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Between ‘Sisters’: A study of the employment relationship between African domestic workers and African employers in the townships of Soweto

By

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Industrial Sociology. 2008

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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Dedication

In Loving memory of my late mother Viola Nomayose Dilata. My Strength. This is for you.

May your Soul Rest in Peace

Abstract

There are just over a million domestic workers in South Africa, accounting for 7.3 percent of total employment. According to Carroll (2004) about 10 percent of the country's estimated one million domestic workers are hired by black people. As an area that is largely occupied by African women the increased entry of African employers adds an interesting dynamic in the domestic work sector. The aim of this study was to look at the relationship that African domestic workers have with their African employers. Particular attention was given to the middle and working class Africans living in living in various townships in Soweto. By focusing on within-race interaction this study is aimed at emphasizing class as the defining characteristic of inequality in this sector.

The main broad finding in this study was that the employment relationship that African employers have with their domestic workers is not different from the traditional relationship between white employers and African domestic workers, as African employers reproduce some of the exploitation that existed in the sector. Despite legislative rights being awarded to domestic workers, a number of the domestic workers in the townships are still being paid below minimum wage, have no set working hours and work without any written contracts of employment. The study also revealed the use of the term 'helper' by African employers, as a way of building unity and equality in the relationship that they have with their domestic workers. The study concludes by

suggesting that there is a need for a more forceful approach from government in ensuring that employers comply with the law.

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