

research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



Experiences of New Hebrides House-Girls Sheds Light on the History of Colonialism

What is this research about?

In the early 18th century, the British and the French colonized the New Hebrides which is a chain of some 80 islands in the South Pacific. From 1906 to 1980, the British and French governed the islands together in a condominium without dividing the islands. The New Hebrides became Vanuatu after getting independence. Vanuatu changed its definition of citizenship to “blood quantum”. This meant that only people with four native Melanesian grandparents could own land. This law has a serious effect on families who are not of purely Melanesian origin, yet whose ancestors owned land in the islands in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A ‘house-girl’ is a term used for a woman who works as a domestic worker. Historically, house-girls worked mainly for English or French-speaking employers. They did housework and looked after their employers’ children. Today’s native urban families also have house-girls.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher set out to answer the question: How are formations of gender and race vital to colonialism in anthropology? To answer this question, the researcher studied settler families

What you need to know:

Studying the experiences of New Hebrides house girls is a powerful way to understand the way colonialism shaped working conditions around the world.

in the New Hebrides to explore issues of:

- Gender
- Race
- Working conditions

The researcher did interviews and historical anthropological research with native women and mixed race settler families from Vanuatu. The research aimed to:

1. Document domestic gender and race relations.
2. Look at the role of native people (ni-Vanuatu) and the Vietnamese in forming the political and socio-cultural aspects of Vanuatu.
3. Understand how the ni-Vanuatu and the Vietnamese occupied and influenced settler spaces.
4. Evaluate how Francophone and Anglophone settlers managed barriers between language, nationality, and occupation.

5. Analyze the formation and the continuation of racial, gender, and power inequalities that affect post-colonial Vanuatu.

The researchers asked house-girls about their work experiences. The research included questions about male employers' sexual abuse and female employers' verbal abuse.

What did the researcher find?

The results of the study were published as a book "House-Girls Remember". In 2001, a week-long workshop was conducted in Vanuatu. It focused on house-girls' memories of their cross-cultural experiences when they worked for a wide range of employers. Native women trained as anthropological fieldworkers through the Vanuatu Cultural Centre gave reports on interviews they had done in their home islands with older women who had worked as house-girls. Most fieldworkers also invited someone who had worked as a house-girl to the workshop so she could tell her own story. This jointly developed method introduces a new way of doing fieldwork. The book highlights concerns of past and present house-girls. It concludes with recommendations for improving working conditions of today's domestic workers.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers and community groups will find this research useful because it offers a new approach to the history of colonialism. It gives historical context for current issues of gender, race, and citizenship in the Pacific. The results of this research may be applied to the experiences of native people around the world.

About the Researcher

Margaret Critchlow is a Professor in York University's Department of Anthropology.

mrodman@yorku.ca

Citation

Critchlow, M., Rodman, M., Kraemer, D., Bolton, L., Tarisesei, J., & Rutherford, N. (Eds.). (2007). *House-girls remember: Domestic workers in Vanuatu*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press. Preview available online at <http://bit.ly/1nAY92M>

Keywords

New Hebrides, Colonialism, Anthropology, History, Working conditions

Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

