

In Conversation with Professor Jacklyn Cock,
Author of *Maids and Madams*

maids & madams



Domestic Workers under Apartheid

Revised and updated by the author

Jacklyn Cock



David du Toit: *Your book, *Maids and Madams*, is one of the seminal texts in domestic work literature in South Africa. What inspired you to write about domestic work during the apartheid era?*

Jacklyn Cock: As a feminist, I was very interested in this particular space where there's more interaction between white and black women than in any other space I could see. And it was a highly exploitative relationship. It still is. Obviously, things have improved, especially a trend away from full-time employment. But there are still many domestic workers who suffer from low wages, long working hours, demeaning treatment, insecurity, and all the problems. It's very much a colonial institution, and I was angry about it. Both as a feminist and as a socialist. I mean, domestic work was a mirror of the obscene inequality in our society, and it still is. So, I wanted to expose that. That was my intention.

David du Toit: *What was the reaction to the book at the time?*

Jacklyn Cock: The book was published in 1980, and the reaction to the book was strange. I remember one evening I was sitting at the dinner table having supper with friends when there was a crash of broken glass as three sticks of dynamite were thrown through a window from the street. The room filled with smoke, and we called the fire brigade who evacuated the whole street. They told us that the dynamite was meant to explode, but the fuse had caught in heavy-lined curtains.

What puzzled me at the time was why the book had angered people so much that they were prepared to do something so drastic. I think it was seen as an invasion of the privacy of the household, what Marx calls the hidden abode of reproduction. I think it was seen somehow as dangerous because of this violation of privacy. And to me, it was well, very frightening at the time. I think the book was exposing the private household as a site of violence, as well as intimacy and particularly the abuse of women. But of course, there are many kinds of violence and a lot of the violence that domestic workers are exposed to on a daily basis is existential as well as material.

David du Toit: *The book was clearly necessary and obviously a very brave thing to do. Now I would like to*

ask about the fieldwork experience of doing research about domestic work in the era of apartheid. Can you talk me through the fieldwork experience, and the methodology of doing research for this book? Is there anything you would do differently now?

Jacklyn Cock: Right. I now think that the methodology was somewhat crude. I would've liked to have given more acknowledgment to my fieldworker, who was Mary Korta. In retrospect, I would've liked *Maids and Madams* to have been co-authored with Mary. Also, the methodology relied on individual interviews, which is a form of extractive research because it is simply extracting information without empowering the participants in any way. And I now believe very strongly that we need to shift our research methods and make sure that the research process in itself, is empowering. And I think it can be if you believe in the co-production of knowledge and emphasise dialogic learning, lived experience, and reciprocity. And so, when I started doing research on mining-affected communities with two colleagues, we developed what we called exchange workshops, and our aim was to empower community members with the information, and confidence to organise, formulate demands and participate in the wider struggle for social and environmental justice. We divided the community members into small groups and posed two questions: what is it like living in a mining-affected community and what would you most like to change? We learned a great deal from the participants. These exchange workshops involved exchanging two kinds of knowledge. The first was direct experiential knowledge expressed by community members. And then, the second part, was us researchers answering questions about ourselves and sharing information about other environmental justice struggles, policy developments, and the different understandings of a just transition. I think domestic workers could benefit from the same kind of research approach. It is empowering in the sense of provoking collective reflection on people's experiences in their everyday lives and the realisation that what is often experienced as individual problems are really social in their causes and consequences. There are lots of things I would do differently now. The research would be both theoretically and methodologically more sophisticated. I would try to aim for an empowering process rather than simply an extractive approach.

David du Toit: *Well, thank you. That is certainly something to think about. In the book, you speak about the ultra-exploitation of domestic workers, which became sort of a concept used by other scholars in domestic work too. Do you think that domestic workers are still ultra-exploited by their employers and by society as a whole? What do you think can be done to change this?*

Jacklyn Cock: I think that there is much more collective organising now than there was in 1980, and there's been some very good research, especially by Shireen Ally. Domestic workers could play a political role. They reflect the obscene inequality in South Africa. We live in a very fragmented society. The rich and the poor live in different worlds that are totally disconnected. But domestic workers move between these two worlds daily. There's no other occupational category that does that. I think that gives them a special insight and power; that linkage, that movement between these two worlds, that could be a significant political force for transformative change. I think that we do have to make our research process empowering. And I do think that we have to all get help to promote solidarity among people who are oppressed. I mean, I think, you know, wages have improved, but there is still a lot of exploitation. And I believe that it's a sort of travesty of feminism because I know that many successful so-called professional

women are only able to achieve that success because they employ domestic workers who do all the work of social reproduction, and the importance of domestic workers' identity is still insufficiently appreciated, and there's no controversy about their place in society. Is it demeaning to have someone else cook your food and wash your clothes? Although there's an increase in feminism, which could implant solidarity among women in the case of the Maids-Madams relationship, we've got an exploitative relationship, which is a challenge to any simplistic feminist notion of solidarity. I want to make the point that in moving between the two worlds of the rich and the poor, domestic workers are at the front line of inequality, which I do see as our key problem. They constitute a linkage between these very separate worlds of wealth and poverty in that they are exposed at a daily level. I mean, look at the obscene consumption and waste of wealthy households. And I think that makes domestic workers quite a special category and a category that could be a transformative change. Also, there is a new wave of feminism, which is great. But to my understanding, it's not always sufficiently grounded in material conditions. In other words, it's not always sufficiently attentive to class relations. And I think that in the book where I describe domestic service as the largest institution that combines oppression by gender, race, and class I still would emphasise class. Otherwise, there's a dangerous flattening of all forms of oppression. I know it's a very popular notion, the notion of intersectionality, but I think it's very dangerous. But that's not to say that intersectionality doesn't have value. It does, especially in recognising the diversity and showing how social institutions and social identities are multiple and how oppression overlaps. And it also forces white feminism to acknowledge race and class privileges. And the benefits derived from living in white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal capitalism, but intersectional analysis asserts that all forms of oppression are equivalent. Whereas Marxist feminism gives special relevance to class in a capitalist society, but not in a reductionist way. It's just saying class has special relevance. And, of course, it's a relational concept, and it involves very different material conditions of life. So domestic workers, I think, are again in a very powerful position in asserting the importance of material conditions and perhaps questioning the sort of current conspicuous consumption and affluence. I think that, from my perspective, women's oppression

“ I’m saying they need to use a methodology that is empowering or not extractive. And that’s quite a big shift because people, especially in sociology, do tend to think that research involves individual interviews. And I’m saying that those do not benefit domestic workers. They do not empower the people they interview. ”

has to challenge capitalism and, without doing so, will fail. And so, I think in this linkage role, moving between the worlds of wealth and poverty, domestic workers could have a powerful voice but they're not a powerful voice at present. And I think there needs to be a process of deeper organising and also an emphasis on new political imaginaries, not just improved social conditions within a capitalist order. But arguing for something completely different, what I would call an ecofeminist socialist society. That would imply transformative feminism, which demands not just equality with men within the existing order or ending gender-based violence, but a kind of solidarity among women to replace the current exploitation of women. By exploiting other women, and a new kind of society based on meeting human needs rather than profits, based on everyone living well, rather than some living better. So, I think the point I really want to make is that inequality is the root of the current social crisis in South Africa. And I think the African women employed as domestic workers are not only a dramatic illustration of that inequality but in a unique position to challenge it.

David du Toit: *Do you think we can change as a society, change the view and the value of domestic work? Or do you think it is, um, maybe something that is going to take a very long time, sort of a pipe dream?*

Jacklyn Cock: Well, you know, David, I mean, you know, apartheid changed much more quickly than a lot of us thought it would. And I mean, domestic service is such a, it's a deep colonial institution, and the decolonisation movement is really, really growing. I do see change as inevitable. Climate change is forcing us to rethink how we live and how we produce, and how we consume. We must reduce carbon emissions globally...otherwise, the future is catastrophic for everybody. That's how I see it. So, I think that slowly, slowly, people are accepting that change is necessary. But I think that there are many ways in which the wealthy can sort of buyout of the inconvenience of change. I mean, if you look at the energy crisis, rich people are buying generators and inverters. And the poor people are protesting about the lack of energy. It's not just load-shedding, the same applies to water and a whole lot of other services. So, I think it's this unevenness or fragmentation in our society where I'm positioning domestic workers as having a special

potential, a much stronger voice, through their insights and their understandings from their daily experiences.

David du Toit: *Yeah. There are a lot of scholars, young scholars, and students who are, you know, doing research on domestic work. And that is great to see. Do you have any advice for them in terms of researching this vulnerable sector?*

Jacklyn Cock: Well, yes. I'm saying they need to use a methodology that is empowering or not extractive. And that's quite a big shift because people, especially in sociology, do tend to think that research involves individual interviews. And I'm saying that those do not benefit domestic workers. They do not empower the people they interview. There has to be something that's more collaborative that is empowering and that's why I think the exchange workshops have a lot of potential. But the trouble is they're expensive. They need to be organised by, you know, the affected group and there needs to be reciprocity. I think my advice to researchers is to ask themselves: Whose interests am I serving? That's the question they need to ask themselves. And often it is their own interests in terms of their own academic careers. And I think the academic world is changing and is becoming much more individualist and less cooperative and collaborative than in the past, or that's my impression. There's a lot of pressure on young people now to publish. And that can often detract from a commitment to teaching, and research becomes a means to individual advancement rather than a social contribution to society. I think that, um, the question is how we teach and do research. Well, I believe in field trips a lot. I mean, you know, not big expensive ones, but certainly local trips because of these two separate worlds of the wealthy and the poor. Not just trips to the townships, but maybe trips to Hyde Park and some of the very wealthy areas and, I could think of all kinds of research projects, with some of the fancy restaurants and what people spend in an evening, is easily the cost of a worker's average salary in a month. I think our teaching and research should address this fragmentation and inequality at the centre. So that one tries to install a social consciousness, a political commitment, and an understanding of how people are living and how they're struggling. Research should be empowering through exchange workshops because it's exchanging information and I think, it is teaching

humility and teaching commitment and trying to break with the terrible materialism and careerism, which is what we are struggling with in the current context. My advice is maybe to follow a domestic worker for a day, or to visit them in their homes, to get an emotional understanding, as well as an intellectual commitment. I think that could be helpful because this could promote new political imaginaries, new ways of organising society, alternative social

arrangements for social reproduction, and learning to empathise with domestic workers.

David du Toit: *Well, thank you. It was a great honour talking to you. Thank you for your reflections and insight and you gave us lots to think about.*

Jacklyn Cock: Thanks, David. Good talking to you too.