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# Maid for Success: Locating Domestic Work in Senegal's Shifting Landscape of Gender, Labor, and Power

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Maid for Success  
Delegating Domestic Work in Senegal's Shifting Landscape of  
Gender, Labor, and Power



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Honors Thesis in Anthropology  
Advisor: Professor Anna Jacobsen  
Spring 2015

*Pour toutes les bonnes de Dakar.*

## **ABSTRACT**

Today Senegalese women are claiming new spaces within society. Among the middle and upper class more and more women are gaining access to education and entry into the formal economy. At the same time, women of poor and rural origin are also redefining the opportunities available to them, opting to migrate and pick up paid domestic work in the city where it is increasingly abandoned by urban women. This thesis examines a basic change in women's membership in Senegalese society through their participation in what has historically been deemed women's work - domestic labor. While in the past domestic work in Senegal has been assigned on a division of gender, today it is delegated not only on this basis, but also on a distinction of socioeconomic class. I argue that domestic work represents a relationship through which women of all sectors of society are negotiating and respatializing structures that have served to define the labor and space that belong to them. This is as much true for the woman that opts out of domestic work as it is for the migrant woman she employs, who seeks an alternative to the possibilities available to her on the rural scale by seeking wage labor in the city. The actions of both women thus come to reconfigure the urban landscape, rewriting the power structure on which it has been built and creating new forms of hierarchy between women that have otherwise shared subordinate identities. This ethnography consults the hidden transcripts of the household--a space over which women have presided throughout history--to observe how power is challenged and claimed within shared constraints.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My dear host family in Ouakam is inseparable from my care for this project. When it came to returning there was never a hesitation. Thank you for giving me a home, for showing me what it means to be a part of a Senegalese family, and for teaching me that a month is never enough time for a visit. À la prochaine.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Introduction

“In Wolof, there is an expression that when you go to the cobbler to have shoes made, the cobbler will look at you and know what type of shoes to make you,” Maimouna explained to me. “Well, you can say the same thing about a maid. Here a good maid knows the type of home to keep for her employer.” I sat chatting with my teacher and friend about what it means to pursue a career in Dakar as a modern-day Senegalese woman. Maimouna grew up in a middle class home in Senegal’s capital of Dakar. Her family’s background and resources afforded her a place among the 32.3% of Senegalese women that attend secondary school and 38.7% of adult Senegalese women that are literate (UNICEF 2013; UNESCO 2012). Today she works as a full-time language instructor and translator. There are many obvious ways in which Maimouna’s background and credentials distinguish her from other Senegalese women. While less noticeable, an equally salient indicator of her privilege is her relationship with domestic work. “When I was little, my mother taught me how to manage the house,” Maimouna went on. “She always told me that when I grew up I would need to work, but I would also need to supervise my maid. In order to supervise your maid, you must first know how to do housework.”

In Senegal, women represent 52% of the population, but perform 90% of the housework (2010 Human Rights Report: Senegal). This labor force establishes not only the basis of all activity within the home, but also a foundational subsidy for activity

beyond it. As emerging social and economic opportunities create new points of access within the public sphere and formal economy, women's absence from the private sphere over which they alone presided does not go unnoticed. "In the Senegalese family, it's the woman who must manage the household," Maimouna explained. "If I'm going to work, this is still my responsibility...If a woman works, she must pay another woman to replace her in the house."

This initial conversation that I shared with Maimouna highlights new terrain that women alone are forging and navigating. In Senegal, as with the rest of the world, change in the public sphere more often than not has come with change in the private. There is no one who understands this principle better than women. With the increase in Senegalese women taking up professional work comes an increase in the demand for what Maimouna calls "replacement women." As women like Maimouna make a space for themselves in the historically male-dominated formal economy, labor is shifting hands within the gendered realm of the household. In Dakar, this replacement takes the form of the maid—a city where about one in four women (24.9%) works as a domestic servant (République du Sénégal 2004).

The labor that supplies this increasing demand for domestic services is predominantly rural—young women who capitalize on expertise that they have developed through the customary motions of daily life. Similar to Maimouna, Oumou developed a relationship with domestic work from a young age. Unlike Maimouna, Oumou grew up in a poor family in rural Senegal. Her father worked in the fields and her mother, like most women in her community, managed the household. When she was young she left school so that she could help her mother in the household. While her



brothers finished secondary school, she came to specialize in the intricate preparation of *Ceebu Jën*, the principles of a clean home, and how to take care of the young children in her village. When she was eighteen she took the opportunity to move to Dakar where she knew that young women could get jobs in houses. Throughout her twenty years as a maid in the city, Oumou has come to assume the full-time position of a domestic of two houses: The first, the household of her employer, and the second, her own.

The changing of domestic hands in which both Maimouna and Oumou play active roles points to a larger reshaping of the domain that belongs to women in Senegal. This thesis posits a basic change in women's membership in Senegalese society through their participation in what has historically been deemed women's work. While in the past domestic work in Senegal has been assigned on a division of gender, today it is delegated not only on this basis, but also on a distinction of socioeconomic class. I argue that domestic work represents a relationship through which women of all sectors of society are negotiating and respatializing structures that have served to define the labor and space that belong to them. This is as much true for the woman that opts out of domestic work as it is for the migrant woman she employs, who seeks an alternative to the possibilities available to her on the rural scale by seeking wage labor in the city. The actions of both women thus come to reconfigure the urban landscape, rewriting the power structure on which it has been built and producing new forms of hierarchy between women who have previously shared subordinate identities. Within this larger system in which both women are disadvantaged, one woman's power prescribes another's subordination. As a result, distinction between both women's relative sources of status is central to their relationship. While the employer asserts her authority through the power that she wields

over the domestic worker, the domestic worker, too, asserts her own authority through her very participation within this system. The practices of both women serve to produce the larger, bilateral structure of dependence that upholds the vast and largely hidden system of domestic work.

There is much to be said for the promises of modernity and capital held by the phenomena of rapidly developing urban centers on the African continent (Ferguson 1999). The migrant domestic worker belongs to a larger population of labor-driven migration in Senegal that increasingly seeks the perceived opportunity of urban self-determination. It is this optimism of modernity that motivates the bold endeavor of migration and respatialization of labor across Senegal's landscape (Ferguson 1999). The migrant domestic worker's story begins as one of personal agency and remains one throughout her trajectory, each step of which is defined by her own deliberate action to improve upon the condition of herself, her family, and her larger social group. At the same time, the decisions that she makes are informed by the scale and context at which they are implemented. The narrative of migrant domestic labor that presents on the locus of the village and often incentivizes relocation does not always align with the realities on the locus of the city. With this in mind, the migrant's authority over her situation must be understood in terms of the larger matrix of rural and urban opportunity, and the historical processes that have allocated power within this landscape.

The domestic worker's claim to an opportunity within the urban home encroaches upon a highly power-laden domain in which other women are likewise reshaping the parameters of their participation. This shared membership in the household establishes a tense and even resentful work environment that is mediated on the terms of the woman of

the household. The employer's sense of distinction from her domestic rests upon status differentials, grounded in a difference of education, socioeconomic standing, and relative wage-earning power. The centrality of inequality in their relationship gives rise to a staging of stratification, enacted through the employer's control over the domestic worker's duties and terms of employment.

The employer's authority in this relationship can be attributed to the insecurity of the domestic worker's situation on the urban scale. With minimal qualifications for other lines of work, the majority of female migrants that come to the city find work in the domestic sphere. This creates a surplus of domestic labor in Dakar, establishing a competitive market between maids. This relationship between supply and demand renders domestic services widely accessible to urban dwellers and also ascribes unmitigated power to employers in the determination of wages as well as the living conditions of their employees. Despite the ubiquity of domestic labor in Dakar, the private nature of the domestic sphere renders it largely unregulated as a workspace. As most maids have migrated long distances to find work in the city where they have limited resources and support systems, they have minimal bargaining power in determining the terms of their employment. Furthermore, the employer's control over the maid's source of livelihood—including income and also frequently room, board, and other non-monetary compensation—makes it difficult for women to leave unfavorable work conditions once they have accepted them.

The conditions that maids encounter at their place of employment are subject to great variation. While some domestic workers face abusive treatment and highly demanding work for little compensation, others receive comfortable accommodations and

reasonable wages. James Scott (1990) observes the broader structure of power that governs the condition of the subordinate at the hands of the dominant, noting that “a particular slave...may be lucky enough to escape such treatment but the sure knowledge that it *could* happen to her pervades the entire relationship<sup>1</sup>” (Scott 1990: xi). Despite the notable potential for positive experiences within the domestic sphere, domestic workers remain an overall vulnerable population in Senegal. This is because their status is not determined by the treatment they receive at the hands of different employers, but as Scott points out, a collective predisposition to maltreatment of which all maids become aware. The vulnerability of domestic labor as a line of work is underpinned by this potential, even in the case of moderate or well-intentioned employers. The lack of security in this work allows the Dakar middle and upper class to maintain a cheap supply of domestic labor, reinforced by a relationship of dependence that manifests between the employer and employee.

Central to this thesis is the element of inequality that lays the foundation of the urban domestic sphere in Senegal. With this infrastructure in mind, I am concerned with the ways in which structures of inequality are produced, challenged, and re-instantiated through the daily practices of those operating within them. Drawing upon the work of James Scott (1990), this ethnography consults the hidden transcripts of women’s work to consider the diagnostic of power by which they have been marginalized (Scott 1990; Abu-Lughod 1990). Through extensive interviews with Senegalese maids and limited interviews with employers, I present a counter-narrative to assumptions of the domestic

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<sup>1</sup> The term slave is used loosely here to refer to the subordinate member of this relationship. While many scholars have written about domestic work as a form of “neoslavery” (see Ong 2006), it is not my intent here to posit Senegalese domestic work as slave labor.

workers' victimization as well as the employer's hostility. Instead, I seek to explore the larger circumstances that situate the employer and employee within a power-laden relationship, and to locate the domestic worker's own sources of agency and intention within this dynamic.

While domestic work in Dakar is often presented as a mutually beneficial relationship, Scott reminds us that the public transcript is "unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations" (Scott 1990: 2). Despite their conduct in the presence of their employers, domestic workers are both critical and vocal about their experiences within homes. They are aware of the strategies used by larger society to disempower them, and navigate these arrangements with sophisticated knowledge of their positioning within them. While this thesis draws largely upon the accounts shared by maids, the hidden transcript contains the voices of domestics and employers alike, and points to a larger system that poses a disadvantage to both women. The larger tensions of social inequality in Senegal that perpetuate women's subordination do not readily manifest in the public arena in which they have been systemically undermined. Instead, they are crystallized within the space over which women alone have presided for centuries: the home. I present the household as a unique locus in which the politics of women's work can be observed more intimately—staging not only how power is wielded, but also where a struggle over power is shared.

## **Structure, Agency, and Systems of Power: Situating Domestic Workers in the Literature**

The condition of the female migrant domestic laborer is situated within larger questions of structure and agency. Much of what has been published in non-academic circles on this subject in the past decade has tended to highlight the immense human rights violations posed to women who work in this field (see Human Rights Watch 2008; International Labor Organization 2013). While many women find themselves in difficult or abusive work conditions, this literature fails to account for the diversity of experiences that characterize domestic service and also fails to understand the domestic worker as more than a victim of her circumstances. In contrast, the body of academic literature that has emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries on this topic has examined the structures in which the domestic worker operates through a particularly agency-driven approach. Building upon this literature, I argue that the experience of the domestic worker in Senegal today reflects internalized social practices that must be considered in light of historically-forged structures of power. The domestic worker is not merely a victim of her position, but an active participant within both the process of migration as well as the domestic relationship. This section seeks to situate the complexity of the arrangement of domestic labor in Senegal within a theoretical framework of power, structure, and agency to underscore the myriad forces at play within the migrant domestic worker's circumstances. In doing so, I draw upon literature that is both specific to domestic laborers as well as broader theoretical work that locates the agency of the individual within the diagnostic of power (Abu-Lughod 1990).

While notions of domesticity in Africa can be linked to colonial models of slavery

and servitude, they have also developed under a uniquely African context of gender, modes of production, and social status. Social theories in the 1970s determined the role of the servant to be obsolete in modern society given new opportunities for women in wage labor (Coser 1973). These were based largely on studies carried out in the West and were extended to the developing world in anticipation of a similar pattern (Hansen 1989: 4). Anthropological research until this time had largely focused on more conspicuous occupations in the developing world, such as miners, railway workers, and traders (Freund 1984). Yet contrary to modernization theories that postulated a unilinear development of areas of the world such as the African continent (for exceptions, see Comaroff 1993, Ferguson 1999), research since this time has indicated both a prevalence of domestic labor in the developing world as well as forms of domestic labor that are distinct from those in the West (Hansen 1989). With this new wave of research came also a consideration of the ways in which migrant domestic workers are more than “victims of globalization,” but actually exercise agency and autonomy despite their participation in a line of work that is heavily power-laden (De Regt 2010; Dickey 2000; Anderson 2000; Constable 1997; Lan 2006; Parreñas 2001). In her research on East African domestic workers in the Middle East, Marina de Regt, for instance, presents a more nuanced view of the dynamics that play out in this field, emphasizing the choices that women make and how different migration trajectories shape experiences in the destination country (De Regt 2010).

Anthropological work of the past few decades on domestic work has likewise come to focus on the relationship that arises between the employer and employee, highlighting the role of difference in this arrangement (Hansen 1989; De Regt

2010). Karen Tranberg Hansen has written extensively on domestic relationships as they manifest in the African continent. Her work on domestic workers in Zambia is informed by a body of literature on practice theory and structuration, which remains highly relevant to the condition of the domestic worker. This theoretical framework locates the employer-employee dyad within a dynamic of autonomy and dependence, allowing space for human agency and intention within the phenomena of need-based migration and potentially exploitative labor conditions. Hansen posits the domestic work relationship as an arrangement into which both parties actively enter, wherein the employer is to some degree as dependent upon the maid as the maid is on her employer (Hansen 1989: 12).

Hansen's work particularly highlights the theories of Anthony Giddens, as set forth in Central Problems in Social Theory (1979). Giddens' notion of structuration was a leading contribution to discussions around the nexus of structure and agency in the 1980s. His theory posits a "duality of structure," arguing that in the same way that individual agents are acted upon by a larger structure, they too shape and maintain this structure through their active participation within it (Giddens 1979). As an inherently two-way relationship, he contends that no matter her subordination, the inferior member reserves a degree of power through her very membership (Giddens 1979: 6). This theory rejected the idea of the subordinate as a passive victim, and instead paints the subordinate as an active agent adept at navigating her disadvantaged position. The larger structure in which both operate is reproduced not only by the dominant party, but by the daily actions and interactions of all those operating within it. Power relations, he says, are thus a product of practice, and can be seen as "regularized relations of autonomy and dependence" (Giddens 1984: 6). Structure thus emerges as the result of internalized



processes that cement practices within the social order and pave the road for the process of domination. Giddens clarifies that “the exercise of power is not a type of act; rather power is instantiated in action, as a regular and routine phenomenon” (Giddens 1984: 91). This distinction that power is enacted *through* a structure distinguishes Giddens from other theorists of power who posit power itself as a resource.

Giddens’ theory of structuration was in many ways in conversation with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus*, or a habitual reproduction of an established social order (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu builds upon Giddens’ work to explain how practice becomes internalized by the body and normalized within society, resulting in a social order that is both tacit and organized (Bourdieu 1984). *Habitus* produces and maintains structure. As Bourdieu explains:

[It] is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes (Bourdieu 1984: 170).

Giddens and Bourdieu converge in their conception of power as inherent within the establishment of normative social structures such as social institutions and language (Ortner 2006). Bourdieu is dissimilar from Giddens in his emphasis on individual interpretations and reproductions of the social order, pointing to the generation of social class as a product of discrimination between groups within the social structure (Bourdieu 1984). This emphasis on the relationship between social practice and class formation is critical to domestic work in Senegal, which increasingly operates on a division of emerging socioeconomic classes between women.

Class formation among women operates on the principle of differentiation

between them. Bourdieu terms this the process of distinction, which develops through “taste” or preference. Taste allows agents to differentiate between their position and the position of others (Bourdieu 1984: 170). Equally important, Bourdieu goes onto emphasize how practice is learned based on orientation to the system within which the individual operates, arguing “that is why an agent’s whole set of practices...are both systematic...and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another life-style” (Bourdieu 1984: 170). Thus while both the female Senegalese employer and female Senegalese employee are enculturated into the gendered realm of domesticity, they are oriented to this world in different ways: the employer incentivized to opt out of domestic work, while the employee undertakes this work as an opportunity.

Bourdieu’s theory of practice and distinction highlights the assemblage of structure within society, but does not deeply theorize the capacity of agency within this system. While agency is discussed in both Giddens’ and Bourdieu’s theories of power, many theorists since this time have considered these to be “soft” concepts of agency (Ortner 2006). In contrast, theorists such as William H. Sewell Jr. posit a “hard” concept of agency in their attention to the role of intentionality within this dynamic (Ortner 2006; Sewell 1992). In his widely cited paper *Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation*, Sewell acknowledges Giddens duality of structure, adding however that “It is equally important...to insist that...agency differs enormously in both kind and extent. What kinds of desires people can have, what intentions they can form, and what sorts of creative transpositions they can carry out vary dramatically...depending on the nature of the particular structures that inform those social worlds” (Sewell 1992: 20-21). This theory improves our ability to conceptualize the dyad of the female employer

and the domestic worker, both of whom exercise intentional decisions within a rigid social structure of defined option. Sewell himself uses the example, “if they are denied access to the public sphere, women's ambitions will be focused on private life” (Sewell 1992: 21). This theory allowed a more critical consideration of how power differentials affect the individual’s capacity to exercise agency, and how choices are made within a constrained framework of possibilities.

Giddens, Bourdieu, and Sewell agree in fundamental areas that pertain to the arrangement of domestic work. All three acknowledge the “two-way” dynamic of the power relationship, in which the subordinate exercises power through her participation and knowledge of this system. This is particularly important within my own research in Senegal. Despite the vulnerability of Senegalese domestic workers, this population demonstrates sophisticated understanding of their disadvantage relative to their employer and enters into their position wary of this reality. Giddens notes that subordinates “are frequently adept at converting whatever resources they possess into some degree of control over the conditions of reproduction of those social systems” (Giddens 1979: 6). While domestic workers have limited ability to refuse the work arrangements set forth by their employers, they do make conscious decisions in which tasks they will perform, how they will perform these tasks, and how they will navigate the adverse terms of their employment. Domestic workers likewise demonstrate intentionality in the lifestyle into which they enter. This is exemplified through their recognition for their candidacy for migration, their decision to act upon this candidacy, and the strategic ways in which they implement alternative forms of security in their lives when they encounter jobs that have proven unfavorable.

Another important point of convergence between these theories is an emphasis upon the symbolism of practice. This is particularly salient in Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The symbolism of practice is central to domestic work, where power is enacted and reinforced through the daily interactions of the employer and employee. These internalized conceptions of domination and subordination are cemented not only within the locus of the home, but within broader Senegalese society, in which female, migrant domestic workers are a widely vulnerable population.

The maintenance of a system that privileges the dominant group at the cost of the subordinate can be examined through James Scott's theory of the hidden transcript (Scott 1990). James Scott (1990) theorized that in all their diverse manifestations, systems of power take a similar form by nature of the conditions that allow domination of one group over another (Scott 1990: x). For instance, the widespread phenomena of slavery, serfdom, and caste subordination all stem from a similar arrangement that extracts labor, goods, and services from a subordinate population (Scott 1990: x). Scott argues that where there is power there is also a resistance to that power force, and that with processes of domination arise both "a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power" (Scott 1990: xii). Scott terms this discourse the "hidden transcript," by which the subordinate offers their critique of the dominant and, in doing so, reclaims power denied to them by the "public transcript." This discourse takes the form of rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and moreover, the "theater of the powerless" (Scott 1990: xii). Like the slave, the serf, and the Hindu untouchable, the Senegalese maid's inferiority to her employer must be enacted to suggest what Scott would term her "ideological subordination" (Scott 1990:

xiii). Her seeming submission is both informed and strategic, and operates to her own best interest given the circumstances.

Since Domination and the Arts of Resistance was published in 1990, scholars have increasingly come to emphasize the context in which resistance arises, examining the ways in which agency is informed by structure. Notably among these is Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, who has argued that excessive attention to resistance removes focus from the power structure that these acts seek to subvert, challenge, or defy (Abu-Lughod 1990). Abu-Lughod places particular emphasis on the historical transformations that have constructed interweaving systems of power and which give shape and meaning to acts of agency in the present-day. She warns against the reductionist view that attributes successes of resistance to the failures of domination. Instead, she proposes that the triumphs of agency be considered in light of the complexities of systems of oppression, serving as a “diagnostic of power” that reveals the historically changing relations within a given society (Abu-Lughod 1990).

This examination of domestic work builds upon Abu-Lughod’s concern with historically-forged structures of power. While this thesis incorporates James Scott’s theory of domination and resistance, it will focus on the larger system that produces a dominant and subordinate party in the domestic relationship. Drawing upon the historical and social processes that establish a hierarchy of labor in Senegal, I situate both the employer and employee within a shared structure that gives meaning to their situation. The broader framework outlined in this section seeks to provide a lens to examine how the diversity of experiences that arise within domestic work converge within a shared system that is defined by a common structure of power and navigated

through similar locations of agency.

## **Methodology**

In September 2013 I arrived at my homestay in Dakar, Senegal, where I would spend three months of my semester abroad. My living room was full of people when I arrived—some of who were my host brothers and sisters, and others that were visiting friends. I remember my host mother bringing me over to each individual at a time, who took my hand and introduced him or herself to me. As I took in my surroundings and greeted everyone in the room, I became aware of a young girl in the background, coming in and out of the bathroom with a bucket and a rag. She wore a *pagne* skirt, an old t-shirt, and a piece of cloth in her hair. Briefly I wondered if she might be my younger host sister. I was introduced to her very briefly before she excused herself and left the house. “You’ll see the maid again in the morning,” my mother told me warmly. Sure enough, I saw our maid, Aida, just about everyday at my homestay. Since we were close to the same age—she two years younger than myself—I was initially disappointed that she seemed disinclined to talk to me. Before long, however, I realized that Aida, like most domestic workers in Dakar, spoke little to no French. She came from a rural village where she had received minimal formal education, and had come to Dakar to find a seasonal position as a maid.

I was struck by the prevalence of domestic labor almost immediately upon my stay in Dakar. I soon became accustomed to the presence of a maid in just about every home that I visited. I consistently had difficulty communicating with these women in

French, resulting in the increasingly familiar explanation from employers that their maid was from a rural village and speaks mostly Wolof. Most of the families with whom I spent time in Senegal treated their maid very well, and in some cases like a true part of the family. Despite this observation, the complete absence of labor regulation was noteworthy. I realized very quickly that the terms of the maid's labor—the length of the her work day, the difficulty of her work, the amount of work she is given, her wages, the conditions of room and board, etc.—all lay to the discretion of the employer. My curiosity about the lives of the maids that I saw everyday, and about the maids that I was not seeing, came to establish the base of my research question.

My project began with a series of inquiries. Where do Dakar's maids come from? Why do they leave their own villages and why do they come to Dakar? How does the decision for a woman to leave her community come about? What is the process of finding a maid, and what is the process of finding an employer? How is the role of the maid understood in Senegalese society, and how does this shape her work experience and lifestyle? In what ways can domestic work be understood as gendered labor, and what are the social and cultural factors that create it as such? How is the system of domestic work in Senegal—where the employer and employee often belong to the same race, nationality, and even sometimes ethnicity—different or similar to domestic work in other parts of the world? How does the role of the migrant domestic worker fit into an overall picture of urbanization in Senegal? Finally, what does a day, a week, a year look like in the life of the female domestic worker, and what is her story?

I identified my target research group as maids in the city of Dakar when I began my project in fall of 2013. I limited my scope to the city of Dakar, as this is the

destination for the vast majority of internal migrant workers. After three months living in Dakar I was also relatively familiar with the city, which lent more understanding to the accounts my informants shared on their integration into the city. Initially I used our placement in host families to connect with three different maids through the homes of people I knew, conducting two to three interviews with each of these women. Each interview ran about thirty minutes to an hour in length and was held within the respective home in which they worked. I was also able to utilize participant observation during these interviews, typically spending the hour of the interview with these women in the kitchen while they carried out daily tasks.

In addition to interviewing domestic workers, I consulted with three representatives from organizations that specialize in issues of labor rights and women's empowerment. ANAFA is a national organization that addresses poverty in Senegal specifically through the domain of education. Aissatou is the coordinator of a project within ANAFA that offers education and counsel to women on their rights, specifically labor rights as they apply to the domestic sphere. The Centre de Jeunes Filles Domestiques is a center that was founded in Dakar in 2012 to provide support and training to young women that have left school in their respective areas of origin and are entering Dakar's domestic sphere as maids. The Centre de Jeunes Filles Domestiques is the only center of its kind in West Africa and works closely with Senegal's domestic workers union to educate women about their rights before they go out into the city to find work. Here I interviewed both the director of the program and the President of the Women's national Committee at the National Confederation of Senegalese Workers, Arame Thiam, as well as the program manager, Daba Camara.



Based on my interviews, I also identified and visited a series of sites relevant to my informants. I spent a great deal of time at Dakar's official office of "Inspection Régionale du Travail et la Sécurité Sociale" where I conducted interviews with the General Secretary of Domestic Workers Union, Omar Diallo. With Omar, I had the opportunity to attend one of the monthly meetings of Dakar's domestic workers unions, where I carried out a series of short interviews with union members. I also visited a neighborhood intermediary site where maids congregate to connect with potential employers. This interaction is facilitated by a *courtier* or *liaison*—a man who negotiates the terms of employment between the maid and her new *patronne*. I carried out one interview with this individual and also conducted participant observation at this site. Here I relied mostly on field notes.

This original research period experienced a series of limitations that were corrected or navigated when I returned to Senegal during summer of 2014 for a supplementary period of research through the Macalester College Spradley Fellowship. Upon my return I utilized my preexisting contacts to pick up with my research where I had left off in the fall. I worked with both the Domestic Workers' Union as well as the Centre de Jeunes Filles again, but modified my sample of informants. While the women that I had interviewed formerly were helpful in understanding daily activities of maids, the fact that I knew their employer and that our interviews were carried out in their place of employment inevitably shaped the content of interviews. Additionally, since they were employed by people that I knew, their work conditions were not representative of the very difficult and degrading environment in which maids often work. During this research period I instead connected with new

informants through the Domestic Workers' Union.

It is important to note that the sample of maids represented in this thesis have all either belonged to this union or have worked with this union in some capacity. This statistic inevitably shapes the nature of the material that I collected, as all of these women have received a degree of education on their labor rights, have found solidarity with other workers, and, most notably, have faced work conditions that have compelled them to seek out the support of the union in the first place. The latter suggests a common experience of maltreatment or difficult work arrangements in all of their stories that might not be the case for maids that have never sought greater security in their position. While my research suggests that these conditions are commonly experienced by domestic workers in Dakar, this thesis most strongly speaks to the collective experience of female migrant domestic workers that have worked with the Domestic Workers' Union.

My interviews with these women took place in neutral meeting places, removed from their places of employment. The majority of these were carried out in the SIT building in Point E, Dakar—a small American exchange school where I took classes during the fall. All of the maids that I interviewed had little formal education and therefore spoke limited French. At first I held interviews at the Work Inspection Headquarters in downtown Dakar—an easy and familiar meeting point for my informants—where Omar Diallo translated for us. Due to both the noisy environment of the building and the positionality of the General Secretary, who was both male and a professional figure in these women's lives, I decided this setting was not conducive to the rapport I was seeking in my interviews. When I changed location I likewise began working with a female interpreter, Fatou Kandji, who took on the role of a research

assistant in my project, acting as both a language and cultural liaison in this process. The change in interpreter made substantial difference for the environment of interviews, which became noticeably comfortable and candid in this new setting. Fatou translated my interview questions from French to Wolof for my interviewees, and translated their responses in the inverse. These interviews typically were between one and two hours in length, which included time for translation. The interviews that I conducted with non maids—employers as well as professionals addressing issues around domestic work—were either held in the office of the individual that I was interviewing or at the SIT building. These interviews were conducted in French, without the presence of a translator, and typically ran 30 minutes to an hour.

Throughout my two research periods I conducted over thirty interviews. I recorded all of my interviews in their entirety, uploaded them onto my computer, and transcribed them. Security and anonymity remain of high priority in all steps of this project. Throughout this thesis I employ pseudonyms for all informants as well as their respective organizations. I have selected Senegalese pseudonyms randomly, and these therefore cannot be interpreted as any indicator of the family, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class of the individual in question. For the Centre de Jeunes Filles Domestiques, I do not use a pseudonym at the request of the director of the program. All other organizations and individuals remain anonymous.

The most immediate limitations to this study arose around language barriers. With the presence of a translator at times it proved difficult to evoke the length and depth of responses that I had hoped for going into my interviews. The layers of translation through which both interview questions and responses had to pass made it

difficult to establish and verify folk terms, as well as to evoke detailed responses to “grand tour” questions. The time that translation added to interviews also imposed limitations on the length of the interview. I was reluctant to ask my translator or informant to participate in interviews of over two hours in length, even when a portion of this time was consumed by translation. These limitations caused me to adjust some of my questions so that my interviews focused more on the stories and experiences of my informants, and less on the minute details of their work culture. For the purposes of this thesis, I have translated the transcriptions of my interviews into English. The quotes that I share from maids have therefore already passed through two processes of translation (Wolof to French to English) and those from my non-maid informants have passed through one (French to English). While the content of these quotes remains true to original statements, the language employed to express them has been subject to interpretation.

My positionality as a white, American, female student inevitably shaped my rapport with my informants and the information they shared with me. In Senegal there is a strong perception of white people, particularly Americans, as development workers. In working with non-profits, I was frequently asked how I would promote their work when I returned to the United States and in what way I could help fundraise for them. I was very aware from the start of my interviews with maids of an expectation that I, as a representative of the West, could affect meaningful change in these women’s lives. In some interviews, there was great emphasis on injustices suffered at the hands of employers, rather than the seemingly more mundane details of day to day tasks within the household. I believe that this reflected both an assumption of myself as a journalist or

reporter as well as my informants' strong sense of what was most important to them to share about themselves. All the women that I interviewed were tremendously forthcoming and generous in the stories they shared with me and the time that they took to do so. Oumou, with whom I conducted a total of seven interviews, has my particular gratitude for the level of devotion that she brought to this project.

Throughout every step of this process I tried to be intentional about how I represented myself to my informants. Before each interview I explained that my research would be for an undergraduate thesis, which will primarily be read by my professors and peers but will also be accessible to the greater public on the internet. Interviewees were informed that they would not receive any compensation for their participation in the study, but that I would send them a copy of my thesis when it was finished. I explained that most of all, I was interviewing them because I wanted to hear their stories and I believe others should hear them too. We agreed that if nothing else, this thesis would strive to create greater understanding of what it means to be a maid in Dakar.

## **Road Map**

Questions concerning the domestic sphere in Senegal concern power. Questions of power demand examination of systems of domination and resistance that have steeped Senegal's history for over five centuries. I begin this thesis with a brief discussion of Senegal's history, focusing particularly on the gendered divisions of space and labor that were institutionalized throughout the colonial era.

This history of occupation and domesticity serves to set the stage for the ethnographic body of this thesis, which takes the form of three chapters that discuss

the circumstances that produce and maintain the system of domestic work in the present day. Chapter three examines the context on both the rural and urban scale that promotes the mobility of young, rural women and establishes an alternative to the options available to them on the village scale. I argue that while there are a series of factors that predispose the daughter to the role of the migrant within the family, urban relocation arises as an opportunity that is unique to young, uneducated women and largely desirable to them.

Chapter four considers the work environment with which the migrant is presented in Dakar and how her positionality is experienced within this context. I contend that the intentional construction of difference between the employer and employee arises as a tactic to distinguish members of a shared identity within an intimate setting, staging the subordination of the maid in order to absolve the employer of the domestic role. This enactment and instantiation of distance within the household serves to produce a social practice that operates on a larger scale to undermine the position of the domestic worker and normalize a standard of treatment directed at this population.

In chapter five I examine the bidirectional relationship of dependence on which domestic work operates. While the nature of this dependent relationship is what serves to disempower domestic workers and ensure a politically weak supply of labor, I contend that it is through the domestic worker's adept participation in this system that she is able to claim a degree of authority over her circumstances. I conclude this thesis with a discussion of current action toward domestic workers rights, and what the position of the domestic worker can tell us about larger systems of power.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Establishing Histories

#### Introduction

Domestic activity in Senegal arises within a confluence of binaries that have served to invalidate the domestic sphere as an official site of economic activity and labor as it manifests across the globe. These include capitalist paradigms of home and work, male and female, and public and private life. As a result, domesticity widely manifests as a form of work that is unquantifiable, informal, and both beyond and inferior to the male-dominated economic sector. Under these definitions, maintenance of the household and the labor that goes into it appear as a “given,” undeserving of regulation or monetary investment. And while the home is widely and historically understood as a gendered domain, domesticity itself can be examined as a construct that has emerged through a series of social processes. Given its history of imperial occupation, these hegemonic processes are especially worthy of consideration within the context of the African continent.

The landscape of urban life in modern-day Senegal is steeped in the country’s extensive subjection to European occupation. Francophone Africa in particular suggests the imported, gendered dimension of domestic work through the use of the feminine form of the French noun that refers to the domestic, *la domestique*. The model of social life that underpins the household as a woman’s domain can be tied to systems of labor that emerged in Europe prior to colonialism, and can be traced through the processes of colonization (Comaroff 1992). Though the country is now half a century post-

independence, the hierarchical and gendered structures that colonialism imposed upon African men and women continue to operate in the power differentials that govern Senegal's domestic sphere today.

This chapter serves to provide an overview of Senegalese history, with particular focus on the colonial era and the colonial processes that concerned the domestic sphere. My point here is not to suggest that Senegalese women did not carry domestic responsibilities prior to European occupation, but to point to the ways in which an imposed division of labor shaped the relationship that men and women had with the household. While I emphasize the influence of colonialism on the domestic, it is important to note that notions of domesticity in post-colonial Africa manifest as a hybrid of both external and internal conceptions of the home, gender roles, and labor. Domesticity—like any institution that accompanied colonization—took form as a series of encounters that played out between the colonizer and colonized, in which the Senegalese actively assessed and navigated foreign and local definitions of labor, gender, and space in the making of new social orders.

### **Early History and Colonial Era**

Senegal's history must be considered in light of its extensive exposure to external interests. These have included the medieval empire of Mali, Islamic trade routes from the north, and European powers that drew it into the Atlantic trading system (Barry 1998: 3). The region that is now Senegal historically spanned the kingdoms of several diverse ethnic groups, including the Wolof, Lebou, Serer, Fulani and Tukolor (Callaway and Creavey 1994: 16). The coastal area that is now the capital city of Dakar was inhabited



principally by the Lebou, a fishing people that occupied the villages of Ouakam, Yoff, Ngor, and Hann (all of which remain largely Lebou neighborhoods in modern Dakar). It was not until the 15th century that Europeans made contact with the area that is now Senegal and the Gambia, also referred to as Senegambia. Islam, meanwhile, was introduced to the Senegambia region in the 11th century via Berber trade routes in the area (Clark 2014). Although first establishing itself in the 11th century, Islam gained considerable strength in the 17th century when it became the religion of the elite and merchant classes (Clark 2014). Despite the assimilation approach imposed by French colonists in the 19th and 20th century, Islam's longevity in the region has allowed it to remain the dominant faith in Senegal.

Prior to and independent of the influence of Islam and European colonization, women in this region held noteworthy political power. The Wolof, Serer, and Lebou ethnic groups were all matriarchal societies, meaning that political power and inheritance were transmitted through women's lineage (Bop 2005: 1107). Both the Wolof and Serer had distinguished political positions that were exclusively held by women, such as the *lingueer*—the mother or maternal sister of the king—and the *awa*—the first wife of the king (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 18). These women were privileged by their control of land, resources, and labor and also played key roles in the politics of war and the selection of kings and other positions of power (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 19). Historians note that women in this region exercised political power complementary to that of men, Callaway and Creevey (1994) contending that “[women] were an integral part of the clan system, patrons in their own right, whose good opinion had to be wooed by any aspiring politician” (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 19). Islam, likewise, remained

“largely intermingled with preexisting values and customs” when it was introduced to Senegal, scholars emphasizing the noteworthy autonomy that Muslim women have maintained in this region (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 20).

In contrast, scholars have noted the significant influence that colonization had on gender roles in the African continent (Hansen 1992, Robertson 1984, Jones 2005, Bujra 1984). The Portuguese were the first European power to set foot on the area that is now Senegal. Arriving in 1444, they used Senegal mainly for trade through ports such as Gorée Island and Rufisque (off the site of modern-day Dakar) as well as along the southern coast (Clark 2014). The area was occupied briefly by the Dutch before the French arrived in 1659, who founded the city of Saint Louis in the north and overtook Dutch and Portuguese operations on Gorée. Both Saint Louis and Gorée Island became major trade ports for the extraction and export of slaves, gold and gum Arabic. A century later, in 1657, Britain took over French operations in the region during the Seven Years War and established the colony of Senegambia, only to be returned to France in 1779. By the end of the 1700s, Saint Louis had become the largest European colony on the west coast of Africa (Crowder 1967: 10).

Unlike the British, colonial French powers employed a system of direct rule in their colonies. Michael Crowder (1967) notes that,

The French kept as their goal, however distant, the cultural and political assimilation of their colonial peoples, and that even when this policy gave way to that of ‘association,’ which recognized the uniqueness of the African situation, assimilation remained an important element in the practice of administration in French West Africa (Crowder 1967: 2).

Despite the French’s use of an assimilationist approach, however, their intention was not the fostering of equal, French citizens in the colonies. Africans were colonized subjects—

“children” to the white colonizers—viewed as inherently inferior and unworthy of the rights of citizenship (Mamdani 1996). As Mahmood Mamdani points out, “in the colonial mind...Africans were no ordinary children. They were destined to be so perpetually—in the words of Christopher Fye, ‘Peter Pan children who can never grow up, a child race’” (Mamdani 1996: 4). While they were central to the construction and maintenance of the city through their labor, Africans were denied actual societal membership and were intended to remain on the margins of urban space.

In the face of attempts to undermine the role of Islam in Senegambia, brotherhood identification became a default form of resistance against colonial rule (Callaway and Creevey 1994: 23). The succession of rule between colonial powers and competition in the slave trade brought with it large-scale violence in the form of manhunts (Barry 1998: 46). The social and political detriment brought about by these practices set the stage for a marabout-led movement to unify the states of Senegambia to resist the slave trade in the 17th century (Barry 1998: 46). The largely indigenous movement proved highly effective in Northern Senegambia where religious leaders came to replace previous aristocracies (Barry 1998: 52). It was during this period that Sufi Islam gained considerable strength in Senegal (Clark 2014).

Despite Senegal’s immediate ties to French legislation, authorities in Senegal tolerated slavery well after it was officially abolished in France. While a royal ordinance in 1833 proclaimed the freeing of all slaves, it was not until 1848 that the status of a slave born into captivity—or *captif*—was abolished (Crowder 1967: 13). Even so, it is believed that a reliance on slave labor continued in Dakar and Rufisque until the late 19th century and that household slavery persisted into the beginning of the 20th century (Klein

1993: 174; Vandervort 2004).

French colonial rule in Senegal was somewhat unique in that citizens of four major cities—Saint Louis, Dakar, Gorée, and Rufisque—received status as full French citizens, rather than just subjects. In the first half of the 20th century this approach began to pose concerns as natives seized the opportunities allowed by citizenship. Crowder comments that “until the outbreak of the Second World War one had the paradoxical situation of the French regretting their assimilationist policy and the Senegalese citizens asking that it be applied more liberally since this was one sure way to improve their lot under the colonial regime” (Crowder 1967: 19). The Senegalese recognized the advantages of membership of this new social order, and seized the opportunities that it allowed them.

With the urban integration of the native population came an adoption of French lifestyles. Capitalism steeped the value system on which new towns and cities were built, bringing with it new paradigms of labor and consumption. Creevey (1991) notes of Senegal, “New goods—cloth, metal dishes, new condiments, eventually bicycles, and the like—began to be desired in the interior and increased the need to earn cash—either by finding wage jobs or growing cash crops” (Creevey 1991: 356). The making of the African urban landscape meant the making of an African urban lifestyle, redefining notions of the family and the home. Susan Geiger explains, “Victorian notions of domesticity were transplanted to the African continent in order to mold ‘better’ mothers and wives” (Geiger 2002: 3). Though largely excluded from the policies and legislation that accompanied these formations, women were instrumental to the new social order of public life that selectively privileged men.

Senegalese women's disadvantage within political and economic spheres has likewise been reified by the longevity and dominance of Islam in Senegal. Although a secular state, scholars note Islam's centrality to the creation of Senegal's legal framework, and by extension the status of the Senegalese woman. This can be observed in the implementation of 1972 Family Code (Bop 2005). While explicitly governing activity within the family and the home, the Family Code (which, in its original form, allowed the husband the power to object to his wife pursuing an occupation<sup>2</sup>) had significant implications for women's status within the public sphere (Bop 2005). Bop (2005) observes of the social positioning of the modern-day Senegalese woman:

With, on the one hand, the spread of Islam within all ethnic groups and, on the other hand, the colonization of Senegal and its aftermath, patriarchal Arabic and European values have eroded women's social power. Today, despite differences in the positions of individual women related to age, marital status, social class, and political involvement, it can be said that women as a group do not hold high social status (Bop 2005: 1107).

It is important to note that women in West Africa have long held autonomy and noteworthy authority over domains such as trade and market activity (Robertson 1984, Clark 1994). This said, women in Senegal also face a series of disadvantages in the formal workforce and public sphere due to larger societal structures that have undermined their political power.

Senegal gained independence in 1960 after over four centuries of foreign occupation. Indeed, social and cultural practices that had preexisted the colonial era maintained their strength and import throughout this period. At the same time, the institutionalized nature of French systems of labor and capital inevitably disrupted and distorted the previous social order, particularly within developing cities. The legacies of

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<sup>2</sup> This article was repealed in 1989.

this extensive period of foreign occupation, in tandem with neoliberal economic policies and increased capitalist penetration that followed in the post-colonial era, lay a foundation for the distribution of labor as well as the urban economy.

### **Emerging Formations of Domesticity and Class**

Scholars observe how with the construction of colonial cities on African soil came a construction of a colonial domestic sphere within an African urban context. The French emulated gender inequalities that were already the norm within their own society and imposed this model upon the society they sought to create in the colonies. Creevey (1991) notes of French colonial powers:

They did not try to understand the interrelationships between sexes in Senegal or the established social and economic interdependencies. Since they believed their society was superior to whatever existed in Senegal, their policies reflected their own values and prejudices. Because they monopolized all political power and because over time, they had grafted their status hierarchy onto the colonial society, their views were extremely influential throughout the country (Creevey 1991: 356).

“Domesticity” as both gendered and confined to the private realm of the household emerged as a colonial project, distinct from forms of housework, agriculture, and domestic activity that had existed in the region prior to imperialism. Among many transformations, the French introduced for the first time systems of industry, land ownership, and urban life to Senegal. Colonial projects were not only concerned with the reconfiguration of public space, however, but with private sphere as well. As Hilary Jones (2013) notes, “colonialism worked its way into the intimate spaces of home, courtyard, kitchen, and bedroom occupied predominantly by women” (Jones 2013: 7). With the imposed institutions of governance, education, and market organization

came European paradigms of work, gender, and the home. These structures imposed a hegemonic value system that allocated power to certain sectors of society—specifically, the male-dominated, formal economy—and incentivized a desire to participate in them.

Though often excluded from literature around urban formation, women and notions of womanhood were critical in producing the desired colonial society and cultural norms set forth by white, European males. Timothy Burke explains how the establishment of a colonial order hinged upon the reconfiguration of gender roles, noting that “colonial subjects’ knowledge of imperial power and of their own identities often worked against and within these hegemonic arrangements of masculinity and femininity” (Burke 1997: 122). The construction of the private, domestic domain as separate and unconcerned with the male-dominated, public sphere was central in instilling this social order.

The introduction of domesticity in the colonies in many ways came to mirror distinctions of public and private, work and home, and male and female that had only recently been institutionalized in the West with the rise of capitalism (Comaroff 1992). The manifestation of “domesticity” in Europe was a corollary to the emergence of the factory system in the seventeenth century, where domestic activity was integral to capitalist ideologies that accompanied industrialization. Jean Comaroff notes that domestic roles in Europe first appeared within the bourgeoisie, and later came to transcend the working class by the mid-1800s (Comaroff 1992). This period, which celebrated the white male’s economic, social, and political dominance, entailed new definitions of “relations of production, of personhood and value, and of class and gender” (Comaroff 1992: 38). Women’s inferiority was constructed vis-à-vis men’s social

superiority in almost every domain. This polarization of gender roles resulted in a restructuring of space, reorganizing the public and private into “two gender-associated domains of distinctly different value” (Hansen 1992: 4). It was men’s domination of the public, the political, and the economic world that came to associate women with the family, the home, and the private, defining domesticity in terms of “women, unwaged housework, child raising, and the ‘private.’” (Comaroff 1992: 38). Integrated into the larger matrix of production, infrastructure, and economic development that accompanied the European penetration of Africa was a model of “home life” that had not existed prior.

Like all colonizing processes, the introduction of Western domestic norms in Africa played out as a series of transformative encounters between the colonizer and the colonized. Karen Tranberg Hansen notes that as Western domestic ideologies were imposed, “African women and men played active but different parts in shaping new spatial boundaries and experimenting with the many meanings of domesticity” (Hansen 1992: 4). The adoption of the European organization of labor and space had diverse and multi-fold ramifications for African women. Some scholars stress the ways in which colonial systems proved empowering to African women, for instance in the form of education, activism, and political power that may not have been available to them under previous cultural norms (see Adams 2006).

One particularly noteworthy example of this was the case of *signares* in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Saint Louis (Jones 2005). These were African and Afro-European women that entered into temporary marital unions with European men known in French as *marriage à la mode du pays* (Jones 2005). Historian Hilary Jones (2005) notes that



these arrangements closely resembled forms of marriage and engagement practiced by the Wolof people, and came to establish almost a hybrid of local and Catholic conceptions of marriage (Jones 2005). These marriages led to the formation of a mixed-race or *métis* population in Senegal, centered in Saint Louis. This society—composed of Senegalese women, European men, and their mixed offspring—assumed the critical role of a broker between local populations and Europeans, exercising predominant power over the commercial and political activity of the time (Jones 2005). Senegalese women notably held noteworthy authority through this arrangement, which afforded them privileged ranking within broader society and urban life. Scholars note that *signares* and their descendants used this marital union as a means of survival and resistance during the colonial era, through which Senegalese women were able to claim and consolidate wealth and power on their own terms (Jones 2005).

The legacy of Saint Louis' *signares* illustrates the active role that women played during processes of colonization. The case of these hybrid marriages exemplifies the bidirectional quality of colonialism, in which new structures were produced and shaped by the colonizer and colonized alike. The literature that paints African women as passive recipients of oppressive Western gender roles neglects the forms of resistance and creativity with which these models were met. At the same time, European powers inarguably imposed an economy that was largely incongruous to African notions of the household, production, and division of labor. To this point, scholars note that the construction of the domestic sphere, in which both African men and women were implicated, came to serve “as a prop in the politics of colonial domination” (Hansen 1992: 5). As African men were recruited into wage labor, the apparatus of the family and

home operated as one of many institutions of a new, larger social order.

This division of labor was particularly incompatible in a context that did not undergo the process of industrialization that Europe underwent. While capitalism in the West developed as the product of class struggle and the dispossession of the means of production from the majority of the people, the introduction of capitalism in Africa had little to no relationship with local forms of production and commerce. Rather, capitalist enterprise was and remains a transplanted system foreign to African conceptions of wealth and labor. “Colonization,” Knibiehler and Goutallier note “is an essentially male act, meaning to conquer, penetrate, possess, fertilize” (Knibiehler and Goutallier 1985, as cited and translated in Hansen 1992: 5). The inherently gendered operation of colonialism permeated efforts to deconstruct and reconstruct social organization and labor in Africa. Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler likewise observes that “the very categories of ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ were secured through formal sexual control that defined the domestic arrangements of Europeans and the cultural investments by which they identified themselves” (as quoted in Burke 1997: 122). Whereas in West Africa men and women had previously maintained “complementary productive roles,” this dynamic was eroded by Western modes of production that cast men in the workplace and women in the home (Hansen 1992: 7). “Consolidating colonial rule,” Hansen notes “required the colonizers to contain African women and men on terms unfamiliar to them,” namely capitalist distinctions between “wage labor” and “housewifery” (Hansen 1992: 5).

While Western feminist paradigms often suggest wage labor and entry into the formal economy as avenues for women’s empowerment, Africanist scholars refute the applicability of this model to a context such as Senegal (Robertson and Berger 1986). In

contrast to this literature, Janet M. Bujra emphasizes the distinct ramifications that capitalism has had upon gender dynamics in Africa, producing “forms of women’s oppression distinctively different from those that characterized the rise of capitalism in Europe and America” (Bujra 1986: 119). Despite the significant burden of labor shouldered by African women, land and business ownership were apportioned exclusively to Senegalese men (Robertson 1984: 119). Even with the introduction of a more unitary social structure in the 1950s and 60s, women’s historic exclusion from the accumulation of wealth predetermined their inferior ranking in the capitalist hierarchy (Robertson 1984: 16). While all of Africa cannot so easily be summed up into one experience of class formation, the reorganization of local economies that accompanied and followed colonialism has elicited similar patterns in emerging processes of stratification (Bujra 1986: 119).

The recruitment of male labor power from previously shared systems of production, specifically agriculture, intensified the burden carried by women. Bujra notes “in Africa...the supply and cost of female labor is determined to a large extent by the fact that it is women who perform this ‘subsidizing function’ for male labor” (Bujra 1986: 122). The historical processes that constructed domesticity likewise served to invalidate the domestic sphere as a site of economic activity. The labor needed to maintain it therefore remains in the non-capitalist sector. Women’s work manifests as “cheap” through historical processes that have rendered it “readily available and politically weak” (Bujra 1984: 122). The increased integration of Senegalese women into the formal economy over the past few decades strains both of these qualities. Today, women still perform the majority of domestic work in Senegal (90%), but it is a particular

group of women that perform this labor: poor, migrant women of rural origin (2010 Human Rights Report: Senegal). The historical forces that have allocated value and power to the distribution of labor in Senegal thus remain relevant to the modern-day system of domestic work in Senegal, which arises within a larger respatialization of women's work. The ethnographic body of this work thus examines dynamics of domestic work with an appreciation of this history, particularly its influence on labor and gender dynamics.

## **Conclusion**

Decolonization in Senegal was led by Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, who was president from 1960 through 1980. Senghor is accredited with leading the post-independence era in a movement characterized by the claiming and cultivation of Senegalese culture. Senegal is a democratic republic and is considered to be one of the most politically stable states in West Africa. Though now over fifty years post-independence, there are many salient indicators of the extensive presence of colonial powers in Senegal. Senegal's education system remains directly modeled off of French schools and classes are taught exclusively in French over Wolof, the lingua franca that is spoken by 80% of the population. French, in contrast, is spoken fluently by only 15-20% of males and only 1-2% of females (Leclerc 2010). The inaccessibility of this system to the overall population, and especially to women, reflects the degree of social stratification that has persisted in the post-independence era. This period has additionally been characterized by the increased Westernization and capitalist penetration of the country and economy, implying new categories for men and women as social life became

increasingly defined around the expectations of a market economy.

While initially undermined by the reorganization of the economy, urban Senegalese women now experience an almost forced participation in the formal workforce if they wish to claim a place in the competitive evolution of this social structure (Creevey 1991: 357). Just as this binary has functioned throughout history, increased activity in the public sphere does not come without expectations of the private sphere. By this principle, women's membership in public spaces begins with the politics of the household.

As a privileged group of women claim opportunities for formal wage-labor that were previously afforded almost exclusively to men, the burden of housework that they previously carried is displaced onto a female population of a lower societal position: migrant laborers. Thus while the phenomenon of the maid is not new in Senegal (indeed, domestic servitude was widespread throughout the colonial era) the modern prevalence of migrant domestic laborers in the urban sphere is unique to the changing place of women in society today. This shifting landscape of women's work is characterized not only by claims to professional work, but also by new claims to traditional work, wherein rural women reinvent their given relationship with domestic work as an opportunity of the modern economy.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**Reinventing Domestic Work:**  
**Migration as Opportunity and Alternative**

**Introduction**

In Dakar, everyone knows the traffic circle in the neighborhood of Liberté 6. As a foreigner visiting this oft mentioned intersection for the first time, it felt like any other bustling open-air market in the city: traffic congested the merging roads and merchandise of every kind flooded pedestrian walkways. Making my way through the market I was solicited by the usual NesCafe vendors and phone card salesmen. Eventually, I came to a far end of the intersection where a group of fifteen to twenty women sat, stood, and lounged across the sidewalk. They were not roasting peanuts or making sandwiches, nor did they carry any bracelets or fabric to sell. Some were in their forties or fifties, while others look like they may not have even been seventeen. Some were laughing and talking, some braiding one another's hair, and others simply sitting, watching people as they walked by. To an outsider like myself, there was no apparent product in sight. I walked over toward them but a man approached me first. He asked me if I was looking for a woman to cook and clean. "*Ce sont les bonnes de Dakar*," he told me—"These are the maids of Dakar."

With every woman's eyes on me, I explained to the *courtier*—or broker—that today I was not looking for a maid, and asked if I could speak with the women. He was noticeably skeptical of what a young, American woman could possibly have to discuss with this group of maids—most of whom spoke minimal French—but he shrugged and

stepped aside. The women, too, did not try to hide their skepticism of the eager *toubab*<sup>3</sup> approaching them, wearing a backpack and glistening from Dakar's afternoon heat. Several of them whispered and giggled to one another as I walked over, while others watched me shyly. "You're looking for a maid?" One woman asked me sharply in Wolof. I shook my head. She appeared older than the others, and her stature was tall and commanding. She looked me up and down as I approached, meeting my own palpable apprehension with an unyielding gaze. For a long moment she just took me in, fanning herself nonchalantly as if taking her time with the moment. Slowly, she drew up the swaths of loose fabric that draped from her shoulders and pooled on the ledge beside her. She gestured offhandedly at the open space. "*Toggal!*"<sup>4</sup> She instructed.

I sat with these women into the afternoon. My very basic Wolof was just enough to make broken conversation and, probably also to provide some afternoon entertainment to the group. The atmosphere gradually relaxed as I explained that I was a student and had no interest in hiring my own maid. I asked some of the women where they were from, to which everyone simply responded that they lived in Dakar. One younger woman mentioned that she had only just recently arrived to the city however, and was looking for her first job. She was from Louga, a rural region about 300 kilometers away from Dakar. She had come by herself. Another woman sitting by us told me that she had come from a village close to Tambacounda, almost 500 kilometers away. I gradually found out that while all of these women are experts on the neighborhoods of Dakar, these are not the spaces from which they themselves have come. Some were from nearby areas like Thies, while others were from regions south of the Gambia, such as Kedougou or

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<sup>3</sup> "White person" in Wolof.

<sup>4</sup> "Sit!" in Wolof.

Casamance. They had all, at some point, left their towns and villages to come find paid work in the houses of Dakar.

The truth is that most maids in Dakar can tell a story about movement. The labor that supplies Senegal's sizeable domestic workforce is predominantly rural. In a 2010 study that surveyed 102 domestic workers in Dakar, only six respondents had actually been born in the city (Barnett 2011). This population of migrant workers in the urban sphere is exemplary of a larger trend of relocation that is playing out in both Senegal and the African continent. Recent studies have found that over one third of Dakar's residents were born outside of the city, a statistic that is only climbing with its high rate of urbanization (Pison 1997). Between 2003 and 2008, Dakar had a net influx of 33,343 internal migrants (République du Sénégal 2009). In 2013 Senegal was 43.1% urban (UNdata 2015), and while Dakar occupies only 0.3% of Senegal's surface area, it contains over 22% of its total population (CIA World Factbook 2014).

While both Senegalese men and women have been making the move to the city in high numbers, somewhat counter intuitively daughters today are more likely to migrate than sons. This feminization of internal migratory flows can be observed on the international scale as well. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs indicates that as of 2012, young women accounted for 53.6% of international migrants in West Africa and 50.5% in Senegal (The Age and Sex of Migrants 2011). The majority of women that migrate in Senegal find work in the informal sector, which is estimated to employ 41% of female workers compared with 17% in the formal economy (Granstrom 2009). The facility with which uneducated women of rural origin can find paid work in the urban domestic sphere is central to this phenomenon.



This chapter points to the mobility of young, rural women as a source of agency and intention within their life paths that follow. While the migration stories of the women whom I interviewed were diverse and complex, they also converge within a similar dynamic of structure and agency. The variables that have predisposed young, rural women to the role of the migrant establish a context in which women claim and implement new opportunities for themselves. I argue that through migration, women reinvent their given relationship with domestic work as an entry point to the urban sphere and modern economy. These migration trajectories, forged within a framework of a particular social order, reproduce and transform the matrix of rural and urban space available to women. Migration to the city presents as an attractive alternative to the options available to young women on the scale of the village, an alternative that is often more desirable to women than it is for men. As a result, women do not passively accept the role of the migrant, but actively migrate as an opportunity that they are claiming on behalf of themselves and their families. In doing so, this population not only redefines the role and utility of women on the scale of the village, but also paves new terrain for women on the urban landscape.

### **Shifting Migratory Patterns: The Feminization of Relocation**

An increase in urbanization can be attributed to changing conditions on both the rural and urban scale. The degradation of rural livelihoods over the past fifty years have incentivized families to diversify their form of income, often in the form of a representative that seeks out work in the city. This movement is further catalyzed by the perception of new opportunities within the urban economy. While these changes have

motivated the mobility of young men and women alike, it has uniquely impacted women. The expansion of the informal economy and the high demand for domestic labor have offered unskilled, uneducated, rural women an opportunity for paid labor that is not available to them in their rural communities. As a result, permanent relocation to the city presents as a more desirable option to women than it does to men (Baker and Aina 1995). Women are therefore central not only to the reshaping of the nature of migration in Senegal, but also the invention of urban space.

The literature on labor-driven urbanization in West Africa suggests that in much of the 20th century it was dominated by men. Gugler and Flanigan (1978), for example, note that during this period young men “were more likely than either their elders or their sisters to be hired because of their physical strength or their education” (Gugler and Flanigan 1978: 3). While men undoubtedly constituted a substantial flow of migration at this time, it is also important to note that the activity of women has historically been excluded from migration discourse. As Silvia Pedraza observes,

History chronicled the world of men in public spaces...In this history, women were included only when they left home and entered the labor force, took part in strikes, joined labor unions, or worked for suffrage, since only then did their activities become public and accessible to traditional research methodology (Pedraza 1991: 305).

Women were either neglected from the literature on the urban sphere or else occupied a space in this literature only in relation to men, as “dependents” of migrating men (Baker and Aina 1995). Women were referred to as the “second sex in town,” women were thought only to migrate in relation to migrating men as “dependents” upon their activity and labor (Baker and Aina 1995). With this in mind, I present the mobility of women not as a new phenomenon, but one whose temporality and magnitude has changed in the past

half-century, and which likewise has received unprecedented scholarly attention.

An increase in the rural to urban migration of women in West Africa can be dated to the mid-twentieth century (Baker and Aina 1995). Guigou and Lericollais (1992) observed that the migration of young, unmarried women between the ages of ten and twenty to work in Dakar as domestics—specifically from the Serer region—began in the 1950s (Baker and Aina 1995: 262). Like most migrants at the time, these women migrated seasonally, typically staying in Dakar for the six months of the dry season. These migration patterns persisted annually until the time of marriage, when women were permanently repatriated into their villages (Baker and Aina 1995). A similar pattern was observed among Diola women of Senegal's southern region, who would leave their villages during the off season to work in the city, maintaining seasonal migration routes for an average of seven years before returning to their village (Hamer 1981). Similar trends were observed in neighboring Mali, Nigeria, and Ghana (Grosz- Ngaté 1991; Anker and Hein 1986).

Rain patterns in the Sahel have long dictated migratory flows. Given the highly seasonal nature of agriculture, historically people always sought alternative work during the dry season, establishing multi-directional urban-rural flows consistent with the agricultural rhythms (Ndiaye 2009). These seasonal migrations are known in French as *navétanes* and have long been customary within the Senegal region (Ndiaye 2009). This kind of rural to urban movement was temporary, however, and was equally characterized by the depopulation of cities during the wet season. Like the Serer and Diola women as cited by Guigou and Lericollais (1992) and Hamer (1981), these patterns ebbed and flowed in keeping with the agricultural cycle as well as the social cycle of the migrant's

life, which still remained tethered to the rural community.

Scholars observe that in the past few decades, the temporary or seasonal flows of migration that have long spanned Senegal's landscape have been gradually eclipsed by permanent relocation and the abandonment of rural livelihoods, particularly among youth (Ndiaye 2009). This change in migratory patterns arises within a shift of viable livelihoods on both the rural and urban scale. Climatic variables and their impact on agriculture have been one significant contributor to this phenomenon. Researchers Guèye, Fall and Tall note that Senegal, like much of the Sahelian region, "has experienced a complete upheaval in its climatic norms since the mid-1960s" (Guèye et al. 2007). According to this study, a period of surplus rainfall in the 1950s spurred an increase in rural population density across Senegal. This was followed by an even longer period of chronic drought beginning in the 70s, greatly reducing agricultural returns (Guèye et al. 2007). In addition to what has been considered a crisis of the Senegalese agriculturalist, fisher communities have also suffered in the past few decades. These two environmental phenomena have greatly contributed to the abandonment of rural livelihoods and restructuring of rural economies that have played out in the latter half of the 20th century.

The devastation that the environmental shifts of the 50s and 60s brought to rural farmers, pastoralists, and fishers was only exacerbated by the imposition of structural adjustment programs of the 1980s. Scholars emphasize the ways in which these policies introduced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have contributed to the underdevelopment of the countries in which they were implemented (Kingston et al. 2011). In Senegal, these policies led to the reduction of subsidies for staple foods, a 40%

reduction in public spending, and the privatization of state-owned companies, resulting in a sizeable loss of jobs (Kingston et al. 2011: 119). In the face of widespread poverty and unemployment, this period saw an expansion of Senegal's informal economy, whose accessibility to the poor and uneducated likewise served to stimulate migration to cities (Beauchemin and Bocquier 2003).

The environmental and economic strains of this period impacted men and women in different ways. While a shift in migratory patterns has played out among male and female migrants alike, it has taken place on a landscape in which migration poses unique incentives to rural women. A 1984 survey of female migrants across West Africa revealed that 29% of women surveyed desired to stay in the city permanently, compared with 3% of men (Baker and Aina 1995, citing Peil and Sada 1984). Due to the more marginal economic possibilities available to women on the rural scale, the urban sphere holds different promises for women than it does for men (Baker and Aina 1995). The actions of women thus come to constitute a leading force in both the reconfiguration of migration, as well as the social invention of urban space. The marketability of women's expertise in domestic labor, and their own desire to capitalize on it, is at the heart of this phenomenon.

### **Establishing Candidacy, Claiming Domesticity**

Building upon scholarly work that has observed the feminization of permanent migratory flows in Africa (Baker and Aina 1995), my own research indicates the appeal that relocation to the city poses to young women within the framework of options available to them in the rural context. As migratory routes had already been forged by

women, for most of my informants the possibility to seek work in the city manifested as both desirable and viable. The vast majority of Senegalese women develop the expertise suited to paid domestic labor at a very young age. It is also from a young age that women experience the narrowing of other options available to them, as girls typically abandon their formal studies earlier and with higher frequency than boys. A gendered division of labor that occurs on the level of the village, where different utility is placed on men's physical labor, likewise becomes a salient factor in priming the daughter for the role of the migrant. My research demonstrates that young women realize a discrepancy in the economic value placed upon domestic labor between their home village and the city, where domestic services assume a central place in the informal market. Aware of their positioning within these intersecting variables, these women recognize their strong candidacy for migration and are also adept at exercising their situation within their own interest.

While domestic skills prove highly marketable within the urban context, the cultivation of these skills is unconcerned with their later market value. All of the women I interviewed were highly experienced in domestic work well before they came to work in Dakar by nature of their roles within their own households. This larger socialization process whereby girls and young women are apprenticed into tasks that later translate into "domestic labor" establishes the foundation of their potential within the urban sphere. Oumou, with whom I had the opportunity to carry out extensive interviews, grew up in the town of Douga, in a region less than 100 kilometers south of Dakar. Like most girls in her village, Oumou knew how to cook and clean by the time she was seven or eight. "The first time I learned to cook I was seven and it was when my mom had left

and said that she would come back later,” Oumou said, smiling. “What usually happens is that she would start cooking and leave for a little while and I would watch the dish while she was gone.” Lunch is the biggest meal of the day in Senegal, for which most people—particularly those close to the coast—prepare Senegal’s national dish, *ceb bu gen* (fish and rice). This time, Oumou’s mom did not come back in time and Oumou tried to finish the dish herself. “Instead of removing the fish from the stew first like my mother always did I just added everything at once and I ruined the whole dish!” Oumou laughed and said that no one had anything to eat for lunch that day, but nonetheless her father had told her that she was very brave for trying. The experience was formative for her because it placed particular value on the important responsibility she held within her family and larger community.

As girls’ authority over the household is cultivated, they also gradually forego participation in other realms. Like many girls in her village, Oumou began attending Qur’anic school when she was seven. When Oumou was young she went to school in the morning, but unlike the boys in her class would come home from school around noon so that she could help her mother do the dishes and clean the house. Sometimes she would return to school in the afternoon but often she would stay home to take care of her younger siblings. “In general it’s the women who must do the housekeeping,” she told me. “Sometimes I needed to cook for my family and my brothers so I would go late to school, some days I wouldn’t go to school at all, it depended.” She attended school for six years, through the end of primary school. By the time Oumou was thirteen she left school to assist her mother at home and help her family produce for the market.

This privileging of domestic responsibilities over investments in education and

other potential skillsets was common to the stories of all the women that I interviewed. Also consistent across stories was a gendered allocation of limited family resources. In an agricultural community, young men are more likely to be kept home to supply their labor to the fields. Given both the large family size in Senegal and the cost of education, families also typically prioritize sending their sons to school over their daughters. This societal investment in men is in part upheld by the prominent role of Islam in Senegal, which is 94% Muslim. Tillion (1966) stresses the significance of religion in delineating gender roles, noting the responsibilities dictated by the Qur'an for the husband "to completely maintain his wife and his children, whatever his poverty, whatever the wealth of his wife" (Tillion 1966: 169). While men carry a societal expectation that they will one day support a family, women traditionally aspire to marriage. Families with limited means are more inclined to invest in the education of their sons rather than their daughters, who will benefit from her husband's education.

A cultivation of domestic skills, in tandem with the truncation of her education, directly affected the options available to Oumou in the workforce. Looking back, she explained to me, "[Domestic work] was my only choice. I needed to find work. I wasn't educated and my family had needs." Oumou's sisters left school at around the same age as her. "In general women aren't kept in school though," Oumou commented. "It's thought that they have more important things to do in the house. Their studies are not as concentrated." Today, her youngest brother is still studying and her other brother works as a blacksmith. In contrast, Oumou's sisters have either married or come to work in Dakar as maids. This trend was confirmed across interviews, another woman, Khadija, noting, "Most women [from my village] work in houses...there are some that might sell



breakfast, but in general when you sell breakfast people always want to buy on credit...so it's better to get a job in a house." The choice to pursue domestic work occurs in an intentional framework in which alternatives are assessed and compared. It is noteworthy that both Oumou and Khadija opted to pursue an economic approach to helping their families over the utility of their own labor within the household. This reflects a desirability of the perceived capital and modernity on the scale of the city. Additionally, it demonstrates a creativity and adeptness in which women reinvent their own domestic expertise to create a place for themselves within this economy.

Oumou and Khadija's resolve to leave home and push the boundaries of the terrain available to them is exemplary of a larger trend of their generation. Looking back on the factors that influenced her decision, Oumou recounted,

You see people come back from the city and they are wearing beautiful things. Women have new bags and jewelry and you can tell that they have made money, money that you can't make in the village. As kids in the village we thought about this all the time. All anyone wanted to do was leave school and go to Dakar to work.

These comments reflect the appeal of urban relocation as a source of autonomy and self-determination to young women. As a result of prior education or training, men have a wider set of vocations available to them in both the city and their own community. These might include the possibility to become tailors, taxi-drivers, carpenters, street vendors, masons, blacksmiths, etc. Women, however, having received less training and little school recognize that they have limited job prospects on the rural scale, which enhances the desirability of urban life. Baker and Aina (1995) attribute the wide gap in male and female migrants who settle permanently in the city to this phenomenon, pointing out "the women in this group are unskilled workers—cleaners and garden-hands—who would

stand little chance of eking out a living in the countryside. On the other hand, the men's expertise as skilled workers...is in demand in the rural areas where they can set up small workshops of their own" (Baker and Aina 1995: 264).

This awareness of greater accessibility of their own goals and ambitions proves a powerful incentive. Similar to Oumou, Khadija made the personal decision to come to the city based upon her own perception of the favorability of life in Dakar. "Before coming...I saw people that would come here and I thought that Dakar must be very agreeable, that you must be able to make a good life for yourself," she explained. "When I saw [them] with beautiful clothes, beautiful things, I thought it would be favorable to come to Dakar." Despite the many variables that pave a road for migration, the stories that women shared with me highlight the shape that their own intentions and desires gave to the trajectories they followed. In their research on female Moroccan migrants, Haas and Fokkema note the ways in which migration allowed women to claim a degree of autonomy that they were not afforded within the context of the home (Haas and Fokkema 2010: 544). The same is true in Senegal, where the independence and economic liberty that mobility allows women make migration a particularly attractive option. One woman, Ndeye, remarked to me that she "wanted to do something more interesting than what was available in the village." ENDA's 1996 study notes the personal ambitions that Senegalese domestic workers pursued through their earnings. These included opening a workshop for braiding or dyeing, continuing their education, getting married, having well-educated and well-dressed children, and obtaining land of their own (Diaw 1996: 274). The city affords migrants the chance of membership in a new standard of living. Rural women increasingly desire participation in both the formal and informal

economies. Baker and Aina observe of West Africa that “with the expansion of secondary education outside the major cities, increasing numbers of educated young women move to the cities in search of employment” (Baker and Aina 1995). Domestic work proves a viable form of seasonal employment that allows young women to fund their own educations. The seasonal nature of this migration might be maintained while the woman is young, and become permanent later when she moves to Dakar to pursue a full-time job.

Through migrating, women actively situate themselves within a context that provides them unique opportunities that they were not afforded within their area of origin. In doing so, they translate their domestic skills to a context within which they can reap economic benefits that they can manipulate according to their own needs and priorities. Women’s access to the urban arena can be largely attributed to their recognition of their own candidacy for migration. Thus despite the salience of factors that predispose the daughter to the role of the migrant, women’s migration stories are fundamentally their own.

### **Paving Routes: The Production and Structuration of Migration**

The collective actions of more women opting to migrate, and more families supporting their members in this endeavor, serves to establish a structure that reproduces migratory patterns. Increasingly in Senegal we can observe a “culture of migration” within rural communities, wherein youth see migration to the city as an eventual and normative life path (Kandel and Massey 2002). This is exemplified by the stories of women like Oumou and Khadija whose decisions to migrate were inspired by the

observation of older women that had been successful in their own relocation to Dakar. Migrants are thus not only acted upon by this structure, but also fortify it through their own choices as well as those of their families. These choices construct and uphold a larger matrix that spans the household, the community, and the city to pave migratory routes and promote the migrant's choices at each of these scales.

For the generation of women that I interviewed—the majority of whom were under the age of forty—migratory routes to Dakar had already been carved out by women. Formerly thought of as “chain migration,” and more recently termed “network migration,” interpersonal ties between kin, friends, and community members have long served to connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in migration processes worldwide (Castles and Miller 2010: 40). The establishment of these routes can be seen as a product of structuration, the result of practices that have been produced and reproduced through their transmittal between agents operating within the same social context (Giddens 1979). Central to this structuration of migration is the recursive relationship between the larger structure that promotes migration and the individuals acting within it (Giddens 1979). Anthony Giddens theorizes a social system in terms of its interdependent quality, defining it as “a relationship in which changes in one or more component parts initiate changes in other component parts, and these changes, in turn, produce changes in the parts in which the original changes occurred” (Giddens 1979:73, quoting Etzioni 1968). The Senegalese domestic worker is neither a passive victim of push and pull forces of migration nor an independent agent unbound of community expectations, responsibilities, and power dynamics. Rather, within a specific set of options defined by her context she implements choices that manipulate and reproduce the

structure in which she operates, in this case strengthening the culture of migration and broadening the perceived options available to other young women.

One particularly effective way that migrants have claimed agency within the insecurity of the relocation process is through social networks. These networks operate to ensure a place to stay, a guide in navigating the city, and sometimes even a job waiting for a migrant when she arrives in Dakar. One woman, Ndeye, remarked to me that before leaving her village, she “didn’t want to do what the others did—come to Dakar alone to look for a job as a maid, where there are already so many maids that don’t already have a job.” Instead, Ndeye relied on her own community to inform her of an available position, after which point she embarked on her journey. While women receive varying levels of information in the village about the conditions of migration, most are aware of the risk that they are undertaking in leaving their family and support system behind and actively enter into the situation. These social networks remain a source of social support beyond the initial moment of migration, establishing an ongoing community of migrants from the same village or region in the unfamiliar and often lonely environment of Dakar. A 1996 study on domestic workers in Dakar observes that “a large part of the sociocultural life...is centered on such associations where they can relax by taking part in evenings of theatre, folklore, song and dance” (Diaw 1996: 273). These associations of people from the same village or region serve to improve the quality of life for both migrants and their communities back home, offering a support system and frequently serving to resolve any conflict that may arise between their members (Diaw 1996). In mitigating the risks of migration and also establishing a form of social capital in the migrant’s life, these networks exemplify both a resistance to and a reconfiguration of the

larger structure that she navigates.

The nature of these networks points to the highly social nature in which migratory decisions occur. Giddens (1979) contends that while attention must be paid to the intention of the individual, the individual's ability to weigh and implement choices is informed by the larger social framework whose "parameters of practical and discursive consciousness are bounded in specifiable ways" (Giddens 1979: 73). In the case of female migrants in Senegal, there is a specific set of social rules and expectations that established gateways for migration. For most migrants, broader considerations of the household were a significant factor in migrating. All of the women that I interviewed told me that they have sent monthly remittances home to family members for the duration of their time in Dakar, provided that they had the means to do so. While this practice is voluntary on the part of the migrant, she is also obliged to fill this role by the context in which decisions are made. Haas and Fokkema (2010) built upon Stark's new economic of migration theory (1991) to emphasize the significance of intra-household power inequalities that shape decision-making and the selection of the migrant (Stark 1991; Haas and Fokkema 2010). They posit the household as a contested space where power struggles play out between men and women, old and young, powerful and powerless (Haas and Fokkema 2010: 543). Young women, who hold little political power within their communities, are more likely to be elected for migration on the part of the family. Similarly, locations of power within the household also determine who will benefit most from migration-generated resources. It was only after a few years of working in Dakar that Oumou herself was actually able to keep any of her own income. At the time she was living with an aunt in Dakar, who would personally

confiscate Oumou's wages and allocate them according to the needs and hierarchy of the household. Other women recounted the similar experience of having little authority over their wages within the political structure of the family, particularly during their first years of work.

It is through a developed understanding of these politics that women exercise authority over their own trajectories and push the boundaries of the spaces that they occupy within these frameworks. While an established social order shaped the circumstances by which women were able to leave, their actions also contributed to a respatialization of power within the larger matrix that spans the communities of origin and destination. Migration becomes a landscape on which women locate new sources of power for themselves and for other women operating within this same system, expanding the loci of authority in her life. My informants demonstrate a high sense of intention around both the initiative to migrate as well as the trajectories that followed their initial relocation. For her first few years in Dakar, Oumou gave all her earnings to her aunt and had little control over her terms of employment. As she became more accustomed to the system of domestic work in Dakar, however, she eventually found an employer where she felt comfortable negotiating her work arrangement. Unlike previous employers, this employer agreed to pay Oumou her wages directly rather than through her aunt, affording Oumou to both move out of her aunt's home and allocate her money as she saw fit. While this was a gradual process, Oumou's experience points to a larger trend in which migrant domestic labor allows women an expansion of the areas of the domains over which they have authority.

Through migration, women not only expand the terrain pertinent to their own

condition, but also to their group. My interviews reveal that many migrants view domestic labor as a gateway for new opportunities for other women and future generations. One woman remarked to me that “you become a domestic worker so that your daughters won’t have to.” The collective well being of family in community of origin as well as the family that the domestic worker has raised in the city is a salient factor in women’s commitment to their work, especially in the face of the trying conditions that domestic work can pose to them. Oumou explained that when she decided to leave her village she did so because “the most important thing she could do” was to help her mother and her grandmother. Her family was poor and she had watched her father’s other daughters send money and gifts home from Dakar to support them. “That was the first time that I thought about it and realized that I could go find work and help my mother too,” she explained, looking back. This sense of responsibility for other family members was common to all the women that I interviewed. Another woman, Khadija, explained how she left school at the age of fifteen because her mother was sick and she needed to care for her. “I was at home with my younger sister and my one younger brother, who is the youngest in my family,” she told me. “I came here so that I could help my mother.”

The deeply held value of family and community creates a strong personal motive to seek economic opportunity that lies beyond the capability of the family on the scale of the village. This comes to reconfigure the larger structure in which the family and community operate, and the woman or daughter’s positioning within this structure. The actions of the woman who increasingly pioneer routes of migration and broaden the space occupied by women in the urban sphere serve to rewrite the terrain accessible to women,



establishing new behaviors that become increasingly imaginable and routine for other women. These collective practices produce, maintain, and reproduce not only a broader culture of migration that spans the rural and urban context, but also a subculture of migration within these domains occupied and defined uniquely by women and for women.

## **Conclusion**

Dakar today increasingly manifests as the primary site of social invention in Senegal. While the city presents as a canvas for male and female migrants alike, rural women are claiming this space through action unique to their circumstances. The women that I first sat down with in Liberté 6 have not arrived there as passive victims of “push” and “pull” factors of migration. Rather, their mobility demonstrates both a degree of creativity and intention that have played out within a framework of societally determined rules and possibilities. It is my argument that the woman who undertakes the enterprise of migration to seek a job in an urban house is not a victim of her marginality, but a pioneer of her own circumstances. She grants herself membership to the city through an adept understanding of her positioning within her social context, repurposing her labor for the demands of the urban economy. In doing so, she likewise claims new ground for rural women on the scale of the household, the community, and the city.

The position of the migrant domestic worker arises within a series of conditions that have changed Senegal’s relationship with migration over the past century and uniquely affected women’s relationship with migration. The economic strains placed on rural livelihoods over the past fifty years has increasingly inclined families to diversify

their forms of income through a representative that migrates to Dakar. Women's candidacy for migration eclipses that of men due to their relative utility on the village scale, marginal political power, and societal expectations. An enculturation into domestic roles affords women a skillset that is almost exclusively marketable on the urban scale, providing women a greater incentive for migration than men who face a wider scope of possibilities on the scale of the village.

My interviews reveal that the city presents an opportunity for self-determination that women do not perceive to exist in their home communities. The accounts shared by Oumou, Khadija, and Ndeye illustrate the narrow options posed to young women, all of whom left school early and knew how to manage the household by the time they were teenagers. Women's positionality within the family spells out a compatibility with migrant domestic labor from a young age. Women thus become enculturated into the role of the domestic worker by the very nature of being female in Senegal. From early on expectations within the home come to eclipse possibilities outside of the home, especially in more rural communities. This renders the opportunity for paid domestic work particularly attractive to this population. As a result, more and more women opt to permanently relocate to the city, contributing to a larger shift in the temporal nature of migration in Senegal. A new culture of migration comes to span the rural and urban context, broadening and redefining the terrain of women's work and opportunity in Senegal.

While migration presents as an attractive opportunity on the level of the village, the harsh structures that delegate migrant labor within the city can present migrants with a more trying reality upon arrival. The domestic worker's action to capitalize upon

perceived opportunity beyond her traditional loci of activity marks her entry into spheres of power delegated on terms over which she has little control. The respatialization of labor within this structure operates within a historically-constructed hierarchy that affords the migrant worker marginal locations of authority over her situation. My next chapter will explore how the positionality of the migrant domestic worker is experienced within the site of her labor: Dakar's vast and power-laden domestic sphere.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Distance within Proximity: The Practice of Power

#### Introduction

“The stories that I could tell you are never ending,” Khadija told me, reflecting on all the houses in Dakar in which she has worked over the years. She was wearing a bright yellow *complet*—a long, three-piece dress—and she sat elegantly, one hand folded across her purse on her lap while the other waved emphatically. “Employers will do anything to maids,” she went on. “It’s like this: You work in a house. The morning you get the kids ready for school. You clean, you bring the kids to school. You cook, you clean again. You go and get the kids from school. You clean some more. Finally at the end of the month you are very tired. You are given 35,000 francs.<sup>5</sup> You spend half of it to take care of yourself, because by this point you are sick. The other half of it you send to your village.”

The migrant domestic worker’s arrival in Dakar likewise marks her integration into the larger hierarchy of labor on which the city’s economy has been built. Similar to the female migrant, urban Senegalese women are also challenging the boundaries of their participation within society. As more middle and upper class women enter the formal workforce, their absence from the historically gendered and power-laden locus of the household establishes new politics of labor within this domain. Due to her status as female, uneducated, young, and of rural origin, the migrant domestic worker assumes an inherently inferior position within this structure. Often serving as a replacement or

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<sup>5</sup> 70.00 USD

subsidy for the responsibilities that would have formerly fallen solely on the shoulders of the woman of the house, her labor becomes subordinate even to other women with whom she shares this domain. The demand for a paid, outside presence within the intimate setting of the home lays a tense and even resentful foundation for the relationship between the employer and employee. As a result, a variation of the unrelenting conditions on which Khadija comments are familiar to many maids that have worked in Dakar.

Due to the informal and unregulated nature of domestic work, migrant workers anticipate the potential for long hours and small wages. At the same time, the unyielding demands of the workplace can often prove more trying than anticipated. Oumou explained that many women of her generation held a misperception of the conditions that this work can pose, particularly to migrants that have a limited set of alternatives once they have arrived. “[Before coming] you don’t know what it means to work in the city,” she told me, shaking her head. “You don’t know what is in this work, you think it will be easier.”

In their appeal to membership in urban society, migrant domestic workers surrender a degree of security in their lives that prevailed on the village level. The use of referrals and established agencies can suggest a higher likelihood that a maid finds a reputable employer, yet even these tactics cannot guarantee that an employer will respect the terms of employment or that the maid will be able to leave in the case of maltreatment or violation of these terms. While maids are aware that there is a possibility of finding a “nice” employer, many women keep jobs at which they are underpaid, overworked, or abused because the risk of not having any employment is too high to jeopardize the

position they have obtained. The severity of maltreatment that domestic workers receive varies, yet their relative powerlessness to the terms set forth by employers undergirds the overall arrangement of domestic service.

This chapter examines the power structure inherent in domestic work. The household manifests as *both* a site of empowerment and subordination for the domestic. In spite of the unique economic potential it that holds for the young, uneducated migrant, the system of domestic work in Dakar disempowers the maid in order to afford greater authority to the female employer. In a system where women's status lies largely in socioeconomic class, established through education and financial resources, employers actively seek to maintain stratification between they and their female servants. This difference between women is constructed and reinforced through a series of arrangements in the home that establish a sense of distance within proximity, allowing the shared, intimate space of the household to function as a site for another woman's labor. The repeated practice of these arrangements normalizes a standard of treatment of maids within larger society that both stigmatizes and disempowers maids as a population. This chapter will consider the domestic worker's experience of subordination and alienation from the family through three factors that contribute the power-laden structure of the household: First, the nature by which two women of different status encounter one another within a gendered domain; two, how the landscape of domestic work serves to signify divides between those inhabiting the household and those working within it; three, how the patterned enactment of difference results in a broader series of practices that undermine the migrant worker's positioning within society.

## **Woman to Woman: Delegating Housework in Modern-Day Senegal**

Domestic work can be considered unique from all other labor arrangements in that both employer and employee are almost always female (Rollins 1985). In Senegal, maids almost exclusively use the feminine form of the French noun—*patronne*—when referring to the employer. One woman that has worked many years as a maid clarified this observation for me, explaining, “In general it refers to a woman, because it is the woman who manages the house. It’s she who pays and she who manages the work of the maid.” While the man typically provides the money for the maid’s salary, it is the woman who hires the domestic worker, determines her responsibilities, and likewise gives her the money that she is owed at the end of the month. Maids relate the common experience of powerlessness to the terms set forth by their employer as a result of their comparative socioeconomic disadvantage, a reality that characterizes most migrant domestic worker’s position in the city. Yet while one woman exercises control over another in this arrangement, both women share a subordinate identity within larger society. This shared disadvantage within an intimate space incentivizes the female employer to differentiate herself from the other women within her house. This produces and reinforces a dyad of superiority and inferiority, often resulting in resentment of the maid and her degrading or unfair treatment.

If a middle or upper class woman has the desire and resources to enter the formal economy, she is directly responsible for finding another woman to replace her in the household. Since the maid is assuming the responsibilities that would normally be expected of the woman of the house, her work becomes a direct reflection on that

woman. As one career-driven Senegalese woman explained it to me, “If a woman works, she must pay another woman to replace her in the house...she must still come home [from work] and supervise what the maid has done and make sure the house is being managed correctly.” If more than one of the women within a household are working, it is not uncommon to have multiple maids to fill vacant domestic roles. In interviews, many women emphasized to me that men simply do not know enough about what needs to be done in the household to make these kinds of decisions. Thus even for women that are educated and career-bound, they must also be versed in the responsibilities of the household so that their own absence from domestic labor can go unnoticed. The commodification of domestic labor thus allows one woman greater authority through the direct disempowerment of another woman over whom she can exercise the power afforded to her resources.

It is thus within her own constrained framework that the employer assumes power within this relationship. James Scott (1990) observes, “the powerful have their own compelling reasons for adopting a mask in the presence of subordinates” (Scott 1990: 10). The terms on which their relative privilege is achieved demand a staging and enactment of power to maintain their distinction. Senegalese employers have only narrowly removed themselves from the role of domestic worker. In the maid’s absence from the household, the housework defaults to the woman of the house. One employer explained to me, “if the maid does not do a good job, it’s the fault of the woman who didn’t supervise her well.” While the “public transcript” or projected narrative of this arrangement maintains the employer’s removal from this domain, in reality both women remain closely oriented to domestic work (Scott 1991).



Since both women belong to this disadvantaged group, stratification between the maid and employer along other lines becomes important to maintaining a sense of difference within the home. Judith Rollins (1985) comments on the uniquely gendered power structure on which domestic labor is predicated, noting:

While any employer-employee relationship is by definition unequal, the mistress-servant relationship—with its centuries of conventions of behavior, its historical association with slavery throughout the world, its unusual retention of feudal characteristics, and the traditions of the servant being not only of a lower class but also female, rural, and of a despised ethnic group—provides an extreme and ‘pure’ example of a relationship of domination in close quarters (Rollins 1985: 7).

The ways in which status divides are produced and reproduced between women prove particularly significant in the context of a highly patriarchal society such as Senegal. Although both women share an oppression due to gender, the construction of hierarchy via other identities comes to eclipse this commonality, serving to estrange them from one another.

Tensions between the domestic worker and her employer are further exacerbated by sentiments of mistrust within the household. Employers often suspect their maids, particularly new maids, of theft or promiscuity. Domestic workers likewise relate the common experience of being perceived as a threatening female presence within the home. One woman explained to me that at one job, the maid that worked there prior to her had had a romantic relationship with the woman’s husband. Although she rarely even spoke to the man of the house, she was often subjected to false accusations and was arbitrarily disliked by the woman of the house. Looking back on this experience she explained that being “unnoticeable” quickly became fundamental terms of her employment.

This symbolic neglect of the maid reinforces distinction between the employer and employee, allowing the employer to maintain an appearance of control over an arrangement that in reality is threatening to her position within the politics of the household and ultimately wider society. Scott points out that “dominant groups often have much to conceal, and typically have the wherewithal to conceal what they wish” (Scott 1990: 12). Within domestic work, the employer exercises her control to obscure, negate, or stifle any qualities of the maid that encroach upon her image as the woman of the house. In her anthropological research on migrant domestic labor and household dynamics in Southeast Asia, Aihwa Ong notes that sentiments of resentment were typical among female employers toward the foreign maid. The employer distrusts the maid as an “outsider” who carries a sexual allure for the male members of the household. While domestic workers in Dakar are typically Senegalese, they are otherized on the basis of their area of origin as well as often their language and ethnicity. Likewise, in her research on domestic workers in Yemen Marina de Regt observes that “female employers often prefer to employ domestics who are not attractive in order to diminish the possibility that their husbands might become attracted to their domestics” (De Regt 2010: 117). Senegalese employers feel similarly threatened by the female presence of their maids. One woman, Safi, explained that she once worked for a Lebanese woman who spoke very little Wolof. Her husband, meanwhile, spoke Wolof very well so Safi said that she would often chat with him. The woman resented her for speaking to her husband, and whenever she observed the two of them conversing or laughing Safi’s food rations would noticeably decline thereafter.

The common phenomena of jealousy and mistrust of domestic workers places

them under intense scrutiny within their places of employment. Many women related the awareness that their bags were frequently searched by their employers while they were at work. Furthermore, any activity beyond the realm of their explicit instructions provokes skepticism and suspicion. At one residence where Mariam worked, she would often do favors for the husband's mother, who lived upstairs. The grandmother had her own maid but Mariam explained that she was very young and had a lot of work to do, so she would help the younger maid with her daily tasks. She had never been instructed by the woman of house—who was technically her own employer—to perform these tasks, but would occasionally do the older woman's laundry, carry water to the second floor, or bring her tea. Finally the younger woman accused her of behaving like a wife to her husband, demanding why she performed these favors for his mother. Mariam had no explanation that pleased the woman, and she was given the option to leave this job. As the woman of the house wields unique power when it comes to decisions regarding the domestic worker, a conflict such as that between Mariam and her employer is almost always lost by the maid, resulting in her termination of work.

A common way that employers assuage their suspicion and resentment of their maids is through keeping them busy at all times. Ong notes employer's concern with "extract[ing] maximum service" from their domestic workers during their time of employment (Ong 2006: 207). The same can be observed in the tendency of Senegalese employers to assign useless tasks to their maids in order to keep them occupied. This allows them to maintain a display of absolute control over the domestic worker's activity, reinforcing their own sense of domination within the relationship. This manipulation of the maid's labor serves to signal fundamental status differentials between the maid and

the employer through the lifestyles afforded to each of them.

In many ways, the maid is the only buffer that stands between the employer and the housework. Recognizing this reality, employers become versed in the many ways to extract as much labor from their domestic workers as possible. Common tasks that women perform so as to appear busy include washing the walls, polishing every item within a room, and re-cleaning areas of the house that had already been completed. In the case of women who reside at their place of employment, the line between “work time” and “rest time” blurs, dissolving the notion of an end time to a maid’s workday. “At 11:00pm she might say, ‘make me a coffee,’” explains one woman. “At midnight the baby might cry. My day ends when they don’t need me anymore.” The unrelenting nature of maid’s labor can be seen as a reflection on the employer’s efforts to gain ground within historically shared confinements. The tension that arises between them as they negotiate a shared domestic position manifests in the common sentiments of resentment directed at the domestic worker, resulting in the staging of an arrangement that seeks to reduce the domestic worker to little more than her utility.

### **Distance within Proximity**

Domestic service is characterized by repeated interactions within a shared space between the family that lives in the house and the woman who works for them. This reality distinguishes the environment of the employer-employee relationship from that which governs other lines of work. The tensions that arise between employers and their domestic workers must thus be strategically mediated to allow the arrangement of domestic service to continue to function. “Inequality is at the core of the their

relationship,” observes Karen Tranberg Hansen, going onto argue that domestic work “can only operate smoothly in situations where servants and employers are considered different from each other” (Hansen 1989: 7). The interactions between these two parties play out on a landscape that has been manipulated to signify difference and inequality between them. Senegalese employers negotiate the intimacy of this work arrangement by creating both emotional and physical distance between themselves and their servants. This is instilled through the myriad rules that govern the domestic worker’s labor.

After twenty years working in houses across Dakar Oumou explained to me, “You live in the house, but you do not become a part of the family. Because everything that happens in the house, all the work that needs to be done, it is you who does it.” Oumou arrived in Dakar when she was 18, and found her first job going door to door in downtown Dakar, a neighborhood known for Senegal’s market-dominant Lebanese minority. She is now 38 years old and has been sending money home to her village every month since she started working. This experience of alienation from the family that Oumou comments on is both common and intentional in domestic work. While some maids may become integrated into the families for whom they work, it is more common that the domestic worker is kept at arm’s length. The construction of her inferiority upholds the widely held attitude that “it’s just the maid,” rationalizing excessive work, poor living conditions, and maltreatment of domestic workers.

The emphasis of the maid’s inferiority and likewise her differentiation from other women serves to render her an overlooked presence within the home. The intentionality behind this can be seen in the comments of one employer who said, “When I hire a maid,

I do not want a maid that wears pants. I do not want a maid who wears makeup and I don't want a maid that wears hair extensions.” The use of dress codes is common for domestic workers in Dakar, both to signal socioeconomic class divides and to further mute her presence. Such tactics that manipulate the expression of the maid to symbolically distinguish her social orientation from that of the family's. Bourdieu suggests that it is this through this process of distinction that meaning is ascribed to a social order, serving to “[guide] the occupants of a given place in social space toward the social positions adjusted to their properties” (Bourdieu 1991: 469). While many maids explained to me that they take pride in showing up to work well-dressed, they are often discouraged from doing so. By giving them clothes to wear or assigning a dress code, the employer undermines the maid's own presentation and instead imbue her appearance with a signifier of social inferiority.

This obscuring of the maid highlights a certain paradox of the domestic worker's status, which, Hansen notes must simultaneously be one of both, “conspicuous presence” on one hand, and “social invisibility” on the other (Hansen 1989: 7). In an environment marked by ongoing interaction between employer and employee, Senegalese employers create distance from their domestic workers through a series of explicit arrangements in the home. Oumou went onto recount:

They told me the places that I was allowed to be in the house and they showed me the places where I was not allowed...They showed me the food in the fridge that I was never allowed to touch, the glasses that I was never allowed to touch...At another job it was the same thing. There were toilets for them and toilets for the maid. There are places that you must clean, but otherwise you are not allowed to be there.

These subtle arrangements cement in clear terms the status differentials that disempower

domestic workers as a group. Here, a manipulation of space functions to both physically and symbolically marginalize the maid in the home, and likewise, emphasize the superiority of the employer.

The conflicting functions of the environment in which domestic labor takes place further contributes to the establishment of distance. Marina de Regt points to the dual quality of the household, which functions as both the private sphere of the employer and the public sphere of the domestic (De Regt 2010: 116). While both the employer and employee spend comparable time within the home, their bodies inhabit the space in distinctly different ways. Given the often-held perceptions of the maid as threatening, inferior, dirty, or distrustful, employers ensure that her presence within the home is distinguished from the family's. In her research on domestic workers in Yemen de Regt observes that "boundaries have to be strictly drawn" (De Regt 2009: 116). The same applies within Senegal's domestic sphere, where employers undermine the maid's status through a series of both the tacit and explicit rules of the household. One woman recounted her experience at one job:

There was an open room in the house where I worked but I was told to sleep on the terrace. My employer woke me up every morning at 5:00 AM by kicking me. Starting at that time I was at her beck and call until she went to bed. My work day finished when she went to sleep and didn't need anything else, usually around 11:00 at night...They gave me a cup of milk at 5:00 AM for breakfast but it would sit out until 10 or 11:00 AM when I was allowed to have it...The rest of the day I ate what was left over from the family's meal.

Although extreme in the abusive nature of this woman's work conditions, her account highlights a series of practices that are common in the treatment of Senegalese maids. Many women related the regulation of food that they were allowed to eat by their

employers. This is particularly demeaning in Senegal where the ritual of eating and sharing a meal is integral to values of family and community. Although maids are responsible for preparing the meal, many women recount the experience of being separated from the family when it was time to eat, given undesirable or insubstantial food to eat, or being denied food altogether. Sometimes the family actively denies the maid food, and other times they do so passively, simply by not allowing her the time or space to eat in her work day. Other common tactics to exclude the maid from mealtime include giving her a lunch allowance so that she has to go out and buy her own food. These are generally small and may entail that two women pool their allowances in order to purchase a plate to share. Denying the maid participation in the same eating rituals as the family serves to distinguish her from the other inhabitants of the house, signaling her presence as one of utility rather than membership within the home.

The same overt inequality that is mapped through eating segregation also functions through sleeping arrangements for women that live in the household in which they work. Here again the manipulation of physical space again acts as a signaler of power differentials within the household. While some live-in maids will have a room to themselves or servants' quarters in which to sleep, it is not uncommon for domestic workers to be relegated to the balcony, terrace, or corridor for the night. Some women that I spoke with recounted jobs that they held for years on end at which they slept every night on the floor. If the employer designates the living room or corridor as the maid's sleeping space, she may have to wait every night until the room is no longer being used by the family in order to go to sleep. By the same token, if an employer depends on the maid to prepare and clean up meals at night, the domestic worker's sleep will also depend



on the employer's lifestyle.

Senegalese employers are faced with the task of reconciling the desirability of a live-in or full-time maid with the reality of sharing their home with her for the majority of the time that they are in it. In order to mediate these tensions, they create distance between themselves and their domestic employees. This is enacted through the explicit and tacit rules that tell her where she is allowed to be and how comfortable she should feel within the home. The divisions that these arrangements serve to produce allow the private and intimate setting of the household to function as a site for another woman's labor, denying her any actual membership to the space that she inhabits.

### **The Practice of Power**

The rules that the employer puts in place to govern the maid's day to day activities establish a structure in her life. This structure is produced and maintained through social practice, created through the patterned repetition of these activities and societal internalization of the meaning behind them (Bourdieu 1979). It is through practice that a standard of treatment of domestic workers becomes the norm within larger society. As a result, the majority of urban society Dakar does not recognize domestic work as a particularly problematic system or domestic workers as an inherently vulnerable population. This perception differs significantly from the understanding of domestic work held by maids, who feel largely disadvantaged by the system and wary of its insecurity. Given their subordinate position within this structure, this experience remains largely confined to the enclosed spaces that maids themselves inhabit: the hidden, private sphere. Instead, the account held by larger urban society dominates and

characterizes the widely held view of domestic work, allowing a series of practices that actively disempower domestic workers to persist across households.

Maids in Dakar recognize that they belong to an underappreciated and disadvantaged group within society. Oumou explained to me that “in general, as a maid, people think that you should not have time to rest, that you should work as a slave, you should not sit down. At my first job, I washed the walls twice a week. At another job, I washed them everyday.” These opinions are widely shared by domestic workers, yet they are typically filtered from the overarching narrative of domestic work in Dakar. Aware that these views are largely invisible or overlooked by the public eye, maids that face unfavorable arrangement employment often accept these circumstances as a reality of their condition. Many maids are unaware that they are entitled to any particular standard of work, and even those that are aware of labor rights assume these standards do not apply to them. As a result of the maid’s status as uneducated, poor, and a migrant, most women have not been educated on their rights and have no means of exercising their rights even if they have been. These circumstances of the domestic workforce is widely understood and easily exploited by employers.

Two distinct and conflicting narratives operate within Senegalese society on the nature of domestic work and condition of the domestic worker, one held by the dominant group within this arrangement and one held by the subordinate. James Scott terms the idea of the “public stage” that underpins an established power structure (Scott 1990). This stage broadcasts the “public” or “official transcript,” distinct from what he calls the “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990). The public transcript upholds the dominant narrative that operates in society and serves to obscure the hidden transcript that carries

the experiences of the subordinate group. Within the realm of domestic work, it is the employer who scripts the official transcript, denying maids a public stage on which to offer their critique of this system. Instead, maids must participate in this system on the terms determined by their employers. Examination of the hidden transcript—the accounts held by women that have worked as domestic workers—sheds light on the opaque layers of this line work, allowing an appreciation of both the insecurity of domestic work as well as how domestic workers view and react to their situation.

The exclusion of the maid's voice from the public transcript allows and perpetuates the exploitation of her labor, which becomes both practice and habit among employers. One of the most common complaints issued by maids is the rigor and length of their workday. As one woman explained, "When you work as a maid in this society, you are given too much work. It is always the work of more than one person." The phenomenon of overwork stems from a series of factors that characterize domestic services: the surplus of workers willing to perform the same labor, the idea that the maid should be "kept busy," and a widely held resentment of paying for domestic work. This results in the aforementioned incentive to "extract maximum service," resulting in maids performing both unreasonably strenuous tasks as well as tasks whose principle aim is just to keep her occupied at all times. This is exemplified in Rokhaya's account of one job that she held where her daily routine consisted of thoroughly cleaning the full house in the morning then cleaning every space again in the late afternoon before she cooked dinner. This had little to do with the house becoming dirty throughout the day and more to do with her employer's interest in creating work for her to do. Despite their long hours, maids are commonly underpaid and have little guarantee that the salary they are

promised will even be paid in its entirety at the end of the month.

Maids' powerlessness to negotiate what they perceive as injustices within their work is determined through a system that standardizes a practice of unfair treatment. Bourdieu (1984) terms this phenomenon *habitus*, or a collective set of attitudes and habits that come to establish and maintain a social order (Bourdieu 1984). *Habitus* can be understood as a structure of the mind that is itself constructed through the activities of daily life while simultaneously structuring these activities. Not only has the gendered quality of domestic work been deeply internalized within Senegalese society, but so too has its "cheap" quality. As a result, we see this labor mapped onto the politically weak group of the rural poor, who have little power to refuse their "subsidizing" function within this system (Bujra 1986). The socioeconomic divide on which domestic work operates is reinforced by the sense of difference or distinction embodied in these social structures (Bourdieu 1984).

This sense of distinction informs the employer and employee's orientation to one another as well as their relative sources of power within their relationship. As both the employer and employee actively enter into the arrangement of domestic work, both parties reserve a degree of agency in this dynamic through their mere participation. The employer ultimately reserves greater authority, however, in that her position allows her to issue more demands of the domestic worker than the domestic worker can refuse (Hansen 1989: 11). The employer's control of this relationship is thus predicated on her control of resources on which the domestic worker depends. This class fraction or distinction of socioeconomic standing pervades the system of domestic labor in Dakar, producing a hierarchy whose principles of distinction are internalized by all members of the

household—employer, employee, and family members alike (Bourdieu 1984). Many domestic workers explained the ways in which the attitudes of the adults in the home were adopted by their children, who felt comfortable issuing excessive demands of the maid out of an inherent sense of superiority. These actions of children reveal the larger process of structuration that situates the low social ranking of domestic labor and reproduces its stigma. The structuration of this differential on the locus of the household perpetuates a larger system of stratification in Dakar in which domestic workers remain disenfranchised and disempowered.

Through their joint participation in this system—voluntary or involuntary—both the employer and employee maintain this structure, even if it is to the advantage of the employer. Both understand the practices of the lifestyle allowed to them by their positioning within this dyad, and how the motions of that lifestyle “systematically distinct from the practices constituting the other life-style” (Bourdieu 1984: 170). This is particularly illustrated in the enactment of distance, wherein the symbolic exclusion of the maid from actual membership within the home comes to establish practice that is rehearsed by both parties.

While such practices are common and habitual, they are simultaneously obscured from the public perception of domestic labor. James Scott explains that “the official transcript...helps to define which of the practices that compose the inevitable dirty work of power must be screened from public view” (Scott 1990: 105). Experiences of being forced to work long hours and carry out pointless tasks are very salient to the group that is subjected to them, and define the maid’s perception of societal attitudes toward domestic workers. Recognition of the prevalence of these practices by the dominant

group, however, “would contradict the pretension of legitimate domination,” ultimately threatening the overall system of domestic work (Scott 1990: 105). These complaints thus remain confined to the hidden transcript, allowing for the regularization of a larger system of power.

## **Conclusion**

In Senegal mention of the maid is often integral to discussions of the home, yet this discourse rarely points to her inexpensive labor as a product of oppression. James Scott contends that the public transcript “is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations” (Scott 1990: 2). Extensive interviews with maids reveal their high attentiveness to the power structures in which they operate, as well as the tacit ways in which their subordination is everyday reinforced. These accounts of the harsh realities of domestic labor tell a different story than the dominant narrative in Senegalese society, which paints domestic workers as a mutually beneficial arrangement. In this chapter I have argued that the power dynamic that pervades households across Dakar is predicated on a constructed system of differentiation that is widely normalized within the domestic sphere. This distance between the inhabitants of the household and their maid is further incentivized by the unique qualities of the household as highly gendered as well as intimate and private in nature. The enactment of difference between the employer and employee serves to relegate the maid to an inferior status within the home, rationalizing degrading and exploitative treatment of domestic workers as a group and establishing a larger power structure that extends beyond the walls of the household.

Despite maids’ understanding of their disadvantaged positioning within the power

dynamic of domestic work, both employers and employees produce and maintain this system through their participation in it. For domestic workers their participation may be largely involuntary, determined by their lack of resources relative to their employer and lack of power to negotiate their terms of employment. Despite the potential for challenging work conditions, domestic work manifests as a promising option for migrant women seeking employment in the city. The more publicly broadcasted notion that domestic work is a symbiotic arrangement between the employer and employee further incentivizes the maid's participation within it. This reflects employers' investment in the maintenance of this power structure, who must "make promises to [the subordinate group] by way of explaining why a particular social order is also in their best interest" (Scott 1990: 77). By presenting domestic work as a viable and advantageous form of wage labor for migrant women that have marginal options within the workforce, Dakarois employers are able to maintain a cheap and seemingly docile labor force.

The modern day exploitation of the rural poor reflects the historic qualities of the domestic sphere, which has been upheld by a widely available and politically marginal labor force (Bujra 1984). While this was historically undertaken by women, it is today increasingly assigned to women of a particular socioeconomic class, privileging identities that were not a source of authority prior to class formation in Senegal, such as access to education and the formal economy. While one woman carries a greater burden within domestic work than the other, the domestic sphere remains a domain that is intimately shared and known by both women. This characteristic easily gives rise to tension between the maid and the employer, fostering an unyielding work environment for the domestic worker. This is further fostered by the perception of the maid as a threatening

presence, not only as another woman in the household but also one who has capitalized on the domestic needs of another household as an opportunity for herself.

The motions of distancing the maid come to substantiate a social practice of the domestic sphere and cement the power structure of larger society. As Anthony Giddens points out, “the exercise of power is not a type of act; rather power is instantiated in action, as a regular and routine phenomenon” (Giddens 1984: 91). Similarly, the wielding of power is not a one time event, but occurs through the repeated enactments of control. By alienating the maid from the family the employer reinforces maltreatment directed at domestic workers, resulting in the widespread tendencies of serious overwork, denial of adequate wages, arbitrary firings, and unyielding terms of employment.

In maintaining their position within a structure of power, Scott contends that “there is every reason for the dominant to police the public transcript” so as to diminish any possibility that the subordinate might improve their condition and challenge the order as it exists (Scott 1990: 67). It is advantageous to those that benefit from domestic work that the problems within this system go unacknowledged, dismissed, or forgotten. After several interviews with Khadija, I asked her what she would want officials and policy makers in Dakar to know about the work that she performs. “I would want them to consider that the work that maids do is very difficult and I would want them to understand the horrible work conditions that we encounter,” she replied. She thought for a moment longer and then responded, “If they thought more about this this, maybe they would have already helped us.”





**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**The Duality of Dependence:**  
**Locations of Agency, Sites of Security**

**Introduction**

“You will always be tired!” Exclaimed Mariam.

“It’s true, you will always be tired,” agreed Awa, nodding along. “I leave my home at 6am and I do not return until after 9pm. In order to eat breakfast, you might have some bread and coffee but you can’t eat. You take a sip, clean a few dishes, take a bite of bread, cook a little, maybe take another bite later.”

“I had a job like that too,” said Khadija, shaking her head and clicking her teeth.

“You might be sent to the market five times while you’re ironing!” Awa explained, sitting on the edge of her seat and throwing her hands in the air for emphasis.

“It’s difficult,” said Khadija. “If you fall sick you may be hospitalized for five days at a time.”

“It’s difficult! It’s very, very difficult,” agreed Mariam, sitting back and crossing her legs.

“I worked somewhere for twenty years,” Awa went on, sitting forward so she could speak over the others. “One day there was a theft in the house. After twenty years, it was still immediately blamed on me and I had to leave.”

Mariam scowled and Khadija sat forward, clicked her teeth loudly and raised her voice to speak over the others. “My patronne would have me clean the whole house and then wipe it down again. Then she would draw her foot across it to see if it was clean enough. If it wasn’t, she would have my clean it again...If I finished cleaning, she would

make me use soap to clean the flowers in the house!” She paused for emphasis and then went on. “I cleaned each petal and each leaf with soap.”

At this the room erupted. The scowls were gone however, replaced with uncontrollable peels of laughter. After working in Dakar as maids since near teenagers, the all too familiar absurdity of such assignments takes on a certain humor. Over the years Mariam, Khadija, and Awa have been tasked with cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, taking care of the children, doing the dishes, carrying water to the house, running errands, and doing any number of favors for their employers. They are not only experts of their craft, but also experts on the larger system of this work. Given their sophisticated understanding of domestic work, maids recognize that it is not in their own interest to refuse such pointless tasks as cleaning flowers and washing walls. The fact that they perform them does not signify helpless subservience to their employers, but rather their agreement to participate in an arrangement in which they recognize their disadvantage.

The domestic worker’s seeming compliance with a system that holds such insecurity for her does not entail her complacency with all facets of this arrangement. As James Scott (1990) observes, “subordinates, for their part, ordinarily have good reasons to help sustain those appearances or, at least, not openly contradict them” (Scott 1990: 70). Domestic workers explain that they are aware of their minimal bargaining power from the moment that they enter into their first negotiation with a potential employer. Even if a woman recognizes that she will receive unfair treatment and insufficient pay in this discussion, she may still agree to the job as a favorable alternative to unemployment. Senegalese maids understand better than anyone the competitive

nature of the job market within Dakar's domestic sphere, and therefore do what they need to do in order to secure and keep jobs when they need them.

While this behavior appears submissive, it is strategic. It is a cost-benefit analysis that derives from sophisticated knowledge of how the rules of the system work. The domestic worker's initial migration to Dakar is forged with intention, and her story remains highly intentional even in contexts where she seemingly reserves very little control over her circumstances. This chapter examines the system of dependence that transcends the employer employee relationship and the larger social context in which it arises. A common structure shapes the migrant domestic worker's experience in the city, producing a degree of insecurity that is inherent in her circumstances. Her predetermined vulnerability becomes an operating factor of the system of domestic services in Dakar, which is predicated on cheap and widely attainable workforce. It is thus to the advantage of urban society to reinforce the insecurity of the domestic worker's condition and ensure her compliance with an unfavorable work arrangement. While this system seeks to maintain the domestic worker's dependence upon it, it does so in order to satisfy its own dependence upon her labor. I present the duality of dependence through three qualities that contribute to this structure: one, the status of the rural migrant on the urban landscape; two, normalized practices among employers that actively disempower the domestic worker; and three, how domestic workers resist and negotiate their participation within this system.

### **The City: Struggle Beyond the Workplace**

Consistent with the factors that have precipitated young women's migration to

Dakar, their arrival and experience thereafter are marked by similar circumstances. The domestic worker's position as uneducated, female, and of rural origin predetermines her societal ranking within the urban sphere as well as the options available to her. Not only is this population predisposed to accepting domestic work as the most viable occupation, but also the lifestyle that accompanies this line of work. The struggles of small wages, long work days, and strenuous tasks prove particularly harsh within the urban environment. The stress that the city imposes upon the domestic worker outside of the workplace serves to tether her to her place of employment, enforcing her reliance upon her employer.

Although established social networks facilitate the migrant's journey and integration into the city, her experience in Dakar often remains one of isolation. This is due to both the limited nature of her support system, her distance from home, and the large amount of time spent at her place of employment. This experience of solitude in the city inclines migrant workers toward accepting difficult work conditions and also fosters her dependence on the family for whom they are working. One woman recounted her experience looking for her first job upon arrival in the city, explaining "everything that the employer said to me I accepted because I knew that I just needed a job." Given the economic need that drives the vast majority of migration to the city, the initial search for a job occurs under significant pressure, limiting maids' bargaining power and increasing the likelihood of accepting a position regardless of the actual terms of employment. Women's willingness to accept objectionable work can also be attributed to the perception of a limited number of positions and pressure to find a job in a short period of time to support themselves as well as family members. It has been documented

that in Dakar supply of domestic workers—particularly during the agricultural off season—exceeds demand (Diaw 1996). This creates a competitive job market between domestic workers and assigns a quality of expendability to their labor.

The maid's powerlessness in determining her work arrangement proves taxing beyond the conditions of the workplace. The long hours, demanding tasks, and minimal wages that are common for domestic workers place substantial limitations on women's ability to tend to their own lives and families. Karen T. Hansen terms the resulting instability the "struggle for tomorrow," observing "most servants struggle for tomorrow in two senses: they strive to make a living for themselves and their own household members on a day-to-day basis, and they strain their substandard means in an attempt to ensure that their children never will have to make their living as domestics" (Hansen 1989: 16). The time and energy that domestic workers invest in their employer's home directly extract from their household. As one woman explained to me, you learn to become the *femme de ménage*<sup>6</sup> of two houses. While domestic workers are adept at managing both homes, doing so comes with a series of sacrifices on the part of the maid and her family.

Given the high dependence on domestic labor in Dakar, many employers demand long work hours from their domestics and are resistant to any time off. As Oumou explained, "In general as a maid people think that you should not have time to rest, that you should work as a slave, that you should not sit down." Women that have families of their own particularly struggle with these unyielding conditions. While in a rural setting a Senegalese woman is typically surrounded by a community of people to share in taking care of her children, as a migrant in the city she lacks the support system. As a result,

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<sup>6</sup> "Cleaning lady."

domestic workers are faced with the common question of how to raise their own children while simultaneously tending to the family of another. Some maids opt to carry their infants on their back while they work, yet many employers also do not permit women to bring their children to work with them.

“Needing to go to work and needing to leave your baby at home—or if you don’t have a maid of your own, to leave your baby with the neighbors—that is the most difficult,” Oumou commented. Like many domestic workers, Oumou could not afford to take off work when she had children and was not given any maternity leave. She returned home to her village to stay with her mother, who could take care of her two children during the day. Every morning she would leave her village at 5:00am to take an hour-long communal car to the city, returning again in the evening. Oumou explained that the distance that this put between she and her children was very difficult for her. “I was breastfeeding at the time,” she explained. “By the end of the work day I would have so much pain in my breast because I had not given any milk all day.” Eventually the commute proved too exhausting so Oumou moved back to Dakar. While she and her husband worked, her oldest child stayed home to take care of the baby. Her daughter was nine and was enrolled in primary school at the time, but needed to retake her entire grade because of how often she was absent during this year. While this was a difficult decision to make, it was ultimately a sacrifice that allowed the family to remain together in Dakar.

Housing and transportation prove a constant site of struggle for domestic workers. The vast and sprawling landscape of Dakar creates a harsh environment for those living on a small salary. Like Oumou, most women cannot afford housing proximal to their place of employment and likewise struggle with the cost of the

commute. ENDA's 1996 study found that of their sample of close to 250 domestic workers in Dakar, over 75% did not live with their employers (Diaw 1996: 272). Women and girls that do not reside at their place of employment often live with a cohort of other maids, with relatives, or with their spouse and family. It is not uncommon for anywhere between five and fifteen girls to rent a single a room together. This arrangement becomes less viable for women who are starting families however. One domestic worker, Mariam, explained to me that when she married her husband they prioritized sharing a private home together. As rent was too high for the two of them to afford within the city limits, she and her husband found a residence together in the suburbs—one of the highest concentrations of poverty in Dakar. For years she commuted thirty-five kilometers to work everyday, waking up early enough to arrive at work with enough time to serve her employer breakfast. After forty years as a domestic worker Mariam explained that she has not been able to accumulate any savings for herself as the majority of her monthly salary has gone to transportation.

Struggles such as housing and transportation are further exacerbated by the unpredictable length of the work day, which can prove unyielding to bus schedules and domestic worker's responsibilities beyond the workplace. Women related the common experience of being kept at work after the public buses had stopped running, at which point they were forced to pay for a taxi cab with their own money. As one woman commented, "if you take a taxi you will spend your entire salary on the taxi." Given the small earnings of most domestic workers, a single taxi can reallocate money that would have otherwise been spent on costs of their own household. This not only affects the domestic worker, but also the family members that she is supporting.



In many ways, the migrant domestic worker's vulnerability to these common sites of struggle is predetermined by their status within the city. As most domestic workers are of rural origin, they face numerous obstacles upon their arrival in Dakar, which are only exacerbated by their lack of resources and a support system. The challenging nature of city life inclines women to accept whatever work they can find, the most viable of which is domestic work. At the same time, the lifestyle that domestic labor entails places further strains upon women's experiences in the city. These strains transcend the workplace as well as the maid's personal life. While domestic workers are adept at implementing choices that are in the interest of their own needs and ambitions, these often come with sacrifices. The stress that domestic work places on life beyond the workplace serves to foster a sense of dependence on the employer and place of employment.

### **Systematic Dependence: Maintaining a Cheap Supply**

The insecurity of the maid's circumstances becomes an operating principle of the larger system of domestic work. Alongside the domestic sphere's qualities as informal and largely unregulated, the vulnerability of the migrant worker renders domestic services both cheap and widely attainable to urban society. Scholar Brenda Melles comments on the obvious appeal of migrants for domestic labor, noting that migrants provide "the cheapest, most flexible, and most docile labor...for dirty, demanding, and dangerous jobs" (Melles 1998). The accessibility of the maid's labor is thus predicated on her relative powerlessness within society. It is critical to this arrangement that maids remain a disenfranchised social group, obliged to cooperate with the terms set forth by

their employer even if they hold little benefit for the maid herself. As Karen Tranberg Hansen observes that “the employers’ power over servants results from their control of resources which they can bring to bear on the work situation to effect their servants’ compliance” (Hansen 1989: 14). In order to maintain the domestic worker’s dependence upon this arrangement, her insecurity is both intentionally and habitually reinforced through a series of practices within the home.

A standard of low wages ensures the accessibility of domestic services and likewise serves to undermine the maid’s bargaining power by keeping her in a place of financial insecurity. Employers navigate lowering the cost of their domestic work in different ways, ranging from alternative forms of compensation to evading payment altogether. While most families pay their domestic workers in some monetary capacity, this is often supplemented by non-monetary compensation such as room and board, clothing, gifts for the maid and her family, and inclusion within the family of the employer. While in many ways these can prove advantageous, they also deny women financial autonomy and reinforce her dependence upon her employer.

Given Senegal’s oral culture and the informal nature of domestic work, written contracts are seldom employed for household work, denying the maid any actual guarantee of what she can expect out of her employment. Out of ENDA’s full sample of domestic workers, only one had ever been given a contract before working. Those that do use some form of paperwork to account for their employee’s labor, ENDA notes, are more likely to be members of Senegal’s Lebanese or Syrian diasporas, or foreigners. Diaw explains “Other employers...take advantage of the power differential and play on the sensibilities, timidity and lack of experience of the young girls to impose

their own conditions. The contract is verbal and the actual words of it are often forgotten” (Diaw 1996: 273). The issue here arises not around the written versus oral nature of contract, but the lack of any agreement or responsibility for the maid’s work and living conditions. Matters such as transportation, health care, and time off are often not accounted for in the terms of a domestic worker’s employment. This lack of accountability demonstrates unconcern for her life beyond the workplace, and likewise absolves employers of a formal responsibility to their domestic workers.

Although more women are seeking participation in the formal economy, many Senegalese families still only have one member earning a salary. In reality many Senegalese employers simply cannot afford to pay their maids a livable wage. Instead, low wages are supplemented by other forms of compensation. One employer explained: “So maybe I pay less, but I treat my maid very well. She sleeps in our home and she eats with us. She wears the clothes of my children, she wears the makeup of my children. She is part of the family even if she is poorly paid.” Many women confirmed the ways that they have benefited from non-monetary payment. Oumou, for instance, explained that one of her preferred jobs was with a family that paid her a mere 20,000 FCFA (40.00 USD) a month. While this is an objectively low wage for a maid, at this residence she was given her own bed, she ate with the family, and was given regular gifts that she could bring home to her own family in her village. The beneficial nature of this close relationship with an employer is not uncommon for maids in Senegal, many of whom become integrated into the families for whom they work as a daughter-like figure.

While this system can prove mutually beneficial, it operates on an unequal power

relationship in which the domestic worker has limited autonomy to refuse an arrangement when it does work to her disadvantage. Marina De Regt observed of the powerlessness of domestic workers in Yemen: “they are dependent on their employers, who give them orders, who may refuse to pay their salaries and who may even accuse them of theft and send them to prison” (De Regt 2010: 117). In the case of Senegalese domestic workers, this dependence results in forced compliance with whatever terms their employer deems appropriate. While some women make low wages and receive supplementary benefits, many make the same small amount with no further compensation. Khadija explained her powerlessness when accepting jobs commenting, “When someone pays you 25,000 FCFA, they should really pay you 50,000 FCFA.<sup>7</sup> That’s how it is here, it’s so demanding. They always give you more work than you could have ever agreed to. And you have no choice but to agree, even though you know you won’t be paid for it.” Interviews demonstrate that women recognize their minimal negotiating power when it comes to their terms of employment, but accept unfair conditions as the best option at hand.

While some Senegalese employers seek to justify their inability to pay through alternative offerings, others develop strategies that minimize the cost of their domestic services while simultaneously extracting maximum labor. In their 1996 study ENDA Tiers Monde reported that employers that are unable or unwilling to pay their domestic servants commonly find an excuse to dismiss them (Diaw 1996: 274). The common phenomena of being arbitrarily fired or denied wages came up in almost every interview that I conducted with women that have years of experience working as maids. Since

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<sup>7</sup> 50.00 USD and 100.00 USD, respectively.

maids are paid on a monthly basis, usually this dismissal comes at the end of the month once she has performed her full service. Diaw notes, “The primary reason [that maids are dismissed] is related to late payment, partial payment, or non-payment of wages. When girls ask for their salaries to be paid they frequently come up against a refusal from their employers or else receive only partial payment” (Diaw 1996: 274). Employers justify denying wages to domestic workers through strategic accusations. Khadija recounted:

When the end of the month approached, my employer would say that she lost a ring, a gold bracelet, something like that. At the end of the month she would try to say that she wouldn't be paying me because I stole. Either that or she would pay me small amounts in advance—5,000 francs, 10,000 francs. When the end of the month comes and it's time to complete my salary, she says “I already paid you.”

Allegations of the maid stealing or breaking items within the house are used to both reduce payment on a monthly basis as well as to evade payment altogether by firing the worker at the completion of her service.

The magnitude of the domestic workforce in Dakar crystallizes the expendability of this labor. ENDA's study of domestic workers in Dakar documents that 42.9% of women that go home to visit their villages find themselves replaced upon their return (Diaw 1996). Maids understand that with the high supply of rural, domestic laborers in Dakar they will be easily replaced if they do not abide by their employer's rules, even if these infringe upon their rights as workers and their own claim to dignity. The long hours that women work combined with the demanding tasks that they are performing all day often results in health problems. In Diaw's study, girls reported that “very few employers cover the medical expenses of their employees”—7.8% of the 15-18 year age group—“even if the sickness is due to accidents at work” (Diaw 1996: 273). Maid's

recounted to me that when they have fallen ill, they are likewise denied the time off to go home to their villages to recover, and instead work during sickness.

These common violations of women's rights as laborers result from both their complete lack of political power as well as private nature of the domestic sphere. Diaw notes most maids "do not know what kind of action can be taken to claim their rights and the few cases that have gone to the police have been ill received. Furthermore, their earnings are rarely enough to meet the basic travel and legal costs of any such action" (Diaw 1996: 274). When women are falsely accused of theft or arbitrarily fired, few are successful in taking these grievances to local authorities. In cases where women have sought out the police for injustices suffered within the home, it comes down to their word against the employer's. Following an incident when her male employer tried to sexually assault her, one woman explained that she had considered reporting the incident. The man, who was a diplomat, told her "If you tell anyone about this, they will not believe you. If you try to go to the police, they will not believe you. People trust deputies, they don't trust maids." Another woman confirmed this perception of local authority, explaining "when you go to the police the maid always loses." The domestic worker's status as rural, poor, female, and a maid rarely favor her position in these disputes. Widely held narratives of maids as untrustworthy and unreliable marginalize domestic workers in the public sphere. This marginalization serves to both create and reproduce the availability of the cheap, expendable labor that upholds the system of domestic services. When a job is lost, not only do women lose the income that it provided, but an overall source of livelihood and support in their lives. The insecurity that such phenomena impose upon the domestic worker's life only oblige her to accept

whatever work comes along next, likewise suggesting her compliance with the conditions of that new job.

### **Participation as Power: Strategies and Enactments of Resistance**

The domestic worker's dependence upon her employer allows the system of domestic services to operate smoothly in Dakar, providing a certain standard of living to a wide population of the city. There is another form of dependence that is central to this arrangement however—that of the employer upon the domestic worker's labor. Urban society's reliance upon domestic services upholds the entire system of domestic work. This affords the domestic worker a degree of power within this relationship. While the employer ultimately retains greater authority over this arrangement, it is the combined practices of both the employer and the employee that give meaning to the structure in which they operate. Domestic workers understand their part within this system, and are adept at both recognizing and exercising their agency within the limits of their individual work arrangements. Their sophisticated knowledge of how this system works allows them to anticipate the areas in which they reserve little power, and implement alternative forms of security in their own lives.

While the public transcript would have us believe that the employer retains complete control of the domestic relationship, the unofficial record of the domestic worker's experience indicates that she holds authority over her situation despite her participation in a system that actively disempowers her (Scott 1990). Anthony Giddens (1979) points out that “those in subordinate positions in social systems are frequently adept at converting whatever resources they possess into some degree of control over the

conditions of reproduction of those social systems” (Giddens 1979: 6). The women that I interviewed that had often been subjected to the harshest work conditions over the years were also often those that were the most versed in the minute ways that their employers sought to affect their compliance. Likewise it was these individuals that were aware of how to quit their jobs with the least possible notice, how to fabricate tasks that would excuse them from further orders from their employers, and also who had been most active in seeking out systems of support beyond their place of employment.

Employers rehearse and reinforce their power over their domestic workers through the commands that they issue. The domestic worker renegotiates the employer’s authority within this dynamic through her performance of these tasks. Hansen notes from her own research on this topic, “Using the discourse of servants, the decision not to obey, or to do things his or her way, is a response to ‘too much work’ and to the employer’s ‘talking too much’ or ‘too loud.’ Servants pursue such practices with the practical knowledge that household work never stops. For once one task is done, others will be issued” (Hansen 1989: 13). Despite the strategic nature by which employers try to keep their domestic workers busy, Senegalese domestic workers similarly explain that they are, in fact, well aware of this tendency and could anticipate the orders that accompanied it. “When the patronne thought that I wasn’t doing anything, she would give me little black plastic bags to fold up like this,” explained one woman, taking a plastic bag typical of a Senegalese boutique and folding it neatly in on itself over and over until it was the size of a coin. “She would have me do this with hundreds of bags, over and over until they filled a shelf.” Like many maids, she explained that she was frequently assigned pointless tasks whenever it appeared that she was not busy enough. Given her familiarity



with this routine, she developed the tactic of “appearing busy” when she anticipated undesirable tasks so as to divert them and perform her work in her “own way.”

Similarly, domestic workers quickly learn the measure of their control over their situation, and exercise their authority to its limits. One woman, Awa, had been working at the same household for over twenty years and explained that she never got along with the woman of the house. She knew that her employer resented her, but also knew that the woman was unwilling to fire her because Awa was good at her job and knew just how her employer wanted the house kept. Recognizing the power that this afforded her, Awa was comfortable refusing tasks when they came as a particular inconvenience to her. This also allowed her the leverage to demand certain days off and gave her a platform on which to argue with her employer if she was displeased with a work arrangement. Her employer was notorious for assigning her “extra” work at the end of her workday right before Awa needed to catch the bus. After a while, she developed the simple response, “tomorrow, only” and would leave without any further exchange. Awa knew that in most cases she would still need to do what her employer asked of her, but recognized that it was under her own authority when she performed it and how she performed it.

Given their expertise in domestic labor, maids take pride in their work and like to structure their own workday. The maid’s intentionality in this respect likewise derives from an understanding of how the workday inevitably structures her affairs beyond the workplace. Though employers tend to overlook or negate the maid’s personal life in relation to her life at work, domestic workers recognize these realms as intertwined and anticipate their influence on one another. In this way, women’s personal lives do not passively absorb shocks that arise from work, but actively anticipate and respond to

circumstances at the place of employment. Hansen notes that “workers...do not confront their imposed conditions as passive objects; they actively seek to affect them” (Hansen 1989: 255). Maids’ powerlessness is maintained largely through their low wages in tandem with the poverty in which they are already living make it difficult for them to save money, inhibiting exit from this line of work once they begin. As financial insecurity and dependence are primary contributors to women’s exploitation in this work, maids resist the power that their employer’s and society wield over them through methods of instilling security and solidarity in their lives.

Social networks can prove a strong source of support in the face of the isolation that domestic work produces for migrant workers. Marina de Regt notes that for laborers in Yemen “networks of relatives and friends are vital for migrants’ well-being in general and for domestic workers in particular” in their ability to offer “support and protection in times of trouble and assist with finding housing and employment” (De Regt 2010: 247). The same is true in Senegal, where migrants’ entry into the city and the workforce is often facilitated by networks of friends and family that have already made the move to Dakar. This structure serves not only to help women find jobs and a place to live, but may also, as Diaw notes, “include support systems and projects for the improvement of living conditions” (Diaw 1996: 273). With the very high value placed on family in Senegal, social capital compensates for a lack of monetary capital. These networks establish a support system that women can rely on when they are faced with the common challenges of unemployment, denial of wages, and long work hours that deny them adequate time to devote to their own families.

Another particularly effective form of support for many migrant workers is the

domestic worker's union in Dakar. The union meets once a month and meetings function as a venue in which domestic workers can come together and create more awareness around their rights as well as resources for claiming these rights. Meetings are co-ed (male domestic workers typically being residential guards) but are predominantly attended by women. Mariam, Awa, and Khadija all met through their participation in the union. Since joining, they explained that they have become aware of what they are entitled to as domestic workers, namely decent wages, time off, and monetary compensation at the termination of employment. The union also works closely with a newly-founded organization for young domestic workers in Dakar, that offers a six-month training program for newly arrived migrants. The program allows young, uneducated girls of rural origin to cultivate marketable skills and also informs them of their labor rights. Both the union meetings and this partner organization serve to connect domestic workers with personnel in advocacy that they can seek out when their rights are violated.

While the union has allowed greater awareness and resources to women that attend its meetings, the number of domestic workers in Dakar that aware of it and likewise are able to attend meetings remains very small. As the Secretary General of the union explained to me, "it's not easy for them to know their rights because they are always at the house, always at the employer's. If there are no problems, they don't come here. We have our meeting...but it's difficult for them to come." Women's confinement to the household—whether they live there or simply work long hours—makes it difficult for them to organize, especially in activity that their employer disapproves of. Women that are not able to organize in an institutional setting come together in less formal ways

to create support in an inherently unstable lifestyle.

The most common and effective example of this is through the Senegalese tradition of *Tontines*, informal savings or credit networks that are almost exclusively operated by women. *Tontines* are formed when a group of women come together—sometimes friends, family, neighbors, co-workers or members of an organization—and agree on a fixed amount that they will contribute at a selected interval. This pooling of resources is then allotted to each member of the group, allowing women to fund projects, ceremonies, or create savings for themselves. Sometimes the winner of the *tontine* is randomly selected and other times it is allotted to a group member that is in need of the sum at a given time. In this way, it can allow security to women that lose jobs without notice or are unable to accumulate savings at their place of employment.

The myriad constraints that domestic labor places upon migrant workers result in diverse methods of resistance, varying between workers and between households. Common to domestic workers is a sophisticated understanding of their disadvantage within this line of work, and how it manifests within their unique work arrangement. Maids recognize the central function that their labor serves within larger urban society and know the value of their position within their individual workplace. While they are highly aware of their reliance upon their employer—to pay their monthly salary, to honor the terms of employment, and often to feed and house them as well—they are likewise aware of the degree to which their employer relies upon their service. While the relationship between she and her employer is upheld by a power structure, this structure is dynamic and operates in both directions. For her part, the maid is thus not a victim of her circumstances, but rather enters into these circumstances with

an awareness of the disadvantages that they pose, and a highly developed capacity to anticipate her disadvantage.

## **Conclusion**

Although work arrangements within the domestic sphere vary from household to household, a larger system of marginalization within urban society subjects domestic workers to a collective experience of vulnerability. Karen Tranberg Hansen contends that “today consent to the labor process in domestic service is based on shared need for security” (Hansen 1989: 254). The domestic worker’s status as a migrant—which has been determined by a lack of resources on the village level—establishes her low status within the city, predisposing her to accepting work arrangements that may be not in her best interest. Furthermore, the employer’s control of resources on which the maid comes to rely limits the maid’s autonomy to leave undesirable jobs, perpetuating a relationship of dependence that characterizes the domestic sphere. Employers actively disempower domestic workers through disadvantageous work arrangements so as to reinforce this quality of dependence that renders their labor cheap and expendable.

The domestic worker’s obliged compliance with the orders issued by her employer obscures her own source of agency in this situation. What is not always recognized within this system is that migrant domestic workers have all, to some degree, sought out their experience. Whether in their own best interest or in that of their families, domestic workers migrate to seek out what they view as an advantageous alternative. They actively enter into their relationships with their employers and opt to participate in a system in which they are disenfranchised. Maids do not assume their role

passively, but as active agents that are wary of their disadvantage and adept at navigating it. These women not only anticipate the insecurity of their work, but actively establish alternative systems that ensure stability in their lives. Among other strategies, these take the form of unions, informal microfinance, and social networks.

The larger structure that upholds the system of domestic service in Senegal is not a static, unidirectional power dynamic. It is constantly being produced and reproduced by the practices of domestic workers and employers alike. As Anthony Giddens points out, “however subordinate an actor may be in a social relationship, the very fact of involvement in that relationship gives him or her a certain amount of power over the other...conflict and power are not logically, but contingently associated” (Giddens 1979: 6). Both parties within the domestic relationship contribute meaning to their context through their everyday negotiations of a shared system. The arrangement of domestic service is inherently a relationship between two participating members, affording each member authority over the nature of their participation. The maid’s command of her condition within this formation reveals a more fluid and multidirectional quality within a system of control, and likewise where agency lives for the seemingly powerless.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

#### **Toward the Rights of the Domestic Worker**

In 2011 the International Labor Organization adopted the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers, which established the first global standards pertaining to domestic labor. The Convention entitles domestic workers to the “same basic rights as those available to other workers in their country,” including a certain number of days off every week, a limit to the number of hours that they can work, minimum wage, overtime compensation, social security, and “clear information on the terms and conditions of employment” (International Labor Organization 2013). By mid-2013 the Convention had been ratified in ten countries worldwide, including five in Latin America (Uruguay, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Guyana), two in Africa (South Africa and Mauritius), two in Europe (Italy and Germany), and one from Asia and the Pacific (the Philippines) (International Labor Organization 2013). At the time, Senegal was among a handful of countries that had pledged to adopt the convention by 2014.

When I visited Senegal in the summer of 2014, the convention had not yet been ratified there but advocacy groups lobbying for its adoption. In June I sat down with Omar Diallo, the Secretary General of the Domestic Worker’s Union, who had been in Geneva in 2011 for the launch of the Convention. At the time, Diallo was working on a referendum that would be presented to the President of the National Assembly, Moustapha Niassé, Prime Minister Mohammed Dionne, and President Macky Sall. Diallo and the syndicate have worked closely with Arame Thiam, President of the

Women's national Committee at the National Confederation of Senegalese Workers, to urge ratification of the treaty. Their activity has included a series of demonstrations throughout the country to urge ratification as well as a large gathering at the National Assembly in the capital. These efforts have been realized through the action of the nearly 600 domestic workers that are registered with the union, including individuals such as Oumou, Khadija, Ndeye, Mariam, and Awa.

The adoption of the Convention would implement a standard of protection that simply has not existed Senegalese domestic workers. While it would impose a greater level of regulation in domestic work as well as greater attention to the issues that pervade this line of work, implementation of these standard would still hinge upon the domestic worker to identify and report labor violations. This becomes a matter of the domestic worker's level of education as well as the nature of her work arrangement, which in many cases may hinder her from seeking authorities. As Khadija explains it, "there are some women who know their rights, others who do not. Sometimes when you mention these things to women they will say 'no, that's not for us.'" As a result of Khadija's involvement with the union, she feels informed on the conditions to which she is entitled in her work and feels confident reporting violations of these conditions to personnel that work as advocates for domestic laborers, such as Omar Diallo. At their monthly union meetings Khadija has had the opportunity to participate in seminars on various topics of work conditions as well as sessions on labor rights.

In addition to the work that the union is doing, other action has been taken to mitigate the vulnerability of domestic workers, particularly to protect those that do not have access to the syndicate. Most noteworthy of these is the Centre de Jeunes Filles,



headed by Arame Thiam. This center was established to facilitate young migrant's entry into the urban domestic workforce. It houses a group of young women for a period of six months at a time, during which time underage girls receive training in marketable skills that will serve them in domestic labor, such as the preparation of meals and traditional Senegalese snacks and juices. These skills also allow women a supplementary form of income as vendors should they struggle to get a job in domestic work. In addition, the Centre incorporates courses to improve women's literacy and educate them on their labor rights. The Center was established in 2011 and is currently the only program of its kind in all of West Africa.

Today Senegal is still waiting on ratification of the convention, but that does not mean that support and awareness for domestic workers is not growing in other ways. The advocacy of people like Omar Diallo and Arame Thiam are increasingly bringing attention to the domestic worker into the public sphere, building organizations to address this issue and pressed its urgency upon local authorities. Non-government organizations and international human rights organizations are likewise calling for increased attention to domestic workers as a marginalized labor force, putting pressure on policy change and increased regulation at the local level (International Labor Organization 2013).

Most importantly, however, domestic workers themselves are demanding recognition. This piece of work has strived to voice the formidable efforts and struggle that play out every day among Senegalese maids to improve upon their situation. These everyday forms of resistance may take the form of organizing, networking, and protesting. Sometimes, however, they may simply take the form of conversations that the public transcript has systematically obscured and ignored. At the end of seven long

interviews, the majority of which took place during the difficult fasting of Ramadan, I thanked Oumou for her time, energy, and commitment to this work. She smiled and reflected. “In Senegal, you continue to work. That’s how it is here,” she told me. “But nobody asks you about the conditions of your work. If nothing else, it is important that we have talked about it.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

Uninformed observation of the domestic arrangement attributes the diagnostic of this relationship to the women participating in it. While women play active and intentional roles in the system of domestic work, this reductionist view ignores both the larger structures that have confined them to it, as well as the everyday practices of women to resist, redefine, and respatialize their participation. This paper presents domestic work as a relationship that is shared and known by women. While women in Senegal have always held responsibilities in the household, the domestic identity that was assigned to them centuries ago served to cement their ranking at the bottom of a labor hierarchy that allocated power based on foreign conceptions of gender and capital.

I contend that domestic work today is central to the processes by which Senegalese women are redefining their place within society and along this hierarchy. This is particularly true in the case of the migrant domestic worker, who reinvents her relationship with domestic work to claim the promises of modernity and opportunity in the urban sphere. As a result of the shared subordinate identity of the employer and employee, as well as the power structure on which domesticity has been mapped since its construction, I have argued that modern-day domestic sphere in

Dakar operates on a principle of difference that allows the urban employer to distinguish herself from her migrant worker. Within the intimate and gendered realm of the household, domestic work becomes delegated on the basis of socioeconomic class rather than gender. This difference is enacted through the practices of everyday life that serve to establish distance between two women that both occupy the intimate space of the household. These patterned practices of differentiation serve to construct and maintain a social structure that undermines maids as a group. Historically predicated on the “political weakness” of women, this marginalization of maids creates a vulnerable workforce to subsidize the labor of the household as more urban women gain political power through education and formal wage labor.

This paper has strived to situate the modern system of domestic labor in Senegal within the broader social and historical contexts that have produced it. It has been the goal of this work to understand domestic workers as more than victims of their circumstances, but active agents in a system that has been founded on an unequal distribution of labor and power. I have presented the trying conditions of domestic labor in Dakar not to sensationalize these accounts or demonize employers, but to give voice to a widely shared set of experiences that more often than not play out behind closed doors.

“You need to understand how hard it is,” Khadija told me as we sat together for the last time. “We are like slaves. It is only God who knows what happens in these houses.” Her tone was serious and she looked me in the eye. There was a certain urgency as she delivered these words to me that had not accompanied the other stories, complaints, and insights that she had shared with me. In this moment, it was not the grief

of suffering on which she insisted, but the indignation of feeling cheated.

Khadija has never been paid a monthly salary of more than 50,000 FCFA (100.00 USD). She has worked jobs at which she was allowed less than five hours of sleep a night and was supervised while she polished flower petals. She has been tricked into working weeks on end without proper wages and has been baselessly framed for thefts she never committed. Still, when I asked Khadija about the her personal principles that govern her work, she told me that it is very important to do an excellent job when you work as a maid.

By and large it is not domestic labor with which Senegalese maids take issue, but the system that dictates it. Domestic workers take pride in their work and care about their reputation as workers. Many women explained to me that they enjoy performing their labor when they can do so on their own terms, meaning the freedom to structure their own agenda of tasks, the time to take appropriate breaks from work, and the trust to perform assignments as they see fit. While some women may experience these conditions in their work arrangement, they have not been established as a standard.

“Here people don’t value domestic work,” Oumou explained to me. “There is a lack of consideration toward maids. But in a house where there is no maid, the house is dirty.” Consistent with Khadija’s sentiments, Oumou was largely unconcerned with the tasks that she performed or even their relative rigor. After countless stories detailing the trials and tribulations that domestic work has posed to she and her family over the years, Oumou sat contemplating what needs to change. “If you cook, that should be enough. If you clean, that should be enough,” she went on. “For each job, there should be a fixed salary and if you finish your work, you should know that you will be paid your

money. There are so many people that refuse to pay, and it is always the maid who loses.”

Senegalese maids recognize the integral role that they fill in society, and also recognize the ways in which their labor has been systematically devalued. They have worked hard to secure their positions in Dakar and it is not an exit from this line of work for which they are asking. Rather, they are demanding rights.

Anthropologists have long grappled with the locations of agency in a group whose systematic disadvantage has served to secure another’s domination. The context of post-colonial Africa, with its layers of entrenched and internalized oppression, poses no shortage of such questions. In 2006 Anthropologist James Ferguson proposed the following:

When urban African seized so eagerly on European cultural forms, they were neither enacting ancient African tradition nor engaging in a parody of whites. Rather...they were asserting rights to the city, and pressing, by their conduct, claims to the political and social rights of full membership in a broader society (Ferguson 2006: 161).

Today, Senegalese women are claiming membership to spaces that have been built upon a negation of their labor. This is as much true for the woman exerting herself in the formal economy as it is for the migrant that establishes a place for herself and her family in the urban landscape. These women have come to occupy these spaces not as dependents upon men, but as pioneers of their own opportunities.

Domestic work in Senegal, like most of the world, remains the responsibility of women alone. Today, Senegalese women are actively redefining their participation within society, yet the expectations of the household have not adjusted accordingly. The experiences of employers and employees in Senegal should help us consider not only the

ways that power is contested and negotiated, but also, perhaps more importantly, where this struggle is shared, and additionally, the structural larger forces that are concealed from the entire arrangement.

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