. One of the ways in which they cope during times of financial difficulty is to share resources. The theme of sharing food amongst family members was prominent. Katie – a 65-year-old

mother of four – explained that she is often gifted left-over food by her employer. She elaborated:

> During the holidays there is excess food in many of the houses where I work. The madam then often tells me I can take the food home. Sometimes it is too much for us to consume and I share it with my family, some of whom also work as domestics in the town. Then we eat like Kings! We do not often buy meat because it is expensive, but in December we are grateful for the holidaymakers who braai [barbeque] and then give us what is left (Katie, 65 years old).

In this regard, Archer (2011: 67) argues that 'symbolic codes of racial paternalism between domestic employers and employees are exposed through food'. Food represents forms of soft power and control and communication regarding food mostly comes from the employers' perspective (Archer, 2011). In this study, an in-depth analysis of the dynamic of food was not undertaken, but many participants did note that their relationship with their employers was often laced with the exchange of food. Although sharing of resources such as food and sometimes borrowing money between these women was evident, most women were possessive over the houses they worked at. They are not keen to share their working space as they had developed a relationship with their employer, and when work was scarce, the underwritten rule of respecting each other's turf became apparent. Selma elaborated on this point:

> Yes, we help each other to survive, but we are also very dependent on work. If I work for Mrs X and I hear that one of the other domestic ladies cleaned for her behind my back, I would be furious! We have an unwritten rule that you do not clean another person's yard. At times it is respected, but sometimes not. Then you see big arguments among us. At the end of the day, we all need to put food on the table, but also need to respect each other's working arrangements and relationships (Selma, 32 years old).

Selma's story implies that there is tension between helping each other to cope and looking after one's own best interest. This tension does not, however, seem to adversely influence relationships that span over generations. What is, however, clear is that the social networks and social capital that is built up over generations between the participants of this study have many benefits. Research shows that access to information about job opportunities depends on social structures and the social networks to which individuals belong (Burns et al., 2010; Vanyoro, 2019). Social Capital is a useful conceptual approach to explain the interconnectedness between the participants of this study. Seippel (2006) shows how capital represents some form of future benefit. Social networks are forged with future benefits in mind. Put differently, social capital is about social connections and relationships. It is a way of defining the intangible resources of the community, shared values, and trust upon which we draw in daily life (Field, 2008).

The intangible resources of this group of women relate to them communicating on what job opportunities are available and looking out for each other's needs. They have built up shared values of what the nature of their work means and there is an element of trust that they will not impinge on each other's work territory. These social networks are important as they create a social bond that emanated in the future benefit of some sense of job security. These strong networks have tangible benefits in terms of arranging transport/job opportunities and sharing food, and intangible benefits in terms of providing each other with social and emotional support. Forsyth (2014: 117) identifies five forms of social support. One of these is what he terms informational support, which is when guidance or advice is provided in a group. Tia elaborated on how information is shared to assist one another:

> We all know each other because we have grown up together. Our families are intertwined, and we are all in the same circumstances. The other day I had to get to a doctor urgently and X [one of the other participants] got up at 2 am to take me to the hospital in her husband's car. We help each other and because we are on the outskirts of town, we need each other to survive. I also help X if her daughter needs money for school. We survive because of each other (Tia, 53 years old).

Tia's sentiments indicate that there seems to be interdependence between the women. One could argue that this dependence is a coping strategy in a microeconomic environment where very few job

opportunities exist. This was not only the case for Tia but for many women in this study.

## Conclusion

This study has considered the notion of mobility and consequences of immobility in the world of domestic work for a group of women in a coastal town in the Southwestern District of South Africa. The analysis shows that these women's movements are multifaceted as they are dependent on movement/walking to get to work, but once at work, their movement is also monitored. I have shown how being immobile at work has detrimental consequences on their ability to secure work. The informal contractual agreement with their employers is a concern as they are at risk of not being supported if work should cease because of injury or illness. In addition to this, the paper has shown that social networks and support are crucial for their livelihood. Through strong bonding social capital, they can secure work opportunities and ensure a sustained livelihood. Whilst domestic work is the largest single sector in which women are employed in South Africa, there is still 'invisibility' to their labour in a very competitive job market. Formal contracts are necessary to minimise exploitation and more research on the lived experience of domestic workers in rural settings is needed to get a holistic understanding of their experiences in the world of work.

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