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**“We have families too.”**

**Live-in domestics talk about their lives**

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The Co-operative Research Programme on Marriage and Family Life is based in the Group: Social Dynamics of the Human Sciences Research Council. The emphasis in the programme is on the structure and dynamics of family life, the nature of family disorganization and disintegration, and the nature of the changes taking place with regard to family structure and family processes in society. In this report the emphasis is on the ways in which a number of domestic workers manage their family life, their job and living at work, away from their families.

The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and should not necessarily be viewed as those of the Human Sciences Research Council.

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## EKSERP

Hierdie verslag is gegrond op diepte-onderhoude en fokusgroepgesprekke met 20 huiswerknemers wat by hul werk inwoon. 'n Verskeidenheid temas is ondersoek, naamlik die kinders en hulle versorging, verhoudings met eggenote en mansvriende, geldsake, werksomstandighede, vryetyd en die besteding daarvan en vriendskapsbande.

Feitlik alle lewensfere het probleme openbaar, maar die ernstigste is gevind ten opsigte van finansies en die implikasies daarvan: min kontak met gesinne, onvermoë om kwalifikasies te verbeter, en onvermoë om vir goeie kindersorg te betaal. Manlike betrokkenheid by die versorging van die kinders was minimaal, en die respondente het meestal as enkelouers gefunksioneer. Hierdie status het egter ook voordele, soos onder andere groter vryheid.

Die voordelige teenwoordigheid van die uitgebreide gesin word meestal ervaar wanneer die werkende moeder 'n goeie finansiële bydrae kan maak, byvoorbeeld tot die versorging van haar kinders by iemand anders. 'n Outomatiese "oorname" van die kinders wanneer die moeder by haar werk moet inwoon, is nie aangetref nie.

In die lig van die hoë werkloosheidskoers en die "ooraanbod" van ongeskoolde werkers, is die huiswerknemer nie in 'n gunstige posisie om vir beter betaling, akkommodasie, kindersorg of opleiding te beding nie. Huiswerknemers is egter meestal moeders en dikwels alleen-broodwinners. Indien hulle lewenskwaliteit nie verbeter nie, word 'n hele nageslag afgeskeep en onvoldoende vir die lewe voorberei.

Aanbevelings word dus in die verslag gedoen oor basiese vergoeding, laekoste-behuising, 'n pensioenstelsel vir huiswerknemers, asook ander werksvoorwaardes soos vryetyd en verlof. Aanbevelings word ook gedoen oor voorligting aan werkgewers met betrekking tot die omstandighede van hul huiswerknemers.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report is based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 20 domestic workers living at their place of work. A variety of themes were investigated, namely their children and child care, relationships with husbands and boyfriends, financial affairs, working conditions, time off work and how it is spent, and the nature of friendships.

Practically all spheres of their lives revealed some problems, but the most serious were related to finances and its implications: little contact with families, inability to improve qualifications, and inability to pay for good child care. Male involvement in the care of the child was found to be minimal, and most of the respondents functioned as single parents. However, this status also brought some advantages, such as more freedom.

The advantages of an extended family mainly benefitted those mothers who could make a substantial financial contribution, for example, for the care of children staying with someone else. An automatic "taking over" of the children of the "live-in" domestic worker was not found.

Against the background of the high unemployment rate and the "over-supply" of unskilled workers, the domestic worker is not in a favourable position to bargain for better remuneration, accommodation, child care or training. However, domestic workers are usually mothers and often sole breadwinners. Unless their quality of life improves, a whole new generation is being neglected and inadequately prepared for life.

Recommendations are therefore made in the report on basic remuneration, low-cost housing, a pension system for domestic workers, as well as other working conditions such as free time, and vacation leave. Recommendations are also made on educating employers about the circumstances of their domestic workers.

## **Acknowledgement**

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# **1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

## **1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

South African society is currently undergoing fundamental changes. All social change is characterised by some degree of instability or anomie; however, the levels of crime, violence and insecurity in our society are particularly alarming. Our social institutions are under stress, notably so the family. Apartheid, migratory labour and rapid urbanization have all impacted on family life in some way or another. The family remains the primary force in the socialization of the young, and the weakening of family ties, which seems to have become characteristic of our society, may well contribute greatly to the present instability in South African society.

Black families, in particular, are victims of poverty, a lack of housing, and migratory labour<sup>1</sup> (Mabetoa, 1994:81). Migratory labour is a reality for many. In a study of rural households, for example, it was found that 70 % of all rural household members who were employed were migrants living and working away from their homes (Natrass & Ardington, 1990:179). Some of the economic and social effects of migratory labour, such as the impoverishment of the rural areas, conjugal breakdown and desertion (due to the long-term absence of men from families) are well-known (see, for example, Stichter, 1985). Furthermore, the fact that the migratory labour of males has had profound effects on the structure of the family, is generally accepted (see, for example, Viljoen, 1994:6; and Mabetoa, 1994:81). In his classic study on the impact of migrant labour in Lesotho, Murray (1981) concentrated on the effects of male migratory labour. From his work it is clear that households are constantly in flux. The findings of this work are applicable to the South African situation and the extent of migratory labour in South Africa is such that it is rare to find long-term day-to-day interaction amongst black families. In this regard, Spiegel talks about the "very fluid nature of social

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1 Migration can be defined as follows: "Relatively permanent movement of people with the purpose of changing their place of residence" (Schaefer & Lamm, 1992 :638). A migratory labourer is someone who moves away from "home" in order to earn an income, but who may still regard his/her place of origin as "home" and who may still maintain ties, financial and/or emotional, with family members at "home".

relationships" with great diversity in household composition over short periods of time (quoted in Sigwana-Ndulo, 1994:9).

Influx control measures meant that up to 1992, migrants were prevented from establishing permanent homes in the industrial areas (Makhanya, 1995:7) The result was that for many years the majority of migratory labourers were men. In certain districts of KwaZulu-Natal, the rate of out-migration by adult males exceeded 70 % in 1970 (Makhanya, 1995:7). During the last few years this situation has rapidly been changing, and in 1988 women formed 19 % of the migrant labour force in South Africa (Natrass & Ardington, 1990:179). This figure is probably increasing rapidly.<sup>2</sup> Today, the increasing significance of female migrants is realised (Sigwana-Ndulo, 1994:9).

### **The domestic worker**

A large portion of the female migrants probably work in cities as domestic workers, as is suggested by the fact that, in South Africa domestic work is a very important occupation for large numbers of women. In 1991 approximately 900 000 women in South Africa were employed as domestic workers, and in 1992 domestic work was the fifth largest source of formal employment, after manufacturing, government, retail/wholesale and agriculture (T.U.R.P., 1994:63). It is by far the largest source of employment for rural and uneducated black women (Friguglietti, 1989:33). The importance of domestic work as a source of employment is emphasized by the fact that in 1991 a third of all households in Soweto employed domestic workers (SA Institute of Race Relations, 1992:xliv). Furthermore a recent survey of Sandton<sup>3</sup> residents revealed that most (88 %) of households employ one or more domestic workers, which represents at least 39 000 people (Mathers, 1994:6).

About 89 % of domestic workers are female, and of these approximately 88 % are black (Basson, Louw & Strydom 1993:1). Domestic work is, by and large, a female

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2 The growth of squatter areas is some indication of the continued influx of migrants to urban areas. An HSRC study suggests that squatting may in many instances be the result of a need for family housing. (*Focus*, May 1992:5)

3 An urban municipality directly north of Johannesburg and east of Randburg.

profession. Conversely, Simms and Malveaux indicate (1986:280) that the majority of black women who are employed are in domestic work.

Domestic workers are often forced to "live in" due to a lack of housing, created *inter alia* by apartheid legislation (such as influx control), rapid urbanization and population growth. For example, in the Sandton study quoted above, the majority (58 %) of domestic workers live on the property and another 20 % live in Sandton (Mathers, 1994:6). Domestic workers who are not resident, spend many hours travelling to and from work. They have to leave in the early morning hours and return home late at night (Viljoen, 1994:60), only to do the necessary chores in their own homes as well (Cock, 1989:10). For this reason many domestic workers actually prefer to "live in". Not only do they have to spend less time and money travelling to and from work, but their backyard quarters<sup>4</sup> may actually be an improvement on their crowded home conditions in squatter camps or in violent or overcrowded townships.

To conclude: many female domestic workers are separated from their husbands, children and other family members. Against this background, certain questions about the family life of domestic workers arise: what kind of family life do they have, and how do they experience their temporary separation from various family members? The nature of these questions suggested the need for a qualitative study, which could provide some understanding of the life-world of these women. The study was limited to domestic workers in Pretoria. In summary, then, *this study aimed to investigate the family life of female live-in domestic workers in Pretoria, focusing in particular on the nature of their contact with husbands, children and other family members, and their feelings about their family life.*

## 1.2 AFRICAN FAMILY LIFE

One has to consider the family relationships of domestic workers in the context of the nature of family life in general. The majority of domestic workers are black women, and

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<sup>4</sup> This normally consists of a room, with or without electricity, and the use of an outside toilet and cold shower. (Some domestics have the use of a bathroom with hot water.) A primus stove is usually used for cooking in the room.

the discussion will therefore be limited to relevant features of black family life in South Africa.

### **The nature of family life**

In family sociology views as to what constitutes a family are varied. Family life is seen by some as disintegrating — there is much talk about the “decline of the family”. Others regard families as extremely resilient and able to adjust to changing circumstances. Likewise, views as to what constitutes a black family in South Africa are varied.<sup>5</sup> There is some agreement, however, that the western nuclear family cannot be seen as the norm or the “ideal” family, with all other family structures being considered deviant. The purpose of this research is not to determine the nature of family structures in general and for the purposes of the present study it is more meaningful to accept that “family” means different things to different people. There is probably consensus, among “ordinary folk” at least, that family life is important, whatever its structure. This was borne out by the research of Viljoen, who found a strong commitment to family and concluded that a community where people do not live in families and households seems inconceivable to black people (1994:30). We also know that kinship structure remains a strong positive factor, or as Epke (1983:485) put it: “African family life is a type of unlimited responsibility.”

Kanjo (1994) mentions four features which distinguish African marriage and family life from the western model. These are polygamy, *lobola*, an emphasis on procreation and the collective aspect of marriage. Of course all four of these aspects are at present in a state of flux, and there is debate as to the desirability of, particularly, polygamy and *lobola* — with some proponents arguing for the maintenance of traditional customs in order to maintain the black culture, and others regarding these customs as exploitative of women (see for example, Cutrufelli, 1983; Bazilli, 1991; Dlamini, 1994; Chidammodzi, 1994). These interrelated characteristics are, however, a reality which has a direct impact on family relationships and should be considered in a study on family. Relevant aspects will be discussed briefly.

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5 For example, Steyn (1993) and Russell (1994) have different interpretations in this respect.

## **Polygamy and male involvement in family life**

Official polygamy has declined, due to *inter alia* religious pressures, the fact that it is not acceptable in terms of Western legal and moral structures, and the nature of housing in modern urban society. Many men, however, seem to remain "socially and morally" polygamous (Kanjō, 1994:27). Their polygamy manifests mainly in having children outside marriage although they do not take responsibility for raising the children. Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1991:106) argue in similar vein when they suggest that the decline in official polygamy may have been replaced by an unofficial polygamy in the keeping of "mistresses". Mabetoa (1994:91) states that polygamy has actually been encouraged by migratory labour and that men who migrate to cities start second families in the city. Viljoen's research on the strengths and weaknesses in the family life of black South Africans, showed that men regarded polygamy as a factor contributing to the stability of families. Women did not support the continuation of this custom (Viljoen 1994:24-25).

The result of the "new" polygamy and the sustained importance of children<sup>6</sup> implies a change in perspectives regarding family life. The absence of fathers from families characterizes the "new" African family. In Khayelitsha, for example, 40 % of households are headed by females (Unicef, 1993:74). In 1991 in South Africa an estimated 30 878 children were affected by divorce and separation and Unicef estimates that some 5 million African children in this country are currently affected. Many women also have children from multiple partners who often refuse to assist with maintenance, leaving them with the burden of sole provision for their children (Unicef, 1993:83).

## **Family and household structure<sup>7</sup>**

Mothers do not always care for these children within single-parent units. One feature of the black family that has not disappeared is the important role of the extended family,

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6 Kayongo-Male and Onyango point out that, despite changes in certain features of family life, the importance of children to the family and kin group has "endured" (1991:105).

7 It should be borne in mind that "family" and "household" are not necessarily synonymous. In South Africa, in particular, factors such as migratory labour and lack of housing, often mean that all members of a household do not necessarily regard themselves as "family", neither do all "family" members necessarily share a household (see, for example, Russell, 1994:56).

or in the words of Kanjo as quoted above, the collective aspect of marriage. It is not clear to what extent the extensive assistance patterns found within the black community is due to the inherent importance of the extended family or to necessity within the current socio-economical circumstances. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that the role of the extended family is important: Apart from its responsibility in assisting with the care of the children of working mothers, the extended family provides a link with the rural family. Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1991:108) describe the role of the extended family as follows:

To the African, it is uncivilized to abandon old people to their own resources, or totally to neglect a poor relative's child or to ignore the widow. Even if constant demands from kin-group members eventually lead to some hostility towards relatives, most people still feel obliged to give a great deal of assistance to kin-group members. The only difference between current practice and recent historical patterns is that now people feel more able to reject some demands and select relatives whom they feel are more worthy of receiving help.

Against this background it has become apparent that it is not the single-parent family *per se* which is emerging as a common structure, but rather the female-headed household, as discussed earlier on, which is frequently a multi-generational household (De Visser, 1995:13-14).

The migration of workers from rural to urban areas has impacted on the structure of both male-headed and female-headed families. Workers in towns experience structural limitations such as housing shortages, long working hours, long distances travelled to and from work, and the absence of child-care facilities, which often make it impossible for them to care for their children themselves (Viljoen, 1994:60; Mabetoa, 1994:92). On the other hand older people are left in the rural areas, with few resources (Viljoen, 1994:32). Thus a relationship of dependency between family members is perpetuated through external circumstances. Gordon (1985:xviii) mentioned the bitter unhappiness experienced by many domestic workers living in towns who had to leave children at home to be reared by grandparents or aunts.

The separation between mother and child is of particular concern, especially as it appears as if the mother-child unit is emerging as the most basic family unit. Viljoen found that the aged (grandparents) saw their inability to control the younger, less conservative and more liberal youth as a weakness in family life (1994:32). Unicef classifies children separated from their parents as "children in difficult circumstances", together with those who are abused, neglected, disabled and so forth. They estimate that 1,8 million children are permanently separated from their mothers due to maternal domestic work (1993:77). They refer to the marginalisation of youth. Mabetoa (1994:92) also regards the separation between children and their parents as a major source of concern: "The crucial family social and emotional support which acts as a buffer against the hostile world is not experienced by members of migrant families." She argues that the inaccessibility of parents in both rural and urban areas contributes to delinquency and teenage pregnancy, which in turn perpetuate a cycle of deprivation.

To conclude, the situation of live-in domestic workers seems to represent the position in which many migrant families find themselves. Domestic workers who live at their place of work, and who are therefore not in daily contact with their families have to make alternative child-care arrangements, which may or may not involve members of the extended family.

The family life of domestics is closely interlinked with their position as workers. A literature study on existing research provided important background to the present study. It is notable that these studies were done largely from a feminist perspective. As Wrigley (1991:317) explains: "The instincts, however, that have drawn feminists to social history and the study of the voiceless have led them to this poorest sector among the working class."

Thus a few important studies have been undertaken about the nature of domestic work in this country. The best-known of these is probably Jacklyn Cock's study entitled *Maids and Madams* which was undertaken in 1978 and 1979. Cock sees domestic service as a measure of oppression of women against women (1989:1) and she subsequently focuses on the relationship between "maids" and "madams". An important conclusion reached by Cock (1989:320) is represented in the following quotation: "Are we in fact creating a system where the liberation of one group of women implicitly

depends on the exploitation of another group of women?" Gordon's study, published in 1985, describes the life stories of a group of domestic workers. Friguglietti (1989) investigated the dependency versus self-assertiveness of domestic workers in the workplace. These studies have all contributed greatly to our knowledge about the lives of domestic workers. The main emphasis in all these studies was on the work situation of domestics, and although valuable information regarding their families was revealed, this was not the primary focus of any of these studies.

These studies have, however, given us a picture of the nature of domestic work in this country, which provides a valuable background to a study of the family life of domestic workers. Studies done on domestic work in other countries, and on related themes, help to fill in the picture of domestic workers in South Africa, which will now be discussed.

### **1.3 DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

#### **Domestic work as an occupation**

*A domestic worker is someone employed as a housekeeper, maid, cook or nanny in a private home.* Gardeners and chauffeurs can also be called domestic workers, but the majority of domestic workers are female and this study will focus on them.

The extent of domestic work in South Africa has already been referred to earlier. We know that domestic work as an occupation is common in many countries. Although the numbers of domestic workers in the USA are declining, in Canada by 1990 almost 11 000 foreign women were admitted as domestic workers, mainly from the Philippines (Macklin, 1994:21). They also remain a large occupational group in most Latin American countries (Wrigley, 1991:318) where domestics constitute about 20 % of the female labour force.

Gordon's remarks (1985:xxvi) in this respect, made in 1985, are probably still valid today:

Despite its disadvantages, domestic work does not appear to be a declining occupation. It would seem that while the level of education of black South Africans is kept so low and their opportunities for jobs remain so limited, many



women will continue to find themselves with no alternative but domestic work as a means of supporting themselves and their children.

It is highly unlikely that in South Africa domestic work as an occupation will decline during the next few years. In fact, with the unemployment rate as high as it is, we can expect the supply of domestic workers in this country to increase rather than decrease.

Domestic work is a relatively easy option for those with little or no schooling. For many, domestic work creates a first opportunity to become financially independent. In addition it is frequently the way in which young adults or late teens can help their families to survive. Thus, domestic work is often primarily seen as a way to enter the adult and "urban" society. Unfortunately, it can at the same time become a trap, since domestic workers are generally unable to improve their qualifications, and therefore their opportunities to enter other occupations. The unemployment rate has the further effect of limiting their bargaining position, so that they have to accept low wages and difficult working conditions (Cock, 1989:4).

Bozzoli (1991) describes how Phokeng women "escaped" domestic labour by participating in the informal sector. She points out that, for young girls, a first job as a domestic was a way to gain independence from home and to earn money. Ironically, however, their dependence is reaffirmed when they send their children home to be cared for by their mothers.

### **The work situation of domestic workers**

Until recently, domestic workers have enjoyed little legal protection regarding minimum wages, hours of work and other working conditions. A lack of disability and unemployment insurance, paid sick leave, and maternity leave made their work position very insecure. Until 1993 the only protection that domestic workers enjoyed was provided by various acts concerning safety, training and basic employment conditions (Machinery and Occupational Safety Act 6 of 1983; Manpower Training Act 56 of 1981; and Guidance and Placement Act 62 of 1981). In 1993 the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 3 of 1983 was extended to cover the employment of domestic workers in private households. This act defines the minimum conditions which apply in respect of the employment of domestic workers. The act does not address the salary

paid and the granting of maternity leave but does determine the work hours and other circumstances of employment.

The working conditions of domestic workers are reported to be extremely harsh. In the study by Cock (1989:31) in the Eastern Cape, referred to before, it was found that domestic workers worked the longest hours of all workers, with the exception of farm workers. Of domestic workers, live-ins<sup>8</sup> worked the most hours, some up to 85 hours per week. The fact that domestic workers have an exceptionally long day is supported by the research of Whisson and Weil (quoted in Cock, 1989:31), who found that in Goodwood (Cape Town) they were working an average of more than 60 hours a week. They are generally not paid for overtime and many domestic workers work a seven day week (Cock 1989:31).

The low wages paid to domestic workers place them in the lowest income brackets — they can readily be classified amongst the “poorest of the poor”. Most domestic workers earn well under the 1993 poverty datum line of R798,19 for a household of five people (Unicef, 1993:87). Cock (1989:4) describes the situation of domestic workers as one of “ultra-exploitation”, since they are denied a negotiated wage, reasonable working hours, family and social life.

Domestic workers who are resident (“live-ins”) are most prone to exploitation since their hours are not fixed and their free time is limited. Their wages are generally also lower. A part of their payment is “in kind”, and they frequently have to work for their rooms (Cock, 1989:25). They generally have no option since they are in no position to bargain (Cock, 1989:4).

Research by Wrigley (1991) about the position of domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean suggests that women employed in domestic work, especially resident domestic workers, often lack the means to create a collective culture since they are isolated in their employers' homes. They frequently lead lonely lives and their main interaction is with their employers and their employers' children. They witness emotional lives they cannot truly share. The research further suggests that ties with

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8 “Live-in” or resident domestic workers live on the premises where they work, mostly in a backyard room. They may go home over weekends, one weekend a month or less frequently.

men are discouraged and they experience many problems when they expect babies or when their children are young. The findings of Gordon (1985) and Cock (1989) suggest that the situation in South Africa is no different from that in these countries.

Due to the absence of kinship or family networks, the quality of life of domestic workers is largely determined by their satisfaction with their jobs and their living and working conditions (French & Lamm, 1988:81). The relationship between a domestic worker and her employer is particularly important, because the domestic worker spends her working time within the household of the employer. The relationship between domestic workers and their employers is a unique one, described by Gordon (1985:xxi) as follows: "... a neurotic dependence binding madam and maid seems to have developed — a web of exploitation and inability to free themselves."

To summarize, previous research on domestic work has placed attention on the work situation of domestic workers. Simultaneously the family life of black people has been the topic of much recent research and debate. The family life of domestic workers has, however, not been the main focus of any existing research. The purpose of the present study, as explained before, was to explore this theme. The focus was on "live-in" domestic workers, who were separated from their families for most of their working lives. A qualitative study was undertaken in order to maximize an understanding of the life-world of these women. Attention was paid to the nature of their contact with husbands, children and other family members and their feelings about their family lives.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 CHOICE OF A METHODOLOGY**

The research was done as a qualitative study. In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted with 20 live-in domestic workers in Pretoria.

The choice between qualitative and quantitative research is largely determined by the theme to be studied. When the purpose of an investigation is to discover the *meaning* behind social action, qualitative techniques are suggested (Haralambos,

1991:707). A qualitative study, particularly one in which case studies and in-depth interviews are done and in which the sampling procedure is not representative, cannot claim to be "representative" (Haralambos, 1991:726). However, when an understanding of the life-world is required, this approach provides depth and understanding. There is an increasing recognition of the potential of this type of study as alternative to positivist studies, which are generally done in a deductive fashion (Mouton & Marais, 1990:159-163).

Various techniques of data collection can be used in a qualitative study. In-depth interviews provide the opportunity to probe and to explore themes in a less restrictive way than is the case where a structured questionnaire is used. In the light of the exploratory nature of this study, this technique was seen to be the technique of choice. The advantages of interviewing include its flexibility, and the opportunity for probing and observation. Thus considerable depth in qualitative data collection is possible (Mouton & Marais, 1990:170 & 212).

During the last couple of years researchers have increasingly come to realize the possibilities of focus-group discussions (see, for example, Sullivan, 1992:129). A focus group is regarded as a particularly useful technique where a range of opinions are to be explored and where a friendly, non-condescending method is required, since an atmosphere of meaningful interaction is created. Information obtained in individual interviews can be validated through triangulation. It allows for flexibility in directing the discussion and for the probing of issues which may arise. It can furthermore contribute to interpretation and understanding, *inter alia* because it allows for observation and insight into relationships. In a successful focus group an atmosphere of meaningful interaction is created.

It was therefore decided to make use of both techniques. Twenty semi-structured interviews and five focus-group discussions were conducted with live-in domestic workers in Pretoria. Three of the respondents who were interviewed individually also participated in the focus group discussions.

## **2.2 DATA COLLECTION**

The research was conducted from July to October of 1994. Although it was originally planned for January of 1994, it proved extremely difficult to obtain respondents during the months before and after the first general election in March 1994. Various appointments were cancelled at the last moment, apparently because at that time the general atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust did not encourage domestic workers to talk to a stranger about their personal lives. During the second half of the year, when the fieldwork took place, these fears seemed to have abated and respondents who were prepared to participate were extremely positive, inviting me back for further discussions and volunteering to find more participants.

### **Selection of respondents**

Due to the qualitative and explorative nature of the research and the small number of cases, representative sampling was not attempted; instead a snow-ball method was used in order to obtain respondents. Initial contacts were established at two different literacy schools (one run by a church and one by a non-governmental organization), a sewing class conducted by a different church and through personal contacts. The institutions gave credibility to the interviewer and it was generally found that trust and co-operation was easier to establish in this way. Women who were interviewed also suggested the names of others who might be willing to participate.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted at various locations. Most respondents preferred to be interviewed away from their place of work. In a few cases interviews were conducted either in the room of the respondent or in the house of the employer while the employer was not at home or else in complete privacy. Some respondents, however, did not want their employers to know that they were participating in the research and the majority of the interviews were conducted at the institution through which contact had been established — always a private venue. One respondent was picked up after work and the interview took place in a nearby park. The interviews lasted on average from one to one-and-a-half hours.

## **Group discussions**

Group discussions were conducted at the various institutions as set out above and the groups varied in size from five to 20 participants. The group discussions proved particularly valuable in establishing a trusting climate and various contacts for interviews were made in this way. Group discussions lasted approximately an hour each.

## **Language**

Instruction at the two literacy schools takes place in English and the teachers and contact persons generally use English as the medium of communication. However, during the group discussions (and interviews) respondents soon indicated that they would rather use Afrikaans, and this is the language that was used for all discussions, including the interviews, with only two exceptions. (The two respondents who preferred English were both young, unmarried and had respectively completed Std 8 and Std 10 at school.)

## **Introduction of themes to be discussed**

By way of introduction the purpose of the research was outlined, beginning with an explanation that sociologists were trying to understand more about people's customs. It was added that domestic workers knew a lot about the lives of their employers, and examples were given of customs the workers might know about but disapproved of, such as only inviting certain people to weddings. Respondents generally agreed that their employers knew little about their lives. The purpose of the research was explained as an attempt to gain a better understanding of their family life. I then proceeded to give some information about my own life, such as who my children were, how old they were and what school they attended.

After this introduction, respondents were asked to talk about their children. During group discussions the conversation was allowed to follow its course from there, and some observations previously made during interviews were "tested" to see whether participants agreed with conclusions reached. The interviews were semi-structured. They were, however, not conducted according to an interview schedule, so that a free conversation was possible. The following themes were covered during the discussions:

- *Biographical background such as age, place of birth, school standard, employment history, maternity arrangements;*
- *Children's ages, sexes, child care, care during early childhood, school attendance, school standards, presence of grandchildren;*
- *Nature of relationships with husbands or boyfriends, frequency and nature of contact, assistance/maintenance;*
- *Relationship and frequency of contact with mothers, brothers, sisters, in-laws and others;*
- *Nature of work: hours, duties, facilities such as TV; amount of time off work, e.g. weekends or afternoons free;*
- *Nature of friendships, activities during times off.*

Confidentiality was strongly emphasized. Owing to the fact that respondents only relaxed once complete privacy had been achieved, it was decided not to tape-record the interviews. Comprehensive field notes were made within five minutes after each interview or group discussion. These notes were analyzed and form the basis for the discussion in the following section. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### **3. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 THE LIVES OF TWO RESPONDENTS: LIESBET AND MARIA**

The domestic workers who were interviewed during the course of this study gladly shared information about their lives. Without their willingness to talk about their lives and their feelings this study would not have been possible. During the course of the interviews the uniqueness of each individual in relation to their particular set of circumstances was underlined. However, certain patterns did emerge, and it is in terms of these patterns that some general picture of the family life of live-in domestic workers can be sketched. The lives of Liesbet and Maria are certainly unique, yet in some sense they are also "typical" of present-day live-in domestics.<sup>9</sup> The discussion of the findings is preceded by a look at the lives of these two respondents.

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<sup>9</sup> Reference to case studies is done in the present tense, throughout this report. It is accepted that many details of the respondents may have changed since the interviews and group

## LIESBET

Liesbet, 46 years old, who obtained Std 6, works as a live-in domestic worker in an upper-middle class suburb of Pretoria. She has a strong personality, a pleasant disposition, and is a leader in her community — during the national elections in April 1994 she gave informal voter education to other domestic workers, and took them with her to the polling station on the day of voting.

Liesbet was one of seven children. Her father, who was a shop-keeper, had not been prepared to educate the daughters, and she started doing domestic work since her father did not provide the girls with clothes. She was thus forced into this occupation at a young age in order to emancipate from her home and to become financially independent.

Liesbet has been working for the same employer for 14 years. Previously, she had four days a month "off" to go home, i.e. from Thursday to Sunday, but at present she goes to her home in Mamelodi<sup>10</sup> every second weekend. During the week she works from 08:00 to 13:00 and then from 14:00 to whenever her work is done (including dishes after supper), on Saturdays from 08:00 to whenever her work is done, and on Sundays from 08:00 to 13:00 or until 11:00 if she is attending church in Mamelodi in the afternoon. She earns R300 a month plus a pension of R47, a room, food and R1 an hour for baby-sitting at night. Liesbet is allowed unlimited visits from friends in her room.

Liesbet relates that her employer often says she is "one of the family". Yet their relationship can be described as "unstable" — a kind of "love-hate" relationship. She has been dismissed on at least three occasions, but then asked to return since a suitable replacement could not be found, especially since the employers frequently go out at night, and many domestic workers do not want to do a great deal of baby-sitting on top of their house work. The employer has helped Liesbet to finance a house in Mamelodi, yet when Liesbet asks for assistance with marital problems, she is told that she is an adult who must solve her own problems. Liesbet also relates that she is not allowed to sit on the furniture inside the house. She may sit on a piece of carpet on the kitchen floor. When she does baby-sitting she sleeps on a stretcher in the kitchen but is woken up to go outside when the employers return. She is not allowed to bring friends into the house, and when her sick child stayed with her recently, the boy had to remain in her room while she was working in the house.

On the other hand Liesbet can be regarded as a true nanny for the children of the household. She is even allowed to spank them on the behind if they

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discussions. In the sense that these details are presented as "typical", the use of the present time is an aid in promoting *verstehen* ("understanding") of the life-world of these people.

10 A Black township to the east of Pretoria.



*misbehave.*

*This is the one side of Liesbet's life. What one should not forget, however, is that she is at the same time a mother and wife: Liesbet has two children, a boy aged 11 and a daughter aged 18, the latter from a previous liaison. The boy is living with her husband in the house in Mamelodi, whilst the daughter is living with relatives.*

*Liesbet has serious family problems. Her husband is a violent man, and recently she was forced to spend a month in hiding because she was afraid that he might kill her. She has been considering divorce for a long time, but is too scared to start proceedings, since she fears for her life. The husband frequently beats up the boy and Liesbet has been to a welfare organization and to the police for assistance more than once. She relates an incident where the boy was beaten with an electrical wire, and his stomach pinched black and blue. Unfortunately, since she does not live at home, her hands are tied and she is unable to protect the child. The daughter was chased away by the husband and has since been living with various relatives. The daughter is causing Liesbet distress, since she has a boyfriend and Liesbet is afraid she might leave school (she is in Std V at present, i.e. the seventh grade). Unfortunately, as she sees the child so infrequently, she feels unable to control the situation, and her only contribution is the money she has to pay for the child's care. Since both her parents as well as her parents-in-law are no longer alive, Liesbet does not have any parental support.*

*The fact that Liesbet plays such an important role in caring for her employer's children represents a deep irony since she is at the same time unable to care properly for her own children. In this respect her situation is representative of those of many domestic workers.*

Liesbet has been a domestic worker for many years, and has accepted that this is the work that she will probably be doing for the rest of her life. Her life represents the struggle of a live-in domestic worker to care for her children in the way that she deems proper and necessary. The life of Maria, on the other hand, is representative of the extent to which family obligations force some women into domestic work at a young age and against their will.

### **MARIA**

*Maria is 25 years old. She is unmarried and does not have any children. She has a brother, and two sisters, one younger and one older than herself. Her brother is married (and has two children), so is the one sister, who lives, together with her toddler and her mother on "the farm", i.e. a rural area near Warmbaths, north of*

*Hammanskraal*<sup>11</sup>.

*Maria completed her schooling and has matric*<sup>12</sup> *She originally wanted to become a nurse, but was not accepted at the college where she had applied. When she was in her final school year, her father passed away and Maria felt that she had to take up employment in order to assist her mother. Her mother, who was a live-in domestic, returned to work two months after the death of her husband, and Maria and her younger sister then stayed at home on their own.*

*Maria would love to continue studying, and has set her heart on doing a computer programming course. At present, however, she is working as a live-in domestic since her mother is no longer able to work and relies on Maria's income for survival. When Maria started doing domestic work, she shared her mother's room at work.*

*Maria works for various families*<sup>13</sup> *but at the time of the interview she had just lost one job of two days a week, and also the room that came with it. These employers had sold their house and moved away. This has forced Maria to take up residence in Mamelodi. At present she is renting a room, together with a friend, for R60 a month*<sup>14</sup> *She is extremely dissatisfied, since the room has a dirt floor, and there is no electricity, and neither doorknobs nor windowknobs. Her transport to and from work now also costs her a great deal and she has to spend more on food than before. This, together with the loss of income of two days a week, means that she finds it extremely difficult to send her mother any money. She used to go home once a month and took her mother a substantial portion of her income. Ironically, the reason for her taking up employment in the first place was to assist her mother — now she is unable to do even that.*

*Contact with her mother is very difficult, since the latter does not have easy access to a telephone, and has to go into town to make calls. This means that if Maria is for some reason unable to go home, or she has some urgent message, there is no easy method of communication.*

*Although Maria has no children, she indicates that she loves children, but that*

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11 Hammanskraal is a semi-rural black area between Pretoria and Warmbaths, about 80 kilometers directly north of Pretoria.

12 Std 10, or twelfth grade.

13 Some domestics do "piece-work", in other words, they work for more than one family on different days of the week. This brings in more money, but is also harder work since all the housework, laundry and ironing have to be done on one or two days.

14 At the time of the interview, Maria was, therefore, strictly speaking, not a live-in domestic. Up to the previous month, however, she had been "living in" since she had taken up domestic work some years ago. It was decided to include her in the study, since her predicament regarding housing illustrates the uncertain position of many live-ins, who are totally dependent on the plans of their employers.

she would like to postpone childbearing until she has been able to further her career. She realizes that her qualifications actually allow her to move out of domestic work, but owing to the fact that she has to take care of her mother, she cannot afford to study at present. She is optimistic, however, that it will still be possible (see postscript). Maria does consider marriage, but not with her present boyfriend (who works at a pharmacy). She is sceptical about finding a husband who would tolerate her working. According to Maria she does not want to be "expensive" as far as *lobola* is concerned — even though she can bring in a substantial amount — since she feels that this will bind her unnecessarily. She feels that if she does experience marital problems, too high *lobola* would make it difficult to break loose. This suggests some scepticism regarding marriage.

Free time on Saturdays is taken up by choir practice and performances. Maria is a very active member of a local choir, in fact, she is the youngest member on the choir committee. (Another, much older respondent, who sings in the same choir, spoke with great respect of Maria's talents and organizational skills.) The choir practises in a local church building, and on Sundays the choir members attend a church service and continue choir singing. The members of the choir are very supportive of each other and at present they are contributing towards Maria's transport costs to attend choir practice.

Maria is friendly, helpful and clearly intelligent. She appears to have a gentle nature and during the interview she displayed a fine sense of humour. She is very keen to explain "our customs", and has offered more interviews as well as assistance in introducing other people, including other choir members. The interview was conducted in the home of one of her employers, who was at work. She seemed at home in this house. We sat in the living-room and she made tea. She has access to the telephone and reported an easy relationship with this employer.

**Post-script:** About a month after this interview, Maria fell pregnant. The employer at whose house the interview was held, also sold the house and moved away from Pretoria.

These two cases represent but two of the respondents whose lives are in some way or another "typical" of that of a domestic worker. In the rest of the discussion, general trends that were observed are reported on and highlighted with examples which are presented as case studies.

The discussion opens with some background on the respondents, where they grew up and their status as domestic workers. The main focus of the research was on the family relationships of the respondents. It was nevertheless important to understand who the respondents were and what their background was, in order to obtain a better

understanding of their position as family members. Their family ties are then discussed in terms of their relationships with their children, with their husbands/boyfriends and with other family members. A final consideration is their position as members of a community.

### 3.2 PERSONAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESPONDENTS

Table 3.1 summarizes the age and level of education of the respondents.

**TABLE 3.1: AGE AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION**

Respondent	Age	Educational level <sup>15</sup>
Liesbet	45	Std 6
Susanna	45	Sub B
Elsie	59	Std 3
Sarie	44	Std 1, currently attending
Betty	37	none
Maria	25	Std 10
Marta	53	Std 5
Paulina	53	Std 3
Josephina	37	Std 3
Lena	44	none
Lisa	35	Std 3, currently attending
Magriet	32	Std 5, currently attending
Ella	46	Std 9
Jeminah	22	Std 8
Rose	30	Std 5
Susan	32	Std 5
Lettie	55	none
Anna	33	Std 1
Elisabeth	40	none
Fancy	29	Std 2

#### Age

The oldest respondent was Elsie who, at 59, was getting close to retirement age. Her employer of many years, with whom she had a particularly close relationship, was currently in an old-age home and Elsie worked for her once a week. She intended to

<sup>15</sup> This refers to the highest level *completed*. Respondents who are currently still attending school may be in a class one or two levels higher than the one completed.

continue working until this woman no longer needed her help. The youngest respondent, Jeminah, was only 22. She left school after completing Std VIII the previous year in order to earn money to assist her family.

### **Level of education**

Four of the respondents had received no schooling whatsoever. They were women who had grown up on farms where schooling for girls was simply not an option. Others who attended school on farms indicated that, although they had gone to school, the schooling when they were young was inadequate, and Anna, for example, does not think that her Std 1 is of much use, since the teacher at the farm school which she attended was very unreliable and did not come to the school regularly.

By contrast, one respondent (Maria) had completed matric. Ella had to leave school after completing Std IX in order to help the family earn money, as did Jeminah mentioned above. Many of the women who had received little or no schooling had brothers who had completed more years of schooling than they had and it was frequently for the sake of financing a brother's education that a woman had to leave school and find employment. An example was Betty, who had no schooling whatsoever, but whose brother was a teacher. Yet the respondents all regarded education as extremely important and those with little or no schooling were clearly embarrassed by the situation. They took pains to explain that they were not at fault and that it had been the result of circumstances beyond their control. Sarie, who was attending night school, stated that "*so lank as wat 'n mens lewe is daar dinge om te leer.*"<sup>16</sup> Many respondents were emphatic that their children should have better educational qualifications than they themselves had had. This theme will be discussed again later on.

- *Both Rose and her sister, who is employed at the neighbouring house, completed Std 5 but then left school in order to work and help pay for the education of their brother. The brother completed matric and has a well-paid job at a bakery.*

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16 "As long as one lives there are things that one can learn."

- *As a child, Lisa did not have the opportunity to go to school for more than just a few years, because her parents had no money. However, her brother was allowed to complete his education. Lisa is now attending night classes four nights a week and will be writing examinations to complete Std 4 this year. She finishes work at 17:00 and starts the hour-long walk to "school" at 17:15. She intends to complete matric, and feels that she should study "om slim te word"<sup>17</sup>. She is not sure how matric will benefit her in finding a better job, but wants to do it anyway. Her main problem is that her current employers are leaving Pretoria at the end of the year and that she does not know where she will find another job, or whether she will still be in a position to attend school.*
- *Josephina completed Std 3. She appears to be highly intelligent and says that many of her employers have told her that she should have completed her schooling as she is bright. Her brother has just completed his matric part time and intends to study law. She has been unable to improve her own schooling as her work circumstances have never allowed her to attend classes at night. She frequently has to baby-sit the children of her employer on week nights.*

## Childhood

Eight of the respondents had grown up on farms and most of the others were also from rural areas. The distances that they were working from home highlighted their migratory status. Some respondents had started work on the farms, and others in towns, but there was a general agreement that Pretoria had more to offer by way of jobs than smaller towns. Many respondents' mothers had worked in farm houses. Others had worked as domestics in cities or towns, and the respondents followed them.

Most respondents grew up with their own parents or mothers. Three of the respondents grew up with relatives. Marta is one example and she does not remember her childhood as particularly happy, and says that she did not know the love of parents. Paulina was brought up by her uncle and had to leave school at a young age. Her words are: "... want jy weet familie hulle is nie soos jou eie ouers nie."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "... to become clever."

<sup>18</sup> "... because, you know, relatives they are not like your own parents."

### 3.3 EMPLOYMENT SITUATION

#### The choice of domestic service as employment

The emphasis of this study was on the family life of domestic workers. Being a domestic worker does, however, directly impact on the personal and family life of a woman, and issues related to employment were explored in order to obtain a better understanding of the options and constraints on domestic workers.

In this respect respondents were asked about their reasons for taking up domestic work, and it was not surprising that domestic work was not the job of choice for these women. They turned to domestic work because there were no other options and because they needed money. Not one respondent indicated that this would be their occupation of choice and there was general agreement during the group discussions, for example, that they would not want their children to become domestic workers (although some daughters, like the eldest two of Paulina, were already employed as domestic workers — a fact that caused great sadness).

Various respondents began by working in farm-houses. As Betty puts it, she "fell into" domestic work. The family circumstances of many respondents actually "pushed" them into domestic work. It has already been explained that a number of the respondents had to start working in order to help educate their brothers. Others were forced into taking up employment at a young age in order to support their parents. This emphasises the interrelationship between family and work.

- *Josephina has been employed as a domestic worker since she started working. She has tried in different ways to improve her situation. She attended sewing classes on her day off work and has been offered a job as a seamstress, but that did not provide her with accommodation in town and her home is too far away to travel every day. She subsequently did training as a hairdresser and supplements her income from time to time by doing hair-dressing in her room. This is not easy, however, as her employer discourages strangers on the property.*
- *The case of Liesbet has already been discussed at length. She took up domestic work because her father did not supply her with clothes. In her case domestic work was probably a way of gaining independence from home.*

## Relationships with employers

The relationship between employer and employee has been dealt with by other studies, as was indicated in the introduction. The relationships between domestic workers and their employers have a direct bearing on their relationships with their families and relatives. As was indicated in the literature review, the relationship is a very intimate one, since the domestic workers share the daily domestic lives of their employers. There seems to be a lot of ambivalence in these relationships — in such an intimate relationship it is not uncommon to find strong emotional attachment and even dependency coupled with resentment and bitterness. During the interviews no specific attempts were made to probe this relationship, since the focus was on family relationships. The issue was, however, inevitably raised during discussions and it was frequently linked to the question of finances.

Relationships with employers varied. Only one respondent (Elsie) was unequivocally positive in her praise for and loyalty to her employer. She had for many years been employed by an author (and the employer's husband before his death). She acted as housekeeper and nanny while the widowed author travelled. She had been well looked after and had a good pension waiting for her. She and the now aged woman had a particularly close relationship and she often borrowed the old lady's dresses, handbags or shoes.

However, the case of Elsie was an exception with most respondents expressing frustration and a few respondents being extremely unhappy in their jobs. This sentiment was expressed particularly during group discussions. Respondents raised all kinds of problems regarding the work situation. There was a feeling that they lacked dignity, or, as a respondent in a group discussion said, "*Ons wil maar net mense wees.*"<sup>19</sup> Lena attributed the fact that she had managed to keep her job for many years to the fact that "*Ek hou maar net my mond toe*"<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> "We just want to be *people*."

<sup>20</sup> "I just keep my mouth shut."



It is important to note that their relationship with employers had an impact on the relationships of domestics with their families. This included the difficulties experienced in communicating with their families because employers did not like them to receive telephone calls, the lack of understanding on the part of employers when funerals<sup>21</sup> had to be attended, and long working hours.

- *Anna is happy with the salary she receives. Her main problem is that her working hours are extremely long. She has to stay in the house even after her work has been completed in order to answer the telephone. This means that in practice she is working from 6:00 until 18:00 daily. On Saturdays she works until 13:00 and on Sundays until 11:00. This means that even though she would be able to afford going home more frequently, her contact with her family is limited to the one weekend a month that she is free. If she complains, her employer tells her that if she is not satisfied with her working conditions, she is free to find other employment.*

## **Salaries**

Frequently an ambiguous relationship seemed to exist between the domestic worker and her employer, with the issue of low salaries dominating all others. Many respondents would qualify their praise for employers who were kind to them, or "nice" people to work for, with complaints about their low salaries. The impression was that, although working for one family was pleasant in the sense that the workload was generally lighter and the security greater, "piece" jobs were preferred because more money could be earned that way. Various respondents supplemented (or wanted to supplement) the income obtained through full-time employment with odd jobs, such as doing laundry for a relative of the employer, or even taking another job on a Thursday, which is a day off for many domestic workers.

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<sup>21</sup> Within the black community attendance of funerals is an integral part of community life. A person is expected to attend weddings and funerals, not only of those related to you, but of all members of the community to which you belong. Furthermore, relationships among members of the extended family network are complex and it can therefore happen that many funerals, of various family members, have to be attended.

- *Sarie works for a divorced father with one child living with him. Her work does not keep her busy all week and on Tuesdays, for example, she often finishes by 09:00. She would love to take on another job in order to supplement her income, but her employer, who employs her full time, does not allow this. His reason is that he does not want her to find a better job and then leave his employment.*

During a group discussion the issues of illness and holidays were raised. Someone explained that she did not get paid for a workday missed for whatever reason, yet when she returned she usually found that she had to do that day's work anyway, since the house had not been cleaned and the dishes had been stacked. Various respondents pointed out that their employers said they could not give them a raise in salary since they could not afford it, but the domestic workers felt that they could not really accept this excuse. In one case a respondent knew exactly how much her employer earned as an estate agent, since she saw his salary slips.

Respondents were never asked what they earned, but once the financial issue had been raised, they freely volunteered information about their income. The bitterness is apparent in the following words used by respondents during a group discussion:

*"... die twee sente wat ons kry ..."*<sup>22</sup>

*"Ons kan nie eens vir ons 'n blikkie Coke koop aan die einde van die maand nie — as jy hom drink is dit die sout, jy koop maar liever die sout vir die kinders."*<sup>23</sup>

There was general agreement by all respondents that one had to accept the situation, since one could easily lose one's job. Various respondents explained that they had learnt to keep their feelings to themselves and that this was the reason why they had managed to keep the same job for many years. Complaints or sometimes even requests for a raise in salary were risky — one could too easily be dismissed. This insecure job position was also evident from the fact that various respondents did not want their employers to know that they were participating in the research.

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<sup>22</sup> "... the two cents we earn ..."

<sup>23</sup> "We cannot even buy ourselves a can of Coke at the end of the month — if you drink it, it is the salt. You rather buy your children the salt."

- *Paulina earns R350,00 per month. She has been working for the same family for 19 years. She accompanied them to Pretoria when the "baas" (boss) retired. The family that she works for have various businesses, and Paulina is very bitter when she tells that her employers do not want to pay more, since they say they cannot afford it.*
- *Liesbet is cynical when she describes how the family she works for call her one of the family. During a recent visit of the employers to Cape Town, she was in charge of the children who stayed behind. Yet her own child is not allowed in the house, and she is not allowed to sit on the chairs. When she stays inside to baby-sit the children, she sleeps on a stretcher in the kitchen and gets wakened to go to her room, whenever the employers return.*
- *Susanna was referred to me through her employer, who explained to me that they have an extremely good relationship. She is regarded a leader at the sewing class she attends, yet she was one of the respondents who talked with the greatest degree of bitterness about her employers, mentioning, for example, that they do not understand when she has to attend funerals, they do not like it when she receives telephone calls, and she works extremely long hours. She has to stay in the house even when her work has been completed, so that she can answer the telephone and take messages. She pleads for dignity: "Ons wil net soos 'n mens behandel word."<sup>24</sup> She says that she would rather sell tomatoes*

### 3.4 DOMESTIC WORKERS AS MOTHERS

The mother-child bond is probably the family relationship that is the least debated when defining or delineating family within the South African society. The assumption is that women relate to their children, even when they do not act as primary caretakers. This assumption was supported by the findings. Themes around motherhood which were discussed during the interviews included the following:

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<sup>24</sup> "We just want to be treated like human beings."

## **Number of children and desire for more children**

The number of children that each respondent had is indicated in Table 3.2. One respondent had seven and another nine children, and quite a few each had four. One should, of course, take the ages of respondents and consequent stages in the family life cycle into account.

Whether respondents want more children is perhaps more meaningful than the actual number. It is significant that of the ten respondents who were still in their childbearing years (all women under 40 years of age), only one definitely wanted more children. This was Maria, who at the time of the interview was still childless, and who had since fallen pregnant — much sooner than she had hoped for. Two (Anna, aged 33 and Fancy, aged 29) were unsure. Betty had been sterilized and Lisa was trying to obtain a sterilization. Some respondents were adamant that they definitely wanted no more children. A case in point was Rose, who stated emphatically that as a child she had suffered too much, and still did. She did not want this to happen to her children (she had one unplanned child). Her sister (Susan) strongly agreed. She also had two unplanned children. Both these women are now better informed about contraception. Jeminah (22), who was still childless, was unambiguous in her statement that she definitely never wanted any children, and the reason she gave was that they “will suffer too much”.

## **Child care**

The issue of the care of children was explored in some detail. Of the 18 respondents with children, eight had children staying with their own mothers/parents and one with the maternal grandmother who had also brought her up. In two cases the respondents' children had all reached adulthood, but of particular concern was the number of cases (5) where children of school-going age lived on their own. Between the five respondents this accounted for a total of 19 children, of whom two were teenage mothers also bringing up their own babies single-handedly. One respondent (Magriet) paid someone to look after her younger child. Only Liesbet and Magriet had some children staying with other relatives — a brother and sister respectively.

**TABLE 3.2: CHILDREN**

Respondent	Number	Ages <sup>25</sup>	Desire for more	Own age	Child care	Children with her
Liesbet	2	11, 18	no (n.a.) <sup>26</sup>	45	older: brother younger: husband	-
Susanna	4	17, 21	no (n.a.)	45	maternal grand-mother of respondent	-
Elsie	4	28, 36	no (n.a.)	59	already grown-up	-
Sarie	4	21, 17	no	44	alone	-
Betty	4	2, 10	no (sterilized)	37	mother of respondent	youngest 2
Maria	0 pregnant	-	yes	25	n.a.	-
Marta	1	33	no (n.a.)	53	already grown-up	-
Paulina	7	36, 14	no (n.a.)	53	older: grown-up younger: alone	2 of sister's children
Josephina	3	5, 15	no	37	older 2: alone younger one: mother of respondent	-
Lena	5	8, 21	no (n.a.)	44	alone	-
Lisa	2	7, 12	no — wants sterilization	35	mother of respondent	-
Magriet	2	3, 15	no	32	older: sister of respondent younger: paid care taker	-
Ella	3	6, 21	no	46	parents of respondent	youngest 1
Jeminah	0	-	never	22	n.a.	-
Rose	1	7	no	30	mother of respondent	-
Susan	2	5, 8	no	32	mother of respondent	-
Lettie	9	±10, 35 <sup>27</sup>	no (n.a.)	55	alone	-
Anna	4	3, 15	not sure	33	mother of respondent	-
Elisabeth	5	4, 17	no	40	mother-in-law of respondent	-
Fancy	2	3, 11	no	29	mother of respondent	youngest 1

<sup>25</sup> Ages of youngest and oldest.

<sup>26</sup> N.a. refers to women over the childbearing age.

<sup>27</sup> Lettie had no schooling and did not know the ages of her children. Estimates based on descriptions were made.

Respondents felt very sad that they could not be with their children. During a group discussion the consensus was that they would go home every day if they could. It was clear throughout the study that children are very important to the respondents — in fact one could probably say that they worked mainly to provide for their children and to ensure a better future for their children. This emphasises the importance of parental ties in family life — as was suggested by the literature dealt with in the introduction. Many respondents expressed a wish to live together with their children in their own house.

- *Betty explains how one loses touch with children if you do not see them regularly. Two of her children live with her and the other two are living with her mother. She says that if you send money you tend to think you have met your responsibility — until you start thinking about it. Her example was very poignant: She sends R60,00 per month, but has thought about it in this way: two loaves of bread a day cost R5,00, which means that R60,00 pays for no more than bread. She also explained that if your children are living with you and you take them out with you, you will notice how poorly they are dressed and might buy clothes. This does not happen if you do not see them.*

The control of children not living with respondents was regarded as a big problem. During a group discussion a respondent ascribed the lack of discipline amongst the youth to the fact that they do not live with their parents. Her words were confirmed by the rest of the group: *“Die kinders van vandag hulle word gou slim. Ons, ons was gehoorsaam, maar vandag se kinders hulle sê sommer: ‘Wat weet jy, hoekom moet ek vir jou luister?’ ”*<sup>28</sup>

A general perception exists that a married couple's children “belong” to the paternal grandparents (Steyn, Van Wyk & Le Roux, 1989:287). Contrary to expectations, only one of the 18 respondents with children left her child with her mother-in-law. Four respondents had children living with them at the time of the interview. In one of these cases the children of a sister was living with her. Various women had previously had young babies and children with them at their places of work.

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<sup>28</sup> “Today's children become wise at an early age. We were obedient, but the children of today would easily say ‘What do you know, why should I listen to you?’ ”

Respondents were probed about their feelings about their children's circumstances, and various major categories of circumstances could be distinguished, namely children staying on their own, with their mothers' parents, with their fathers' parents or with the (domestic worker) mother herself. These will be dealt with individually.

### **Children staying on their own**

Respondents with children living on their own were very concerned about their children. These children had to cook for themselves and handle the housekeeping on their own. When these mothers went home they had to clean the house and do the laundry.

- *Sarie's mother-in-law lives close-by, but Sarie is very bitter when she reports that her mother-in-law does nothing for the children. She does not even check in to see whether they are all right. They have no choice but to accept the situation, though, and Sarie talks with great pride of the way in which her children manage on their own, and how they do not want her to work when she comes home. She has taught them how to cook and bake. Her daughter was forced to leave school because she had a baby. Sarie had a week's leave after the birth of the baby, but from then on her daughter had to cope on her own.*
- *Paulina is renting a room in Mamelodi for her youngest three children — a daughter in Std 10, and two boys in Stds 9 and 6. She is concerned because the girl has a boyfriend and she is scared that the girl might fall pregnant. She is also unhappy about the fact that her children do not attend school regularly. Unfortunately she cannot do anything about the situation since she is unable to monitor it.*
- *Two of Josephina's children live on their own — a boy of 15 and a girl of 12. They go to school, but she is concerned since the daughter is not very bright and actually needs assistance with her work. Her main problem is that teachers at the school want to see the parents from time to time, and this means that she has to take time off work, or go home unexpectedly over weekends when this has not been planned, and when she has not budgeted for travelling expenses.*

## Children staying with maternal grandmothers

Respondents whose children stayed with their mothers generally seemed happy with the care their children were receiving. At least two of the respondents seemed surprised at the question as to whether they were happy with the way in which their mothers were looking after their children. They felt that this should have been obvious, since they had grown up in the same house! Betty felt that her mother was now getting too old and was not taking the trouble to discipline the children and ensure that they attended school regularly: "*Met my boetie, sy het saam met hom geloop tot by die skool om te seker maak dat hy gaan, maar nou, sy is moeg.*"<sup>29</sup> She also felt that her mother was spoiling the children. Gordon also suggested that grandparents in her study spoiled children (1985:xxiv).

During one of the group discussions the issue of discipline was raised and respondents all agreed that their mother/parents found it difficult to discipline the children. They reported that children were aggressive towards the elderly, and ascribed it to a gap in experience. This supports findings by Viljoen (1994:42-46).

On the other hand, during a group discussion, participants agreed with a woman who felt that it was unfair that their mothers should be raising their children, since they had already raised one set of children. More than one respondent expressed a desire to care for their mothers, instead of having their mothers look after their children.

- *Susanna's children are staying with their grandmother. She says her mother gives the children whatever they want — in order to prevent them from turning to prostitution to get money.*
- *Ella is very worried about her children who live with her parents. She says that her parents are old and that they argue a lot. She relates how she looks forward to going home, but then comes back disappointed, time and again, because of all the arguing. Her salary supports the whole family, so she has no choice.*

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<sup>29</sup> "In the case of my brother, she went with him to the school to make sure that he attends school regularly, but now, she is tired."



- *Apart from her children, Rose's mother also looks after the children of her sister, her divorced brother and Rose's own two brothers. They used to live on a farm, but when/after her father died she had to move to the "location" <sup>30</sup> since her mother is too old to work on the farm and the farmer did not want an unproductive family on his property. Rose goes home once every three months.*

- *Lisa's two children, as well as her own brother and sister live with her parents. Her mother also works as a domestic. She is generally happy about the care that they get, but complains that her mother gives the children sweets in order to bribe them to attend school.*

### **Children staying with in-laws**

In two cases the in-laws had laid claim to the children, but the respondents had not wanted to leave the children there. Both these respondents (Betty and Josephina) complained that their mothers-in-law did not look after their children properly. There was a general feeling (which was confirmed at all the group discussions) that a mother-in-law took better care of the children of her own daughter than of those of the daughter-in-law. This seemed to be the reason why most respondents preferred to have their children stay with their own mothers or even by themselves. During a group discussion a participant illustrated it aptly when she said that the children of the daughter sat on the grandmother's knee whilst the children of the daughter-in-law had to sit at her feet. She likewise explained that if there was only one piece of bread, it was the daughter's child who would get it. These comments prompted many stories of mothers-in-law who neglected the children of their sons, such as the case where a new pair of shoes which the mother had bought for her child, was given to the "real" grandchild.

- *Josephina's children used to live with her in-laws before her husband divorced her. However, she removed the children while still married and now prefers to have them live on their own. She tells the story of going home one weekend while the children were still living with her in-laws to find that there had been no adults at home all week.*

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30 This is what black townships outside of cities and towns were frequently called in the past.

- *Sarie's children lived with her mother-in-law for some time, but they did not want to stay there. Sane does not know the reason. At present the children live on their own. She feels bitter since her mother-in-law's house is quite close but the woman never checks to see whether the children are safe or whether they need anything.*

Respondents were asked about the amount of say they had in the way their children were brought up by others and whether they could interfere when they did not agree. There was general consensus that if a relative took care of one's children, one had to accept their ways of doing things. Respondents felt that if someone else accepted the day-to-day responsibility for the children, it would be presumptuous to interfere, even if one did not always agree. In this sense the socialization of the children is taken out of the mother's hands, even though she is the primary breadwinner and identifies strongly with the children. In terms of the traditional role of the mother as caretaker and primary socialization agent, this could represent a case of role ambiguity.

### **Children staying with live-in domestics**

Respondents who had children living with them saw this as a great privilege and regarded employers who allowed children to stay with their mothers as good employers. In some cases respondents stopped working for some time after the birth of a child, but in other cases these children came to stay with them, usually for the first two years of their lives. In the case of Elisabeth, who had twins, the employer was particularly sympathetic. At the time of their birth she was working for a medical doctor who assisted her a lot with the sickly children. Josephine, after the birth of her baby, preferred to come back to her room at her place of work rather than go to her parents or in-laws.

On the other hand children living with domestics also caused problems, especially older children. The respondents felt that such older children might find it difficult to adjust once they had to leave. The mothers seemed to realize that their children enjoyed certain privileges at the place of employment but that it was a temporary situation.

- *Two of Betty's four children are living with her. They are completely "at home" in the employer's house. During the interview, which was conducted in the living room of the house, the older one (four years of age) was climbing over chairs and couches and eating an apple which he had taken from the kitchen. The employers pay to have this child sent to a crèche three times a week. Betty feels very ambivalent about this situation. On the one hand she is extremely grateful for the opportunities provided to these children, and she loves having them around and being able to care for them herself. On the other hand she is concerned about their future and she does not know how they will adjust once they have to go "home" when they reach school-going age. She also feels guilty about the children who are not with her. The idiom "out of sight out of mind" came to mind when she explained how easy it was to spend money on the ones with you and to neglect the ones that you do not see quite so often.*

- *Ella has a daughter of almost seven years old who lives with her. This child was previously cared for by her older daughter who wrote matric last year. During the course of the year, the older daughter called her in desperation, saying that she was unable to study, do all the housework that the grandmother expected of her (collecting firewood, making the fire, cooking and cleaning) and also care for her younger sister. Ella's employer encouraged her to go and fetch the child. The child, who was present during the interview, is obviously highly intelligent, is fluent in Afrikaans and can read — a combination of her own efforts and "lessons" by the eight-year old child of the employer. Ella is very concerned about this child. She should be in school, but Ella cannot afford the school fees in the upper middle-class suburb where she works. She clearly does not have the confidence or support of her employer to enrol the child anyway, which should be possible at present, owing to the recent changes in educational policy. Ella feels that she cannot send the child back home to go to school since there is no one to look after the child and Ella does not earn enough herself to be able to pay someone to care for her daughter.*

### **Contact with home**

Respondents agreed that "home" is where their children were. Although they spent the greater part of their lives at the place of work, this was not regarded as "home". One respondent (Lena), alternatively went to "visit" her husband in Mamelodi and her children at her mother's house, and even she agreed that the latter was "home". Contact

with "home" and thus with children can take many forms, but the most important one is visiting.

Only three of the 20 respondents went home more than once a month, seven went home once a month and six once in two months. One respondent (Jeminah) had not been home once since she began work in January, but she was looking forward to a two-week holiday in December, when she would see her family for the first time since she had left school the previous year in order to earn money to assist the family.

Respondents were asked whether they would like to go home more often, and all except one (who explained that there was a lot of domestic fighting at her home) were surprised that such a question could even be asked, since the answer should obviously be "yes". The question as to why they did not go home more often, elicited a strong response. The answer that most of them gave was that they could not afford it. A trip home could cost a *third or more* of one month's salary, which meant that those at home who needed the money would get that much less. Two respondents said they had to work over weekends; so, even if they could afford to, their employers would not allow them to go home. However, no other respondents had this restriction — they were not required to work on the Saturday or the Sunday if they went home; but their salaries simply did not allow it. Lena was a case in point: She and her husband took turns to visit the children every other month since there was not enough money for both to go at the same time.

- *Magriet earns R300,00 a month, supplemented with R50 for doing the laundry of her employer's aged mother. She goes home every weekend, at a cost of R30,00 per round trip.*

- *Josephine used to get a lift home every weekend with her brother who works close-by. They had an argument because he has a mistress and now she has to take a taxi. This means that she can no longer afford to go home more than once a month. She is also saving to build a house and has taken an additional job on Saturdays, which means that even when she does go home, it is only from Saturday evening to late Sunday afternoon.*

Only rarely did children visit their mothers at their place of work. Sarie's children came to see her when they ran out of money, and Paulina's children, who were living in a rented room in Mamelodi, sometimes came to visit her at her work-place in Murrayfield<sup>31</sup>, which was quite close to Mamelodi and thus not too expensive to reach. At the time of the interview, Betty's older children had just returned home after visiting her during their school holidays. On the whole, however, the distances and costs did not make it possible for children to visit their mothers. Liesbet once had a child who was ill and came to stay with her. She found this extremely difficult, since the child was not allowed in the employer's house and had to stay in her room all day long.

Apart from living together or visiting, contact with children included telephone calls, letters and sending money home. Some respondents reported restrictions on receiving calls, but the main problem in this respect was that generally children at home did not have easy access to telephones and might have to travel long distances in order to make or receive a telephone call. One respondent (Jeminah) had a regular telephone conversation with her family at home when she was not working on a Saturday afternoon.

Letters seemed to be restricted to emergencies only. The postal service to many of the rural areas where the respondents come from is slow and unreliable and their low level of education, and the even lower level of education of many of the adults looking after the children, makes this a spurious form of communication. In fact Lettie told how she had received a letter about a child of hers who had been badly burnt only after the child had been treated by a nearby shop-owner for more than a week and had already started recovering.

Various ways were devised to send money home on a regular basis. In some cases it was taken by friends who could be trusted. In some instances children sent a return note, stating the amount they had received. This service was not always free, but those respondents who paid the person to deliver their money felt that it brought some kind of guarantee that the money would reach the children. Lisa had recently sent money home with her husband, and he had spent it all, leaving the children with

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31 A suburb in the eastern part of Pretoria — about five kilometres from Mamelodi.

nothing. Rose and Susan sent the money either through the mail or with Susan's employer, who often travelled to his farm in the Free State close to where her family were living. Jeminah telegraphed the money home.

## Maternity

Pregnancy is one of the events in a woman's life which most severely impacts on her job or career situation. It is only recently that industry has started abandoning discrimination against women on the basis of pregnancy and childbirth. The position of domestic workers is particularly precarious, and, much as women want to have children, this often results in an uncertain future because of the almost certainty of dismissal.

During the interviews respondents were asked what they did during their pregnancies and subsequent confinements. Some respondents said they were able to keep their jobs. A few were able to keep the babies with them up to the age of two, but many left their jobs and stayed home with the babies until they were two or three years old.

- *Elisabeth was particularly fortunate. She had previously worked for a very sympathetic employer who assisted her in many ways. During the time she worked for this family, she gave birth to two sets of twins. The younger ones, in particular, were (and still are) very sickly. She kept them with her until they were two years old, and she herself and another domestic worker employed by the same family, were allowed to take turns caring for the children. The "boss" who was a medical doctor, treated the children and Elisabeth acknowledges that if it were not for him, she would not have known what to do.*

- *At the time of her first pregnancy, Susan was working at a hotel in a town in the Orange Free State. Her friends and mother had to tell her that she was expecting a baby; at the time she was apparently quite ignorant on the subject. She lost her job and stayed at home caring for her first baby and subsequently for her second baby until her sister (Rose) in Pretoria fell pregnant and came home to have her baby. Susan was then sent to take over the sister's job as a domestic worker, and this is where she still is.*

It is not only the domestic workers themselves who get pregnant. Various respondents had adolescent or young adult daughters at home who were mothers themselves.

Many of these cases have already been discussed. Some respondents took their daughters to the family planning clinic for contraceptives, and one respondent who was too embarrassed to do this herself, asked a friend to take her daughter. Josephina explained that she took her fourteen-year-old daughter to the clinic because she was not home to supervise the girl's behaviour and she did not want "trouble". Sexual activity seems to be wholly accepted amongst teenagers (Motshologane, 1987:200; Seabela, 1990:150).

- *Sarie explains that her daughter gave birth at the age of 17 and she (Sarie) was not able to take off work for any length of time. Consequently she spent a week at home assisting her daughter and from there on the girl had to cope on her own. Sarie was very upset when her daughter fell pregnant, and had her daughter stay at home for two years to look after the baby. She describes this as the girl's punishment for being "caught": "Kyk watse mooi presentjie het die boyfriend jou gegee."*<sup>32</sup>

- *Lena's daughter who is now 21 had to leave school in order to have a baby. She has been home with her brothers aged 17, 15, 8 and 3 for two years now. Lena would love to be able to stay home and care for her grandchild, but her salary is the only source of income, since her husband does not earn a great deal. She expects her daughter to start in domestic work soon — provided she can find someone to care for the baby.*

### **Aspirations for their children**

Respondents wanted to give their children a better life, and they saw education as the way towards this. This was a priority for every respondent interviewed and every participant in group discussions. This was also suggested by Gordon (1985:xxiv).

It made the respondents very sad when children did not go to school, either because they were lazy or because the mother was not there to care for them and grandparents were unable to discipline them or, in some cases, because of intimidation at school. Many respondents expressed concern over the quality of education their children were receiving. Since they were intimately exposed to the daily lives of their

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32 "See what a nice gift the boyfriend gave you."

employers, they were probably more aware than many others of the contrasts between schooling in some black communities and schooling in white urban areas.

- *Sane wants her children to continue studying after school even though she earns a meagre salary. When her children express reservations and ask her how she will be able to afford it, she says that they need not worry, it is her problem and she will find the money somehow.*

- *Paulina is unwell: she has problems with her back and also with her bladder. Although she frequently has to lie down in the course of a working day she says that she cannot stop working until her children have all completed matric. Of her nine children, three are still at school.*

### **3.5 DOMESTIC WORKERS AS WIVES**

The second major family relationship which was explored, was that between husband and wife. The type of marriage (e.g. customary, church, or other) was not considered, since the intention was not to explore differences in this regard. For the purposes of this research it was sufficient to ascertain whether the woman *regarded* herself as married or not. Not all respondents were formally married, either by customary or civil law, but respondents freely talked about their boyfriends as substitute husbands. Relationships with boyfriends therefore are included under this heading. Table 3.3 summarizes key issues regarding the relationships of domestic workers with men.

#### **Marital status**

Eight of the respondents indicated that they were married at the time of the interview, five were either divorced or separated from their husbands and one had been a widow for many years. Two of the divorced/separated women currently had boyfriends. Of the remaining, unmarried, respondents two (Maria and Rose) were involved with boyfriends at the time.



**TABLE 3.3: RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Boyfriend</b>	<b>Occupation of husband or boyfriend</b>	<b>Financial contribution</b>
Liesbet	divorced	no	general worker	none
Susanna	divorced	previously had one	does not know	none
Elsie	separated	no	labourer	none
Sarie	married	no	work shy	none
Betty	married	no	taxi-driver	infrequently
Maria	unmarried	yes		none
Marta	widow	previously had one	farm labourer	n.a.
Paulina	married	no	unemployed	none
Josephina	divorced	yes	builder	none
Lena	married	no	factory worker	when he can
Lisa	unmarried	he left her	general worker in shop	none
Magriet	married	no	labourer	when he can
Ella	unmarried and separated from boyfriend	separated from him	messenger	none
Jeminah	unmarried	no	n.a.	n.a.
Rose	unmarried	yes, but they fight a lot	steak house	sporadic maintenance
Susan	unmarried	no	n.a.	n.a.
Lettie	married	no	gardener	yes
Anna	separated	yes	husband: gardener boyfriend: labourer	R50,00 per year
Elisabeth	married	no	gardener	when he can
Fancy	married	no	sales assistant	yes

**Contact with husband**

Gordon (1985:xxv) suggested that domestic workers find it very difficult to maintain a marriage. This was supported in the present study. No respondent experienced a limitation on visits by a husband, but some employers disapproved of boyfriends visiting. Yet very few of the respondents who were married or who had relationships with men

lived with their husbands. The reasons varied, but generally the male worked somewhere else and it was simply not affordable or practical to live together.

However, the majority of women did not seem to regret the absence of the men too much — in contrast to how they were missing their children. Sarie, for example, does not particularly want to see her husband, as he takes her money and does not contribute towards the care of the children. As will be discussed later, the women showed a strong feeling of resentment towards their men.

- *Lena used to share a room with her husband in Mamelodi until the cost of transport to work became too high and her employer requested her to "live in" in order to assist with two young children. Now she goes to visit him once every two weeks. When she goes she cooks and cleans for him. She does not know whether he keeps a girlfriend when she is not around, but that would not trouble her. She does not see him on visits to her children as, owing to the price of transport, the two of them have to take turns to go.*

- *Lettie's husband is a gardener who works in the neighbourhood where she is employed. He lives with her, but has to pay her employers R70 per month rent in order to share her room. The employers argue that he uses their water and electricity and therefore has to pay rent. She seems to enjoy having him with her.*

- *Lisa was not formally married since the father of her children did not pay lobola. He has since left her. She does not mind this because he did not contribute anything. Her feeling is that she does not want a husband or even another boyfriend, as they only are "trouble". She says that men want children but that they do not want to contribute towards the upbringing of the children.*

## **Relationship with men**

During interviews and group discussions the general feeling towards men was one of bitterness, as has already been suggested. This feeling was expressed very strongly during the group discussions, where women seemed to be encouraged to voice their feelings by hearing the complaints of others. The women felt that the men were not supporting them financially or otherwise. Some respondents expressed acceptance of the need for male company (presumably for sex) from time to time. As Susanna put it:

*"Ek is mos 'n vrou, ek was mos getroud; ek weet hoe dit is."*<sup>33</sup> Yet for the divorced, separated or unmarried respondents (re)marriage was never an option. Rose, who had a boyfriend, would not consider it, even though the boyfriend had asked her to marry him. She said that he could wait forever. Anna explained that each December her boyfriend told her he would marry her, but she did not think he was serious and she would not marry him even if he did finally appear to be truly willing.

The women generally felt that the men had betrayed them. They had taken new wives or girlfriends, leaving women and children behind who had to fend for themselves.

If one explores the occupations of the men involved, it seems unlikely that their lack of contribution arises from an inability to pay. Although the job status of the men was generally low, an analysis of the information in Table 3.3 clearly shows that most of the men were able to contribute towards the maintenance of their children.

Eight of the women received some kind of assistance from men to care for their children, but of these, only two indicated that this happened regularly enough for them to depend on this contribution. The husbands of Magriet, Lena and Elisabeth contributed when they could, Anna's husband gave the children a total of about R50 once a year, Rose's ex-boyfriend paid infrequently and Betty's husband provided a little bit of money, but she described him as stingy (*"Hy is suinig"*). During one of the group discussions the other participants supported a participant's statement that the men did not know what the school fees were. This woman's husband also did not know what his children's "white" names were.

- *Liesbet has a particularly difficult relationship with her ex-husband. He frequently battered both her and the eleven year-old son living with him in their house in Mamelodi. After several interventions by the police and the welfare, and after having been in hiding for some time, she finally managed to divorce him. She has custody of the child but has nowhere to take him, so that she is forced to leave him with his father who once beat him with an electrical wire and pinched his stomach, leaving severe bruises. (At the time of writing this report, Liesbet was in hospital after having been stabbed in the back with a*

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<sup>33</sup> "I am a woman, I was married, I know what it is like."

*knife by her ex-husband during an argument about the son.)*

- *Sarie's husband lives with her off and on. He does not hold a job for very long, so that he moves around quite a lot. According to her, he pretends to be sick when he tires of a job. She prefers not having him with her, since he takes money from her purse. During the week before the interview, she sent money home with him. He took half of it for himself and the children had to borrow money from someone to come and ask Sarie for food.*
- *Josephina used to see her ex-husband infrequently as he worked for a builder and had to live on the building site. Two years ago she spent three months in hospital and on her return home she found a new wife there. She subsequently divorced her husband, but does not receive any maintenance for her children. She has a boyfriend but says that she will never remarry.*
- *Betty's husband lives with his parents in the former KwaNdebele<sup>34</sup>. Two children are with her; two with her mother. Betty's husband visits her from time to time. She feels that because they do not live together, they are bound to become increasingly more distant from each other, caring less and less for each other. She also points out that the separation has practical implications, such as tribal taboos about who may wash her husband's clothes. Betty ascribes the fact that her husband does not contribute towards the care of the children to the fact that they do not live together — they do not pool their money and her husband does not see his children often, so that he does not notice, for example, how shabby their clothes are.*

### **3.6 OTHER FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

This research was not aimed at determining the nature of family structures, but as explained in the introduction it can be accepted that family life for black people does not conform to a clear-cut nuclear or extended family model. There is some leaning towards a nuclear family structure, but for reasons explained earlier on, ties with the extended family network remain important. However, the words of respondents quoted before, who said that "relatives are not like your own parents", do suggest some ambivalence in the relationship.

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<sup>34</sup> A former segregated "black" state to the north-east of Pretoria.

From the interviews and group discussions it seemed nevertheless apparent that ties with relatives were indeed regarded as very important. The extent to which the women were able to uphold and make use of these ties was determined by their financial position. On the one hand relatives fulfilled an extremely important role in assisting domestic workers with child care. On the other hand domestic workers reciprocated by providing financial support and many were the sole providers for a whole network of relatives. This relationship has already been apparent in themes discussed before, such as the fact that so many of the respondents started working in order to support their brothers' education, or to support their parents and the children of other relatives. The relationship was not always an easy one — Liesbet, whose circumstances were discussed before, had a daughter living with relatives and this caused her a lot of distress, since according to her they did not care for the girl. On the other hand there has also been evidence of strong support among relatives, such as the brother of Rose and Susan, who assists them wherever he can:

- *Rose and her sister, Susan, work at neighbouring houses. Rose first came to work in Pretoria about ten years ago. When she fell pregnant, she went home to have her baby and sent her sister to fill in for her. Susan is still employed at this family. After two years, when Rose wanted to return to a job, her sister helped her to find a new job. Rose and Susan had both left school after Std V and started earning money at a young age in order to help their brother obtain matric. This brother now works close-by at a bakery, and the three see each other regularly. They send their money home together each month. They speak with great gratitude of the way in which he assists them financially.*

- *Betty related how the previous week she had planned on visiting her ailing grandmother. She also needed a pair of shoes and decided to buy the shoes instead of spend the money on transport for the visit. The grandmother died and she feels very sad and guilty that she did not visit the old lady.*

### **The concept “home”**

Sociologists and anthropologists recognize the ill-defined relationship between family and household, particularly in South African society where geographically divided families are a legacy of apartheid. In the case of migratory labourers such as resident

domestic workers, one cannot focus on the household as the measure of family life. Family life exists for these women not in the everyday experience thereof, but in the meaning they themselves attach to their ties with their family members. The overall impression was that, although other relatives played an important part in helping them cope, these women primarily identified with their children. In response to a question about what style of life they would prefer if they had a free choice, most respondents expressed a wish to have their own home where they and their children could live alone. They would sketch a picture of themselves and their children (and only occasionally a husband as well), sitting at a table sharing a meal. This was, however, often qualified by a statement that they had a responsibility to look after their mothers (also).

Domestic workers have not escaped the housing crisis in the country and many explained that their children and/or parents lived in shacks. What was particularly striking, though, was the value placed on obtaining a house of one's own. Respondents frequently lamented the fact that they were unable to afford building a house of their own, or if they did own a house, that they could not live there permanently.

- *Marta, who has been a widow for many years, has only one adult son who lives with his girlfriend in Mamelodi. For years she has been building and improving her house. She was extremely proud of the ceiling which had recently been added. Yet she admitted that this house is empty save for the weekend every month when she goes "home".*

### **3.7 TIES WITH THE COMMUNITY**

The importance of participation in community events in order to solidify one's ties with a community was confirmed during interviews and group discussions. Once again financial considerations made it very difficult to maintain these ties. During a group discussion a participant explained how isolated they had become from the community because they were not able to attend most of the important events, mainly funerals. They felt that the community did not always understand their difficult position and

tended to resent their absence. One respondent explained that it isolated them: "Jy moet jou dogter maar alleen trou, jy moet maar self die kis dra."<sup>35</sup>

The social lives of live-in domestic workers was explored to some extent. Long working hours or after-hour activities such as baby-sitting or dishes after dinner were their main limitations. Free time was very limited and respondents who attended night school explained that they were seldom able to spend time with friends. They were the ones who most often expressed feelings of loneliness.

- *Magriet's employer does not mind her receiving visitors. This hardly ever happens, however, since she goes to night school four nights a week, and in the afternoons after she has completed her work, she is expected to keep her employer "company".*

Some respondents had televisions in their rooms and enjoyed watching television but, as Anna put it, "you cannot talk to your TV."

Friendships with other domestic workers in the neighbourhood were valued highly and no-one reported restrictions by employers on receiving visits from female friends outside of work time. Respondents and their friends shared experiences, celebrated birthdays and assisted each other where possible. It did appear, however, that preference was given to friends (or even relatives) who came from the same home area.

- *Josephine has been working for the same employer for about ten years. She knows most of the other women working in the area and her closest friend works about two kilometers away. Whenever anything important happens to either of them, they visit or call. They also consult each other about big decisions, and lend each other money if needed. She says that her friend is like a "sister" to her.*

- *Betty has many friends in the area where she works. Now that her younger children are living with her, however, she has less time to visit than before. She says that the children are now her company. Yet she seems to know a lot of people and offered to get a few friends together for a group discussion.*

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35 "You have to marry your daughter by yourself, you have to carry the coffin yourself."

The main social activity for most of the women interviewed, was church attendance. In fact, it could probably be stated that this was the major social activity for the majority of the respondents. Many would attend church in a township on Sunday afternoons and in some cases also during the week. A few of the respondents expressed strong religious feelings. Elsie, for example, who was a lay preacher, said that she spent almost all her free time reading the Bible. Anna found it difficult to attend church regularly because of her long working hours and during group discussions participants also explained that they sometimes had to run to be in time for church. Paulina, who was sickly and struggled to make ends meet, felt that she had to accept the life God had given her.

Four respondents were members of choirs and choir practice, which was also related to church activities, seemed to be a highlight of their week. Maria related how choir members would assist each other with transport costs. Elisabeth sometimes had to do baby-sitting on Saturday afternoons and then run to choir practice, often arriving late.

The focus group discussions were held at venues which could potentially fulfil some social function. At the literacy schools respondents had clearly become friends. It did not, however, appear to fulfil a major social function. Respondents frequently reported having to leave work in a hurry to be in time for class, and after class it was so late that getting home safely was a major concern. This did not leave much time for socializing. At one of the schools a respondent who had not turned up for one of the research interviews clearly had no contact with other class members outside the school, as no one knew why she had not come, neither did they know where she lived. The sewing class, by contrast seemed to provide more of a social occasion. It was held on a Thursday afternoon, the traditional free time. Many respondents came earlier and sat outside, talking to one another. The fact that they mostly walked from their places of work meant that those who attended it all lived in the general vicinity and therefore not too far from each other either. Yet in interviews and in the group discussion held at this location, no-one made specific mention of special social support from this group — even these respondents rather referred to church activities. It does not seem, therefore, that these organized activities play a major social role in the lives of respondents.



In summary it seems as if the social lives of the respondents are largely determined by their work situation. Informal friendships provide strong support and church activities seem to represent their community involvement.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Several main themes arose from this research. These form the basis for the recommendations that follow. There are several important issues which characterize the family relationships of live-in domestic workers, but two themes ran like a thread through the life stories of all the women: the financial hardship that they suffered and a lack of support from their husbands/partners.

### **4.1 FINANCIAL RESTRAINTS**

The single most important problem which fundamentally limits the family relationships of all the respondents and group participants was that of financial hardship. In fact, their lives are largely determined by economical restraints. Due to an oversupply of domestic work and the threat of unemployment, they are forced to accept very low wages and have no bargaining power. This was previously suggested by various researchers, such as Cock (1989), Wrigley (1991) and Friguglietti (1989) and was confirmed during the present study.

Whereas the previous work of Cock and Gordon concentrated on the relationship between domestic workers and their employers, this study focused on the family life of domestic workers. However, the theme of money was repeatedly raised by respondents, and what emerged during the course of this study was the extent to which their *family relationships* were determined by their financial position:

- Many respondents were forced to leave school in order to assist their families financially. In some cases this was due to the ill health of a mother who could no longer earn money, in other cases because respondents had to earn money to enable a brother to complete his education. Consequently their obligation to the family limited their own opportunities, forcing them into domestic work. As pointed out in the introduction, the salaries of domestic workers often fall well below the

poverty datum line, yet in many cases they are the sole providers for their aged mothers/parents, children — even grandchildren and unmarried brothers/sisters.

- Some respondents were forced to work despite poor health in order to provide their children with food or education. Their working hours did not permit regular visits to hospitals or clinics for thorough treatment, because going for treatment often involved many hours of waiting. Their financial position did not allow any other option, such as a regular visit to local doctors. Because there was no provision for unemployment or retirement, they had no option but to continue working indefinitely. Often they were the sole breadwinners and their children's livelihood and future depended on their income.
- The contact that domestic workers had with their children was severely limited by financial restraints. For example, a lack of funds restricted their "visits" home to a minimum. Transport to their homes could cost as much as a third of their monthly salary and they would rather send the money home than spend it on transport. This implies that their obligation to provide for their children limits their physical contact with these children; thus the children are raised entirely by others, or by no one at all. Their lives represent a constant struggle to provide their children (whom they seldom see) with money for food and education.
- Owing to financial pressures domestic workers have no choice regarding child care. They have to accept whatever options are available. Some were fortunate to have caring mothers prepared to assist with child care. Although this was highly appreciated, the general feeling was that elderly mothers had done their part and should actually have someone to look after them instead. Many children lived on their own, the older ones caring for their younger brothers and sisters. These mothers lived in constant fear that something could happen to children. Their objective of providing their children with an education depended greatly on the children's sense of responsibility in the matter of school attendance and doing their homework. They had no-one to supervise their behaviour and it was not uncommon for the young teenage daughters to fall pregnant. This often left the girl no choice

but to drop out of school altogether in order to look after her baby. Eventually she herself might be forced into domestic labour or a similar poorly paid job.

These financial problems were underscored by the fact that so many of the respondents were sole breadwinners. This leads directly to the following key theme, namely the lack of involvement by men in the maintenance of children.

#### 4.2 LACK OF MALE INVOLVEMENT

Although the extent of single parenthood amongst black families is uncertain (see for example Ziehl, 1994), the single-parent family is generally accepted as a family structure (Steyn, 1993, Viljoen, 1994). In addition to clearly defined single-parent families resulting from divorce, desertion, widowhood or having children out of wedlock, a large proportion of the women in the study seem to be *functional* single parents. This means that even though they are related to a man through marriage or a permanent relationship, as far as the raising of their children is concerned, they function as single parents. This includes financial and emotional aspects.

Many fathers do not provide for their children financially, they take no responsibility for child care and are not involved in the discipline of children. They take little interest in their schooling or general well-being and the children essentially grow up without fathers. This emerged very strongly from the research, and respondents revealed considerable bitterness toward men for their lack of involvement.

What is not yet clear is whether this female-headed family is potentially empowering for women or whether it places them in a more disadvantageous position.<sup>36</sup> The answer probably lies somewhere in-between. The position of live-in domestic workers reflects the position of black women in general.

For the domestic workers their single-parent status appears to be liberating in the sense that they are relieved from patriarchal authoritarian oppression and can make their own decisions, yet it is limiting in the sense that they have to provide for their

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<sup>36</sup> Various authors have advanced different views, mainly with reference to unmarried mothers (e.g. Cutrufelli, 1983:71; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1989; Campbell, 1989, 1994; Ziehl, 1994). The arguments can, however, also be applied to what is here termed "functional single parents".

families single-handedly. Financially they are in a particularly disadvantageous position since they have a low level of education, few marketable skills and no infrastructure, including social security such as disability and unemployment insurance or a pension scheme.

#### **4.3 RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN**

It was clear throughout the research that the women identified very strongly with their children. The mother-child unit appears to emerge as the family nucleus and they work mainly in order to provide for their children and their own mothers (and often, as has been explained above, siblings). Against this background it is particularly ironic that they are unable to live with their children, a fact which causes them great sadness.

The care of children is often left to grandmothers and in some cases, to no-one at all. Grandmothers fulfil their role willingly but find it difficult under changing circumstances. They have to deal with children who are more educated, much younger, and more sophisticated than they themselves. In addition they are often old, and in poor health. Respondents clearly indicated that although they appreciated the role their own mothers played, they would much rather have lived with their children themselves.

These findings are contrary to the general perception that unlimited support from the extended family is available and that its members are only too willing to care for the children of relatives. Family obligations nevertheless did emerge as being important, particularly with regard to financial assistance. However, where the mothers of domestic workers were unable to care for the children, this posed a major problem. Relatives did not "automatically" take over this function.

It was also clear that in-laws play a very limited role and that they are perceived to be biased in favour of the children of their own daughters. Respondents were very pessimistic about support from the parents of husbands. This finding re-emphasizes two previous themes: the separation between the worlds of mothers and fathers as also manifested in the lack of male involvement in raising children; and the importance of the mother-child union, which is spread over three generations, with mothers taking responsibility for the care of their daughters' children.

#### **4.4 GENERAL CONCLUSION**

Previous research on the *work situation* of domestic workers, as discussed in the introduction, suggested that the position of domestic workers is a microcosm of the position of black women in the South African society. The present research suggests that this position can be extended to the family. Thus, the family life of domestic workers can be seen as a microcosm of the family life of black South Africans. The problems experienced by black families in general are magnified in the case of resident domestic workers. They are separated from their families for most of their lives and, owing to poverty, are unable to maintain the family life of their choice. Furthermore, the gradual disengagement of men from family life is exacerbated in the case of these families, where not only fathers are away for long periods, but also mothers, and where the contact between the parents themselves is also very infrequent. It was clear, however, that the physical absence of mothers from their children did not bring about a change in their loyalty to and orientation towards their families — in other words, even though the household structure may be fluid and inconsistent, and even though they have to entrust the primary socialization of their children to others or to no-one at all, they see themselves as part of a family, together with their children. "Home" is where their children are.

#### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Domestic work is seen by some as inherently exploitative, and feminists in particular have pointed out that the liberation of one group of people (middle-class female employers) implicitly depends on the exploitation of another group — the domestic workers (Wrigley, 1991:320; Cock, 1989:320). These arguments remind one of the words of Ferrarotti (1973:258) regarding problems of family life: "Problems of the family are not the outcome of individual intentions, good or bad. They are structural problems the solution of which implies structural changes, that is to say, a basic transformation of the structure of present-day society."

It seems unlikely, however, that our society will in the near future undergo the kind of changes which will do away with domestic service altogether. At present one of the

most serious problems facing the South African society is the high unemployment rate and under these circumstances one has to acknowledge that domestic work provides an income, albeit inadequate, to many who would otherwise have no financial resources at all. Against this background the following recommendations are made with the purpose of stimulating concerted action to alleviate the problems of resident domestic workers and to provide them with reasonable work and life prospects which are at least in line with those of other workers.

**5.1** Many domestic workers are separated from their families owing to a lack of adequate housing close to their work. This emphasizes the dire need for affordable housing. It is recommended that the families of resident domestic workers are taken into account in the planning of new housing close to urban areas.

**5.2** Salaries are clearly inadequate and payment "in kind" does not feed or educate the children of domestic workers. The establishment of a minimum wage is a problematic issue, and it has been argued in the past that the introduction of a too high minimum wage may result in many employers dismissing domestic workers, with consequent wide-spread unemployment. This issue should be re-investigated. At the very least a concerted effort should be made to educate employers about the financial needs of black families in the modern society.

**5.3** Black women are dependent on their children to look after them in their old age, instead a retired domestic worker is often required to look after the children of her daughter who is a domestic worker. Many domestic workers have entered this job market in order to care for elderly parents. The salaries of domestic workers are inadequate to cope with the demands of the present and this leaves them without options to provide for their retirement. The cycle of dependence should be broken and this clearly indicates the necessity of investigating the provision of a minimum pension<sup>37</sup> by the employers of domestic workers.

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<sup>37</sup> The dependence of rural caretaker-mothers on a state pension should be taken into account in the investigation of this issue.

**5.4** Employers have to be sensitized to the fact that live-in domestic workers are family members with obligations, worries and emotional needs. It is recommended that a programme be launched to promote greater awareness of the family life and feelings of domestic workers in this respect. It is suggested that this be channelled through appropriate popular media (such as magazines, regional newspapers, television programmes), churches and women's groups.

**5.5** Skills upgrading programmes need to be designed in conjunction with career-pathing and career guidance, if these are to serve the purpose of enabling women to escape the "trap of domestic work". This applies to domestic workers as well as to their adolescent children. The need for well-planned career guidance for school girls should also be emphasised.

**5.6** The time resident domestic workers are able to spend with their children is severely restricted and these periods are frequently spent on domestic duties. Contact per letter and telephone is limited. Domestic workers have to be educated in ways in which they can strengthen their ties with their children despite their separation from them. Existing programmes<sup>38</sup> in this respect should be supported and expanded in order to minimize emotional distance and to limit the negative effects of long-term physical separation on the development of the children. These programmes should be introduced as widely as possible. It is furthermore suggested that these programmes be extended to provide grandparents with skills to raise children in and for the present-day society.

**5.7** Education is valued highly by domestic workers and they see a better education for their children as a way to improve their position in society. They need support in providing their children with quality schooling and where children live with them they should not feel obliged to send children away elsewhere for schooling. They must be informed of their rights to have children accepted at local schools and assistance should be available to help them enjoy these rights. Furthermore, programmes to

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<sup>38</sup> The "Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie" has developed a programme to support domestic workers in this respect.

upgrade and improve the skills of domestic workers themselves should be supported and expanded. Employers should be motivated to allow workers time off to improve their qualifications.<sup>39</sup>

**5.8** Teenage or early unplanned pregnancy forces many girls to leave school and enter domestic work. Domestic workers who live away from their teenage daughters are not able to guide and supervise them and grandparents who do not embrace modern customs do not perform these functions adequately. It is therefore recommended that the problem of teenage pregnancy be addressed, *inter alia* through a thorough programme of sex education at school. Naturally such programmes would benefit many more groups than domestic workers.<sup>40</sup>

**5.9** A prominent theme which emerged from the research was the lack of involvement by men. Easily accessible, affordable and effective routes through which women can claim maintenance from men should be investigated. These should target not only divorced men but also "absent" men married either by customary or civil rites, as well as boyfriends who impregnate women. Enforcement does not, however, guarantee voluntary co-operation and any family policy in this country should give a high priority to reaching men in order to motivate them to re-enter the arena of family life. Future generations of men should be the main target and it is therefore recommended that new school curricula give high priority to topics that deal with preparation for marriage and family responsibilities. This should not only be dealt with in subjects such as guidance, but in other subjects as well. Language textbooks could, for example, include topics about family life.

**5.10** Finally it is strongly recommended that a large-scale quantitative survey amongst domestic workers be undertaken to validate through triangulation<sup>41</sup> the findings of this explorative and qualitative research. This research should focus *inter alia* on the

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<sup>39</sup> Various adult literacy schools, such as Ikageng in Pretoria, provide an important service.

<sup>40</sup> The knowledge that these teenagers have of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, and of ways of preventing these diseases should be researched.

<sup>41</sup> "In social research, *triangulation* means using different types of measures, or data collection techniques, in order to examine the same variable." (Neuman, 1994:141)



following: financial restraints on family relationships; frequency of home visits; distance travelled to and from home; child care arrangements; the nature of relationships with children; relationships with men, including the extent of financial support and the nature of contact with men; contact of men with children; and attitudes towards other family members.

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