

THE BLACK SASH

NATIONAL CONFERENCE, 1976

HELD AT GRAHAMSTOWN

REPORT ON THE DOMESTIC WORKERS EMPLOYMENT BUREAU  
RUN CONJOINTLY BY THE DWEP PROGRAM OF THE INSTITUTE  
OF RACE RELATIONS AND THE BLACK SASH

This programme was instituted on a small scale in 1974. The purpose of the programme is to uplift conditions of service and the standards of service offered. The programme now runs twice weekly at the Temple Emmanuel in Johannesburg. We are grateful to the Temple and its staff for their kindness and generosity.

Domestic service has always been a difficult and unrewarding task, and in a society where the difficulties are compounded by a race colour prejudiced society with great cultural differences, the problems are multiplied.

Sue Gordon, the Director of the DWEP programme, has written a booklet giving guidance on many aspects of the employer-employee relationship, on cultural background and custom, which, if widely read, would improve the lot of the domestic worker and race relations generally. It is our fervent wish that a similar book for domestic workers be published in order to explain the cultural background of whites and the duties and requirements of domestic workers, preferably in the vernacular languages. At present we have only a roneoed advice sheet to offer the workers.

At the present moment, due to the economic climate, it is a "buyer's market" for employers. Many people are out of work and many of these have little in the way of skills to offer. This is depressing salaries and making our task of bettering the salary structure more difficult.

In September and October of last year, several women operatives, mainly from the clothing industry, applied to us for positions as domestics. Flat cleaners, too, are being retrenched and are looking for domestic work. We are beginning to see too, men formerly employed in the building trade looking for a job which would mean at least a roof over their heads and enough to eat. We understand, though we have no statistics to prove our case, that school-leavers in Soweto have encountered many difficulties in finding work, and young people from country districts are seeking domestic work in areas such as Sandton and Randburg where they may be employed on a contract basis. Most employers demand references and it is difficult for anyone to provide a suitable reference if they have been employed in industry. We ask school-leavers to bring a testimonial from their headmasters where possible. Ironically, very few employers ever provide a written reference.

One of the greatest problems a domestic worker has is the inability to negotiate salary or hours. We are now requesting a signature from employers which might afford some legal protection as to contractual obligation on the part of the employer as to salary and payment of notice.

Few domestic workers are properly trained; facilities are now available at the Centres of Concern for literacy training, cooking and sewing courses. We urge all workers to attend these Centres and employers to allow their employees time to attend these courses and to reward their employees for skills acquired. We feel too that the Centres of Concern do much to better the individual's view of himself and instil more self-confidence.

The need for proper training centres for domestic workers is becoming more urgent. We would dearly love to establish one and are working to this end. Obviously finance, technical facilities and departmental permission would have to be obtained. A trained worker would obviously command a better salary and would be more efficient . . . . /2

efficient.

Other difficulties that we encounter with domestic workers include a reluctance to take up employment in an area in which they have not worked before. While fully understanding that they have friends in a specific neighbourhood and know the shops, often a good job is turned down because of prejudice. Many, too, are reluctant to take up employment in a block of flats; this, too, we understand, especially as many have to share rooms and the law requires that the caretaker exercise vigilant control of visitors. However, hostel residents have to share too and there is gross overcrowding in the townships.

Many efficient, highly trained women are reluctant to divulge special skills, such as an ability to bake or sew or do kosher cooking, in case they are not paid adequately for these skills. Another fear is that if they work efficiently and quickly the employer will load them with extra chores and cut down on their free time. We encourage people to state their skills and work efficiently in return for which we persuade the employer to reward skill and encourage efficiency by giving them more free time.

Despite constant press publicity and the lectures given to women's organisations by Sue Gordon, and despite the current rate of inflation, salaries offered are still far too low. We reluctantly accept that we can only negotiate from R40 per month upwards. There is always some desperate person, possibly illegally in the area, who will work for much less than R40 per month.

Domestic workers who come in on a daily basis have their own problems. We have been able to influence employers to make the hours more realistic and to pay transport costs. However, many fail to see that the live-out domestic has to pay rent and feed herself and hasn't the "perks" that a live-in domestic has. There are still employers who expect a live-out worker to travel for hours in the early morning in order to present Madam with her early morning tea and to stay until the evening to wash up the supper dishes. The live-out worker, despite the fact that most blocks of flats, and there are many in Johannesburg, have little or no sleeping accommodation, finds it more difficult to obtain work except on a piece-work basis. We try and negotiate on a daily minimum of R3,50 plus transport costs.

We interview an average of 28 new employees per session and only six potential employers. Including old applications, we achieve 2 "marriages" per session, of which about 6 work out satisfactorily. This leaves us with vast numbers of workseekers returning week after week.

Obviously we send those in difficulties with reference books, housing and permits to the Johannesburg Advice Office. This averages out at approximately two per week. We reluctantly explain to those who have no rights in the area that we cannot help them and advise them to return to the areas in which they might obtain work. Many of these are women from the Eastern Cape who have all told us of the low salaries in the area.

There are numerous unemployables, some drink heavily and, if possible, we refer them to the clinic at Happiness House in an attempt to rehabilitate them. Some people have bad reputations as pilferers or people who quarrel frequently and violently. These, of course, we ask to leave the centre, but not before we can prove the case against them. Some workers are old and contemptuously overlooked even for the lightest of jobs; some never seem to accept any jobs offered, and we try to establish why through our one untrained black worker. We sorely need the help of a social worker, preferably black. Because of our own shortcomings, we are unable to break the communications barrier. Some flit from job to job; if we have placed them on several occasions we feel it only fair to ask them to seek work elsewhere and give newcomers a chance.

It is an uphill and often unrewarding job to attempt to change white South African attitudes to domestic workers. Whilst we believe in asking a fair return for a good day's work and efficient service, we are aware of the quality of service offered.

We feel that employers should put more effort into training and organising their domestic workers. Old attitudes die hard and are too easily assimilated by many foreigners living in South Africa. Employers by and large expect an 11-13 hour day from live-in workers. They do little to increase efficiency by rewarding skills and initiative. Many grumble that all servants are dirty, lazy, dishonest and careless of the employer's property. Few employers can give a proper job description and we often wonder if South African housewives actually know anything at all about domestic work. Those who buy and read Sue Gordon's booklet attempt to see their servants as human beings with human needs and problems. We feel that they are more rational in the demands they make and more sympathetic to employees. Of necessity, domestic work necessitates a more intimate relationship than industrial or commercial work.

We find older housewives by and large very intolerant. They invent useless, unproductive tasks, rather than see black hands idle. They are difficult about salary, time off, and leave, and feel that the family cast-offs are a sufficient reward or substitute for salary. We are often amazed when an elderly domestic tells us that she has left her last employer for whom she worked for twenty or more years, but still needs a job as her "golden handshake" was very small, perhaps the battered contents of her room. Frequently, her salary after all those years would only be about R35 per month. Older employers too seem to be reluctant to provide a pension or provident fund. There are many spoilt young women who make tremendous demands on their staff. The better-educated younger women, often working women themselves, are more understanding, pay better and generally treat their servants with more humanity.

Employers, by and large, bristle when they discover that they have to sit in a queue and answer a questionnaire; some, in fact, seem to regard our service as a convenient cattle market. By demanding that each employer be interviewed (we previously let them fill in their own forms) we are able to influence some, and certainly raise the awareness of all, concerning salary, the length of the working day, time off, hot water in the servant's bathroom, etc. We suggest rationalisation of work in large households and encourage them to help their staff acquire skills. Naturally, we urge them to buy Sue's booklet.

We do not hesitate to refuse to help employers who have not complied with the terms of the agreements made in our Centre, and to point out in no mean terms, that we are not obliged to find a domestic for an unsuitable employer. We push the neighbourhood Centres of Concern and point out the advantages of skill training, social contact and the general personal upliftment that comes from a break in the dreary round of domestic chores.

We unfortunately do not get sufficient feedback from either employer or employee, but a percentage of employers have proved amenable, friendly and willing to teach and learn and people placed with them seem happy. Improved attitudes may improve race relations one day.

We hope in the coming year to try and get a training centre established, to raise employer awareness for the provision of medical care, to better conditions of employment, wages and pensions schemes, to encourage workers to acquire skills and increase efficiency, and to encourage frank discussion of conditions and service on an open and friendly basis. We hope that mutual respect will improve the quality of life for all concerned.

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