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# DOMESTIC WORKERS AND CAREER WOMEN: THE DILEMMA OF FAMILY STABILITY.

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## Abstract

*Sociological research on paid domestic work has increased substantially in recent years. Domestic employment has also continued to be common in developing countries and some of today's most advanced societies are witnessing a resurgence rather than a decline in such employment. In spite of several policies on child right and widespread prohibition of child slavery by various nations to discourage the perpetuation of the illegal acts, domestic employment still thrives in various societies. While the girl child account for the greater proportion of domestic workers globally, career women are found to be massively involved in the employment of domestic workers in order to sustain their own participation in paid employment. It is expedient to state that the issue of domestic work is a modern phenomenon. In a traditional family setting, the woman ran the home in terms of domestic chores and child care but in contemporary times due to job mobility and the changing economy as ushered in by industrialization, the woman has also become a partaker in breadwinning thereby necessitating the need for the employment of domestic worker. (It will not be out of place to state that 'the domestic worker is a necessary evil' because of the various activities they engage in.) This paper sets out therefore to answer the following questions: who benefits in the long run? What is the future of the domestic worker in the home? Are career women not guilty of excess delegation of their duties? What danger does this pose for the offspring in the home and the larger society? And what is the way out of this dilemma.*

**Keywords:** *Domestic worker, Career women, Employment, Family stability.*

## Introduction

In virtually all homes in modern Nigerian societies where the demands of employment grossly affect the time spent at home by the career woman, domestic workers who are also popularly known as 'House helps', 'maids', or 'domestics' have come in recent times to permeate the family households. This is a recent phenomenon that calls for serious consideration particularly with regard to family stability along the dimension of the performance of women and their career. The effect of domestic workers on family relationship will no doubt create an avenue for

considering the situation as a dilemma being faced by the average career centered household.

### **The Family Past and Present**

Prior to the European domination of Africa, the family was not an unchanging unit of loyalty, protection, and production dwelling in a timeless, static space that had never undergone radical social change (White,1977)

One of the most difficult challenges in the study of the family is developing a definition of the concept that is relevant to all family forms. During the last few decades, a revived interest in the question of the universality of family has occurred. There are as many definitions of family as there are texts on the sociology of the family.

Essentially, the family is the basic unit of life. It is the fundamental unit of society often referred to as the foundation and the building block of any society. Cherlin (1996) defines a family as a set of people related by blood, marriage or some other agreed upon relationship, or adoption who shares the primary responsibility of reproduction and caring for members of the society. The family is a central institution in all human societies, although it may take different forms.

Otite and Ogionwo (2001) defines the family as a vital unit in social organization and social control as well as an important institution in the process of socialization

For many years, family scholars have documented the significance of the family as a major institution for carrying out essential functions for individuals and societies: reproductive, physical sustenance, economic maintenance, socialization, nurturance, and meeting sexual and other social emotional needs Bulbolz (2001). The family has remained the child's first window with the outside world. It is a social unit to which a child is born and where he acquires the rudiments and norms of the society.

Ola-Aluko (2002) acknowledges that the family is central to the existence of any society. It is because of this strategic role that the family plays that sociologists and psychologists have described it as the first port of call for the child. It is in the family that a child is socialized into the culture of the society. Haralambos and Heald (1980:325) states it is difficult to imagine how human society could function without it

The traditional family is characterized by a father-headed households and mothers who stayed at home to raise their children. The extended large family size was predominant, polygamy – the marriage of one man to several women was the norm. During this dispensation, anthropologists, Mead notes 'information on mother-infant attachment would have been particularly important to families at this time. Burgess (1926) discovers a sudden perception of the tremendous difference between the modern family and the family of the past. He adds, "the modern phenomenon is the small family of father, mother, and children emancipated from the control of the wider kinship group of grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins". In most urbanized areas, there are no spare bedrooms in most homes as a convenient defense against invading relatives.



Indeed, the family in modern life is undergoing changes and modifications which can

hardly be appreciated or understood except in the perspectives of the past. Furthermore, Burgess (1926) defines the family as a "unity of interacting persons". This assertion is relevant in assessing the changing values of most families in recent time for certain obvious reasons. For the career woman, who passionately drives the mission of her organization, how much of her time is invested in her immediate family? Is she not the ever busy career woman with little or no time devoted to meeting the needs of her spouse and children? As a result, the domestic worker automatically steps into the career woman's shoes in the home front.

### **Family Values and Domestic Employment**

The recent and common dimension of domestic worker's employment in recent times have been attributed to several factors particularly, the changing family values necessitated by industrialization, modernity, increasing participation of women in the labour force and the small nuclear family size which is fast replacing the traditional extended family. While the case with the treatment of slaves reveal helplessness and docility in the deplorable ways in which they were treated by their 'owners' (Simpson, 2004), present day domestic workers are usually very much involved in the negotiations related to their employment well before the commencement of the contract. Usually guided into such negotiations by their sponsors, upfront payment for the proposed service of the domestic worker is often demanded. There are cases of other expenses: transportation fees incurred by the sponsors who often claim the new arrival of the individual domestic servants. Clearly therefore, domestic workers invariably partake of the family's payroll while also enjoying other welfare provisions from the same source. They are also free to leave their employment at any time, although socio-economic conditions and laws relating to working in a foreign country may make that difficult.

### **Forms of Domestic Employment**

Domestic employment in contemporary times has usually taken three forms. The first is consisted within the category of workers who live-in with the employer family as full-time workers, sharing common residence with them and being paid monthly stipend as initially agreed at the time of employment. The second category is reflective of those domestic workers who work without pay but are remunerated in terms of other investments like formal or informal education, acquisition of apprenticeship skills depending on the terms of contract between the domestic workers or their sponsor and the employer. The third category is the casual workers who work at specified periods under agreed terms of working condition.

The supply of domestic workers on demand is fast becoming a lucrative business for some members of the society. The irony of the matter is that the same women who are supposed to champion the cause for its abolition are at the forefront in its perpetuation. It is amazing to know that today, they not only form cartels with far reaching branch networks all over but are also very well organized with formal structures put in place to transact their illegal business. In spite of concerted efforts

by various governments to eradicate domestic workers tagged in many quarters as 'slavery or child abuse', the business still thrives in many parts of the world.

The rising level of poverty and income inequality of many families have been adduced for the upsurge while career women have been tagged as 'culprits' who exploit these disadvantaged group via domestic employment in furtherance of their career aspirations.

Recent research suggests that it might be a society's level of income inequality rather than the level of modernization that determines the size of its paid domestic workforce (Milkman, Reese, and Roth., 1998).

Available data shows that the girl child or female usually under eighteen (18) years old account for a higher proportion of recruits into domestic employment. Other instances of male recruits as domestic workers exist but very minimal. In Nigeria and most countries (industrialized or less industrialized), career women who patronize or recruit domestic workers are fast increasing. Smaller family size no doubt has weakened the traditional role of the extended family thus, hiring of domestic worker remains a viable option if the woman is to cope with the demands of her career. This has made some scholars to describe the domestic worker as 'a necessary evil'. While the role of the domestic worker in child care, socialization and domestic work cannot be undermined, there are insinuations concerning the damages done to such families both at present and in the long run. For the woman, the decision to have domestic worker(s) is usually borne out of two motives: she either loses her respect and family or keeps her career or vice versa. This is one dilemma the career woman has to tackle in modern day society.

In 1897, a labour union official in Boston declared that "the demand for female labour is an insidious assault upon the home. It is the knife of the assassin, aimed at the family circle. (Degler,1981:396). Despite such fears, the labour participation of mothers globally has increased steadily during the twentieth century, culminating with a majority of mothers working for wages even when their children were young. There is no doubt, that female employment in paid work outside the home puts so much pressure on the career woman and the security of the family institution. In terms of monetary gains and financial independent, the involvement of women in paid employment outside the home has enhanced their social status in the society but the consequent neglect of traditional family responsibilities should be put on check for the survival of the family institution. Today, the domestic worker does virtually everything in home from washing, to caring for the children and cooking of meals for all family members including making the spouse bed.

The career woman is too busy with satisfying the dictates of her work to the neglect of her primary role as a wife and mother and consequently to the detriment of her family. If one may ask; are our career women not guilty of excess delegation of duties all in the name of modernization?

This trend has generated a large body of research on the consequences of maternal employment on children's well-being. Recent examples include (Anderson, Butcher and Levine 2002; Belsky and Eggebeen 1991; and Greenstein 1995.)

It is against this background that this paper examines domestic workers and career women: the dilemma of family stability in connection with domestic workers.



### **The Indispensability of the Domestic worker**

There are very few studies that discuss the role of paid domestic work alongside that of unpaid domestic work. Gregson and Lowe (1994) is one such exception and in their examination of the resurgence of paid domestic work in the UK, they found that couples' motives for employing cleaners (to substitute cleaning work) and nannies (to substitute child-care work) are quite different. They found that cleaners, who do typically time-consuming and unrewarding tasks, allow middle-class couples (especially the women) to spend much leisure time pursuing consumption-based activities and to avoid conflict stemming from how the work should be divided; nannies, on the other hand, allow dual-career households to continue functioning without compromising the ideal that children are best cared for in the home. Given that their study focused on dual-career families, it is taken for granted that the function of domestic workers is primarily to allow women to continue the pursuit of their careers. Gregson and Lowe (1994) adds that the function of paid domestic workers is that of 'letting men off the hook', which further reinforces not only the gendered nature of domestic work but, also the class division within women as a group. In large households, there can be a large number of domestic workers doing different jobs, often as part of an elaborate hierarchy. Domestic workers perform typical domestic chores such as cooking, ironing, washing, cleaning the house, shopping, taking the family dog for a walk, and taking care of children and elderly people with disabilities within the family.

Considering the nature of present society, it will not be out of place to state that the domestic worker is a necessary evil because of the activities that they engage in the day to day running of the home. Apart from studies that look at the causes of resurgence of paid domestic work (Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Milkman, Reese, and Roth., 1998), another area within the literature focuses on employer-employee relationships.

It is expedient to state that the issue of domestic worker is a modern phenomenon because in the traditional family setting, as earlier stated, the man is the sole breadwinner of the family. The women on their part ran the home in terms of child care and domestic chores. However, the nature of the economy and job mobility in contemporary time where women now assume the role of breadwinner has necessitated the need for domestic workers.

### **The Risks Involved**

Cases of adolescent female house helps indulgence in illicit sexual relationship with the head of the family (husband) of career woman abound in our societies today. Most husbands' infidelity and house helps abuse of privilege has resulted into many broken homes and consequent instability of the family as a social institution. The problem of excess delegation of duties by wives due to career aspirations to the neglect of their primary roles has no doubt contributed to the increasing trend of instability in most families in recent time. Other cases of sexual molestation abound, as the female children of the house are molested by the male domestic or outsiders ably aided by the domestic worker. On the other hand, cases abound of other adult

males of the house who sexually molest female domestic worker age difference not withstanding.

Health-wise, the family is open to risk particularly because, house helps do not usually undergo thorough medical examination to ascertain their health history and present health status as obtainable in formal organizations in the course of recruitment.

The acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic is undoubtedly a major health hazard globally, with profound impact on the individual, family and community levels. (Adepoju, 1994). Spread of HIV/AIDS and other contagious diseases to employers' immediate family members are common risks associated with the introduction of domestic workers in most families. The HIV/AIDS epidemic for instance is mostly spread by heterosexual relations. The pattern of infection is also at the generalized level since it is not only concentrated to risk groups but it affects all categories of the population (USAIDS/USAIDS, 1998). According to (Oluwadare, 2004), the scourge of HIV/AIDS is fuelled by social stigma and discrimination towards the virus and the infected. Some families have lost their precious children to HIV/AIDS through deliberate and careless infection by domestic workers.

At all time, the domestic worker always notes the faults of the employer. No matter the amount of love or assistance given to them, they are usually not satisfied as they transfer their aggression on innocent children of the house who they ought to tolerate and show some love.

### **The Benefits Involved**

The benefits involved in domestic employment are in two ways. First, for the employer who is relieved from cumbersome domestic responsibilities such as child care and domestic chores, which usually involve energy and time. The employer benefits tremendously in terms of leisure and work time demanded by paid employment outside the home.

The present day effect of career on the family life of women have revealed the unavoidable admittance of domestic workers into the family, they are a partaker of the family's purse especially for the live-in domestics, they not only benefit in monetary terms, but in terms of other investments such as skill acquisition or formal education as the case may be.

The widespread use of domestic worker by most families and their effects on women's participation in paid work are incomplete without referring to the rich literature on economics and sociology of work. (Chan, 2007).

### **Changing Family Values and Career Women**

Prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, women's employment in the public spheres was much less common than it is today. Given so, in an earlier era, even though the hiring of maids and domestics was much more than it is today, having domestic help in the household was rarely related to the wife's employment outcomes. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, important changes in society and in labour markets have taken place, which allows more women than ever to enter paid work. (Hakim, 2000)



There is nothing permanent except change. Although change is not new, its current speed is unique to this century. The family today is changing and the change is more diverse than ever as families are not only smaller, but more women are working outside the home. In less industrialized society as Nigeria, social and economic forces have altered the way most families live. Gone are the days when the woman sits at home to raise children in addition to carrying out domestic duties and the men are the breadwinners.

Times have indeed changed. Majority of married women with children of age below twelve (12) years now work outside the home for smaller or higher wages as the case may be. This can be explained in terms of changing family values and aspirations especially by the woman to pursue a career necessitated by dwindling economic situations which has made it practically impossible for families to survive on the man's income these days.

As the entry of women into the labour market and paid employment has soared, their overall employment rates have moved closer to those that were previously characteristic of men (Dex, 1999; Rubery; Smith; Fagan; and Grimshaw 1998).

In a comprehensive survey of women and men's attitudes towards the division of labour in the family in industrial societies, findings consistently point to the fact that financial need remains an important motivation for mothers to take up paid work, and that many still support a gendered division of labour where men are primary earners and women are secondary earners or homemakers (Hakim, 1988). The passive role of women in rewarding economic activities is gradually being eroded by the globalization ideology. Women are seen to take centre-stage in profitable ventures such as private businesses and formal career of all kinds such as banking, insurance, finance, academia, law, engineering and medicine. Today, there are more women than ever before in paid and self employment. While statistics abound to support the increasing contribution of women outside the home, some have taken over the role of the breadwinner exclusively reserved for the men in time past.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of widespread concern in changing the social status of women with the crusade for equal rights for women in England ushered in by Mary Wollstonecraft in her historic text "*A vindication of the rights of women*" published in 1792. The predominant skewed relationship between men and women in terms of education and other opportunities in favour of men was greatly challenged by this author who advocated for equity and social justice in all ramifications for all sexes. Relating the above to the changing family values in recent time, Onyeonoru (2005) notes that the awareness created by the earlier crusade for equality between the sexes was given impetus at the time by such agents of change as industrialization and urbanization occasioned by industrial revolution. The demand for jobs in factories and service organizations that accompanied industrialization in Europe afforded women the opportunity to move and participate in formal employment and other forms of paid labour outside the home in order to sustain their families. The foregoing was to lead to changes in the traditional



perception of the dominant role of the woman as housewife (Oakley 1982). The changes in perception and attitude brought modest improvements in education, training and skill acquisition of women in Europe and increase in their involvement in formal sector.

Essentially, career women referred to in this article as labor market privilege women who are differentiated from women in lower jobs because they are faring so much better in terms of jobs and career opportunities, wages and working conditions. Indeed, many fare so well that they can afford to employ wage poorer working-class women to clean their homes and care for their children, freeing them up to dedicate more time and energy to the labour market (Anderson, 2000; Gregson and Lowe, 1994).

### **Recommendations**

The task of this paper has been to examine domestic workers and the dilemma of family stability among career women in the society. The following are some recommendations;

There's need for the career woman to inculcate into the domestic worker self worth, enough of inhuman treatment, this disadvantaged group must be adequately rewarded and managed in order to minimize the inherent risks involved in such employment. Women have always been at the forefront of campaign against exploitation, they should not be found guilty of perpetuating acts of exploitation. The efforts of domestic works must commensurate with their remuneration. In other instances, mere compliments and appreciation of their contribution could also win their loyalty.

It is also vital and of utmost necessity to grant domestic workers a sense of belonging as this will discourage distrust, suspicion and evil practices often the resultant effect when sense of self belonging is missing.

Because domestic workers are useful in relieving career women to paid employment which improve their status to enviable positions in society, the domestic workers should reap the fruit of their labor. Adequate compensation of this group is essential to make them less vulnerable in the society. In addition to their monthly stipends or income, other areas of savings and investments for this group will no doubt give them a sense of belonging and commitment.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

An inquiry into domestic workers and career women the dilemma of family stability has no doubt revealed the various challenges posed by domestic employment necessitated by changing family values. However, there's need for empirical study for further research into these issues which directly impact on the family institution. As Burgess notes (1926) "the family in modern life is undergoing changes and modifications which can hardly be appreciated or understood except in the perspective of the past or by an opportunity for comparison with a contemporary organization of the large family in process of disintegration". In addition he adds that the family lives as long as interaction is taking place and only dies when it ceases.

An elaborate empirical research is pivotal to unveiling the dynamics and new knowledge in this aspect of family institution.

**Conclusion**

Women's involvement in paid employment has no doubt enhanced their economic security in the society unlike the traditional unpaid domestic work which usually is not reckoned with and assumed as women's natural roles and ways of contributing to society. However, economic empowerment of women is insufficient for attaining family stability. To a large extent, it has relieved career women of being a liability and outright burden to themselves, the society and mankind in general. Economic contributions and modernization notwithstanding, career women must be alive to their responsibility rather than expressing guilt over for instance leaving children at home but not home due to work demand. Mothers are expected to maintain significant emotional bonds with their children and spouse despite the distance.

The place of domestic workers as necessary evil in the modern family setting no doubt has both positive and negative consequences as revealed in this work. The benefits and strengths in this case should be harnessed to yield the much needed desired results. The sacred role of the family as a social institution must not be jeopardized for whatever reasons. Career women must live up to their expectation as mothers and wives by carrying out their God-given roles which if compromised will not only lead to misplaced Priorities and family values and consequent crack in the family but a lasting effect on the larger society.



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