Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities
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6.1 Introduction

Domestic work is one of the largest job sectors for low-skilled workers in South African cities. However, it is difficult to evaluate accurately how many people, mainly women and some men, are employed as domestic workers in South Africa – one estimate is that their number is close to 900,000. This figure tends to be fairly stable. In 2000, the number varied from 940,000 in February to 952,000 in September. In 2001, it was estimated to lie between 870,000 in February and 880,000 in September (Statistics South Africa, 2001; 202; 2003). Such a difference, from one year to the next, reflects difficulties of evaluation in a job sector known to be very discreet.

Domestic work is a hidden form of work, involving tasks that workers have to complete at their employers’ homes. The hidden nature of the work makes it difficult to control, to manage and to register, which explains why South Africa lacks reliable official data on this sector. More importantly, domestic work is scattered throughout the urban space, generating diffuse mobility patterns that are hard to detect.

Under apartheid, mobility patterns were not as developed as they currently are for the following two reasons. First, the live-in or sleep-in arrangement was widespread until the midnineties (Le Roux, 1995). This arrangement declined after influx control legislation was abolished in 1986, opening the way for migrant workers’ families to join them in the townships. Second, the job market is currently becoming increasingly flexible, due partly to a rising unemployment level. Rising unemployment has led to a diminishment of job security, associated with a growing demand for piece work and the scattering of job opportunities throughout the urban space. Urban migration is becoming less circular; multiple and scattered
labour mobility patterns are becoming more common in a job market transformed both by de-industrialisation and the transition to post-Fordism.

In both cases, domestic workers relate to the urban space in very specific ways. Being isolated from one another, they struggle to find ways and means to integrate into the social fabric of the city and to perceive themselves as members of a clearly identified social group, with a specific identity. This might be one of the reasons why domestic workers are neglected worldwide by researchers in the social sciences, although they play a major role in the national economy of many countries (Destremau & Lautier, 2002). It also explains why research has so far focused on other aspects of domestic work: a recent issue of the French journal *Tiers Monde*, dedicated to the study of domestic workers (Destremau & Lautier, 2002), focused on the mobility of migrant domestic workers elsewhere in the world, as they move from rural to urban settings, and on their social trajectories in cities, while, in South Africa, the focus lay on their conditions of work (Cock, 1980).

The authors of this chapter have chosen to broach the subject from an urban perspective, by analysing the way in which domestic workers relate to urban space. The success of charring (Breitenbach & Peta, 2001) makes domestic work a near-perfect prototype of what has been called globalised salary employment (*salariat mondialisé*) (Destremau & Lautier, 2002), which refers to the way domestic workers deal with the flexibility of the job market and to the way that this flexibility influences the way they relate to urban space. This concept, therefore, reflects the impact, on an urban scale, of what Bourdieu has called site effects (*les effets de lieux*) (Bourdieu, 1993) on the rapidly transforming conditions of work and on increasing access to work opportunities, as well as on the new nature of urban mobility.

However, increasing enforcement of legislation relating to domestic workers’ conditions of work and wage levels, in contrast to mere flexibility of work, can play a key role in encouraging the formation of a new social identity for domestic workers. This may especially be so if they find themselves capable of joining trade unions and of working in a more formalised environment.

To explore these concerns, the authors base their study on a series of 33 interviews, held with domestic workers in different areas of Cape Town and Johannesburg.¹

### 6.2 From paternalism to flexibility: The influence of post-apartheid transformation on the domestic work environment

Relationships between employers and domestic workers are still based on archaic paternalistic practices that are a direct continuation of the *live-in* system established during the apartheid era (Friguglietti, 1989). The system aimed to
Domestic workers, job access and work identities

bridge the divide between black and white areas, so that the demand for full-time domestic workers in the white residential areas could be satisfied. In the 1960s, the employer was considered as ‘an urban father who makes sure of feeding his children before catering for the other children in the rural areas’. The metaphor reveals the importance of influx control and of the exclusion of black people from urban areas, while it also confirms that paternalistic patterns of relationship in the social field were particularly well developed and rooted in the domestic arena.

_Employers’ paternalism: A traditional, arbitrary, and alienating form of regulation_

The ongoing tendency for employers to provide accommodation for domestic workers means that domestic workers are still entitled to a certain number of benefits, just as they are compelled, in turn, to abide by certain rules and fulfil certain duties. Rights and duties are often implied, and can be confused in a system based on personalised relationships, clientelism, and favouritism. Employers decide arbitrarily whether to pay transport fees for their domestic workers’ annual Christmas visit to the workers’ families, who may live in remote rural areas; whether to pay for medication, whether to pay for accommodation, if the workers do not live on the premises of their employers, and whether to provide their workers with any other kind of help, such as financial assistance with the tuition fees of the workers’ children. The majority of domestic workers are, in fact, indebted to their employers, which makes the workers even more dependent on them (_Cape Times_, 2002b). Sometimes a woman passes on a domestic worker to her daughter.

Live-in domestic workers can, therefore, be considered to be held captive, both by their jobs and their employers. They have difficulty in accessing other job opportunities and neighbourhoods for a variety of reasons. First, they find themselves isolated and confined to their employers’ backyards (Lessie, one of the domestic workers we interviewed, complains: ‘We just have to be there, by the back door. I see myself as a little mouse, quiet and lonely at the back of the yard.’) and separated from their families. They have to recreate a social network in order to gain a sense of solidarity and support in the immediate neighbourhood, such as in the housing block or street in which they live. Such links are often reinforced by means of participation in communal religious practices, such as attending church (the Sunday service may provide the only opportunity for socialising and be regarded as a valued occasion to escape from their employers’ backyards). Such expressions of solidarity are extremely valuable in dispelling the feeling of isolation experienced by domestic workers. However, they also help to reinforce a sense of spatial captivity. Domestic workers are often informed of other job opportunities by means of verbal interchanges with other domestic workers in the areas in which
they work, so that, despite the contact, they are still, in fact, confined to a very narrow local job market. Deprived of everyday township socialising, they have little hope of entering another spatial network.

Second, employers usually tend to employ live-in domestic workers, who they expect to be available most of the time. Working under such conditions, domestic workers have little personal time in which to look for another job.

Third, domestic workers depend on their employers for their accommodation, and have to secure another place in which to live before being able to quit their current employment. Free accommodation may at first look like a valuable option in terms of saving both time and money, but it costs a great deal in terms of spatial and social mobility, as well as in terms of psychological and emotional security.

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Yvonne

A product of 15 years of paternalistic behaviour, spatial captivity and social stagnation

Yvonne was born in Durban, where she started making a living from doing piece jobs, before she found a permanent position as a cashier in a supermarket. When she lost her job following a conflict with the manager, she decided to become a domestic worker. She secured a position through her mother-in-law, who was herself a domestic worker. Since then, Yvonne has been working for the same family for 15 years.

Over the years, Yvonne followed her employer from Pietermaritzburg to Johannesburg, and then to Cape Town, where she arrived in 2001. She was separated from her son during most of this time, as he stayed in Durban with her sister. When he turned 11, she brought him to join her in Cape Town. Yvonne lives in a cottage in Kenilworth and is satisfied with her free accommodation: ‘I have no one to feed and my salary is so little’ (R800 a month). She works from Monday to Friday from 6.30 a.m. to 7 p.m., and she also sometimes works extra hours on a Saturday or Sunday, for no additional pay. Her employer pays for her bus fares to and from church on Sundays. However, she usually walks everywhere else, including to the local shopping centre.

Yvonne lacks the time to look for another job and is reluctant to do so, because she considers herself too old to be able to secure other work, although she is only 46 years old. She has tried unsuccessfully to find additional charring to do on Sundays. Employers do not usually want occasional domestic workers to work over weekends, because the employers are often then away from home, she says. With no job contract, no other job possibility, and very limited mobility, Yvonne is unable to negotiate a raise, and has only
received a salary increase of R200 over the past 15 years. She is unable to save money, she is not registered with the unemployment insurance fund, she is neither a member of a medical aid scheme nor a pension fund, and she depends on her employer’s goodwill to pay for her medication when she falls ill. Like many other domestic workers, she repays a substantial amount of her salary (R300 a month) on her television set.

Towards a greater flexibility: Freedom or precariousness?
The live-in system is currently declining as it becomes more and more contested by domestic workers who consider it to be a ‘modern form of slavery’ (Destremau & Lautier, 2002: 258), and who see the stability it offers as coming at too great a cost. The demise of the apartheid regime, the advent of freedom of movement, and the reuniting of families who had been forcibly split up led to the development of charring, which allowed workers to free themselves to a certain extent from the effects of paternalistic alienation. However, charring is a precarious form of work.

Jessica

The flexibility of work – the price of a relative freedom
Jessica has been working as a domestic worker for 30 years. At the moment, she is working in five different places: in Kuils River on Mondays, in Brackenfell two Tuesdays a month, in Pinelands on Wednesdays, and in Montevista on Thursdays for one employer and every second Friday for another. She opted to work in different places after she lost her full-time job, when her previous employer passed away, leaving her overnight without a source of income. She feels more secure not having to depend on only one employer. Having several different employers also reduces the risk of workplace tension and enables her to avoid developing close relationships with children other than her own. She does not want to be dragged into a situation where patronising employers would expect her to be devoted to their children and work after hours, whenever the children would need her.

She would rather char on the other side of the city from where she lives than turn down a job, even if she has to take seven different kinds of transport to her different jobs. She is too afraid to be tempted to go back to a full-time job, which she sees as a form of slavery. Although it takes her a long time to commute, she finds that she is more capable of organising her own schedule so as to take care of her own children.

Though Jessica asserts that charring has a positive impact on her family life,
she also complains that ‘charring is not a real job’. She claims that she is tired of having to spend such a long time on trains and buses: all her workplaces are far away from Guguletu, to where she and the rest of her family were forced to move in the 1960s.

However, live-in domestic work still has an important role to play in providing those migrating from rural areas with employment and in integrating them into the urban economy. Domestic work requires no more than a minimal education, and employers of domestic workers often provide accommodation for their workers. Newcomers with scant knowledge of the urban environment are often eager to save money on accommodation and transport, as they often wish to send at least part of their earnings back to their families on their rural holdings. Of the 11 women interviewed in Cape Town, nine were migrants from rural areas, small Eastern Cape towns or the former Transkei. All had at one stage been (or are still being) accommodated by their employers.

Circular migration and family division, entrenched by the apartheid system, are still in existence today, creating tensions between newcomers and long-standing urban-dwellers, who call themselves the Cape-borners, meaning people who arrived a long time ago, or who were born in Cape Town. The Cape-borners complain of the unfair competition that newcomers provide in the job market. Isolated in their backyards and stuck in a precarious situation, newcomers are more flexible and their lack of resistance and of protest make them open to exploitation by their employers. Such exploitation contributes to further destabilisation of a job market that longstanding urban-dwelling domestic workers, especially unionised women, try to change and make more bearable. When they want to do several different part-time or charring jobs in order to become more independent and to earn better pay, Cape-borners have, to their disadvantage, to compete with women coming from rural areas. The newcomers are prepared to work for minimal wages if they receive free accommodation, and have usually not yet come to realise the advantages offered by the flexibility of charring in comparison to what they see as more stable positions.

MARY

A domestic worker who is aware of being exploited

Forty-three-year-old Mary lives in a shack in Kliptown (Soweto) and has always worked as a domestic worker. She secured her first job by canvassing door-to-door for work in the neighbouring township of Eldorado Park. After 14 years of working for them, Mary claims that her employers, a couple of coloured teachers, fired her overnight, without any explanation of why they were doing so.
After remaining unemployed for two years, she found another job as a domestic worker in Eldorado Park, thanks to a friend. However, she quit this job after five years because her wages were too low (R300 a month for full-time work).

At the time, she also helped to launch a domestic workers’ trade union in Kliptown. However, the union did not last long. Currently, she has two part-time jobs in Eldorado Park, which she once again found by going door-to-door throughout the neighbourhood. She currently earns R530 a month for five days’ work, and is unhappy with her working conditions but cannot afford to quit at the moment. When asked about the new minimum-wage legislation, she replied that she was concerned about domestic workers losing their jobs if they insisted on being paid at least the minimum wage. Mary no longer expects any improvement in her situation, in spite of her strong personality that led her to take initiatives to find a job, to protest when working conditions were exploitative, and to start becoming politically involved. Her economic context prevents her from being more successful: The difficulty in finding a sufficiently well-paid job, or in finding enough part-time jobs to secure a decent income, shows how precarious domestic work can be as a source of income, rather than how flexible it is.

The growth of domestic work: A consequence of rising unemployment

In the urban environment, which is currently characterised by decreasing opportunities for formal employment, domestic work provides employment opportunities for low-skilled black jobseekers. Domestic work has come to offer more job opportunities than industrial work in many low-income areas of Johannesburg (Bénit, 2001). Indeed, many life trajectories reflect the shift from industrial to domestic work.

DORIS

Victim of de-industrialisation and spatial distance

Forty-two-year-old Doris has been working as a domestic worker for only two years. She was born in Kliptown (Soweto), where she still lives. Her father was an industrial worker and her mother a domestic worker. In 1991, she found a job, which paid R100 a month, in a clothing factory in Fordsburg in the Johannesburg inner city. However, when the factory closed down two years later, she lost her job. She found another job, which paid R150 a month, in a second-hand clothing factory, from which she was later also retrenched.

After remaining unemployed for two years, she was hired by a drycleaner in
the inner city. When she started work, she tried unsuccessfully to negotiate her schedule, so that she could leave work before six p.m. in order to avoid taking the train at night, as she regarded doing so as ‘too dangerous’. After she was mugged while disembarking from the train in Soweto one night, she resigned from her job.

Another period of unemployment followed, until she found a job as a domestic worker in Pimville (Soweto), with her children’s schoolteacher. She is currently working full time for R300 a month, on which she has to support both herself and her husband, who is an unemployed factory worker, as well as their six children and four grandchildren.

Informal trade as a means of coping with de-industrialisation and growing unemployment worldwide is only an inadequate and temporary solution. Many informal traders categorise themselves as unemployed jobseekers, as they are involved in an ongoing search for domestic positions.

HELEN

Domestic worker and landlady

Forty-year-old Helen was born in KwaNdebele and moved to Johannesburg, where she found a job as a hardware factory worker in Strijdom Park, north of Johannesburg. She lost her job after two years, and stayed unemployed for two years (‘That time was bad time’). She survived by selling fruit and vegetables in Diepsloot, an informal neighbourhood in northern Johannesburg, where she was given a plot on which to live. She made about R900 a month at the time.

For five years now, she has been working as a domestic worker in three different part-time jobs in the northern suburbs. She found these jobs thanks to her neighbours in Diepsloot. Currently, she earns R1 200 a month. Moreover, she leases five shacks on her plot, for which she charges the average rent of R90 a month per shack. Her overall monthly income, therefore, amounts to R1 600. However, she claims that she is very unhappy, as her elder son is in prison after having been involved in a hijacking, and her second son has since become a drug addict.

Though Doris’s and Helen’s trajectories represent the most common, becoming a domestic worker is not necessarily considered to be a social or economic decline. Domestic work is even sometimes described as less tiring and better paid than industrial work. Rebecca, for instance, who was born in the Transkei in the 1940s, refused to take the conventional route of seeking employment in Johannesburg: ‘Gold mines had a very bad reputation, and I did not want to go to
Johannesburg, when I left the Transkei to go to Cape Town.’ Janie also decided to take up employment as a domestic worker, in preference to becoming an industrial worker.

**JANIE**

The flexibility of charring in comparison with the rigidity of a more conventional factory job

Janie worked for a long time in factories before she chose to become a domestic worker. She found that factory work was too hard and incompatible with her family life: ‘I used to work in a printing works, then I worked in soldering, then in a sweet factory, but it was too hard. My children were still young and I had to start working at five a.m. It was too difficult, too early: you cannot do that if you have young children, especially babies.’ Janie left the factory to work for herself, charring in Rondebosch, Observatory, Claremont, and Mowbray. She is satisfied with the work that she currently does, as it gives her time to take proper care of her children, as well as to look after her husband, who is severely ill. When it takes the form of charring, domestic work may be defined as provision of services in a free market by a person who works for himself or herself.⁵

### 6.3 Place matters: Spatial segmentation in the domestic labour market

The working conditions of domestic workers are so diverse that it is hard to define the meaning of the category *domestic worker*. The authors of this study have so far explained this diversity in terms of differences in personality patterns, in terms of residential history (migrant or non-migrant), and in terms of professional and family history (domestic work after the loss of an industrial job or in line with the type of work held by the mothers of domestic workers). However, another, more unexpected, reason for these differences should be stressed: site effects (Bourdieu, 1993).

Site effects can be defined as the impact that space and place of residence have on the individual’s integration into the job market, in two ways. First, living at a distance from wealthier neighbourhoods, which contain residences of potential employers, increases the risk of unemployment. Domestic workers undergo more frequent and longer periods of unemployment when they live in Kliptown (on the southern periphery of Soweto) or in Diepsloot (on the remote northern periphery of Johannesburg), than they do when living in Alexandra or Zevenfontein, which are much closer to suburban malls and middle- to high-income residential areas.
Figure 6.1: Domestic work in Johannesburg: A segmented labour market.

Claire Bénit & Marianne Morange
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Map 1 - Domestic work in Johannesburg: a segmented labour market.
Figure 6.2: Spatial mobilities of domestic workers in Cape Town

Marianne Morange, 2003
Second, an awareness of whether the place of residence is central or peripheral is crucial to understanding the diversity of available jobs, and the spatial extent of the labour market for each individual. As can be seen from the maps of Johannesburg, Kliptown residents work almost exclusively in the neighbouring townships of Eldorado Park and Lenasia; Zevenfontein and Diepsloot residents tend to work only in the adjoining northern suburbs. On the contrary, Alexandra residents can choose from a far more diverse and widespread range of job opportunities.

Their place of residence plays a major role in the ability of individuals to find a job, to access transportation, and to negotiate wages and working conditions. Indeed, domestic work, as an essentially spatially scattered and relatively invisible form of employment, relies, more than other forms of employment, on spatial proximity and the existence of social networks.

### Transport, an important limitation to job accessibility

Distance is a primary constraint to access to jobs, in terms of both time and cost. This is obvious in Doris's case, as she has given up a formal job in the inner city for domestic work in Soweto, due to the distances that she would otherwise have had to travel and the insecurity that she would have experienced in having to use public transport. Therefore, distance adds to the perception of a *ghetto effect*, and further confines residents to a particular neighbourhood.

One might argue that distance is one of the reasons why *live-in* arrangements remain important for domestic workers, although such arrangements can be considered as an anachronism in the current job market. Domestic workers usually prefer not to be separated from their families than to live in relative isolation in their employers' backyards. However, the latter option allows them to save on transport costs and to accept jobs that may be spatially far apart from their families. *Living in* is sometimes the only means of securing accommodation in a city, especially for recently arrived migrants. As in the case of Doris in Johannesburg, Mary in Cape Town turned down a job opportunity in Sea Point because accepting the job would have meant that she would have had to travel too far to get to work. After having remained unemployed for a long period of time, she felt obliged to accept a position in Claremont, though the job required almost as much travel as the one in Sea Point. However, the Claremont position at least offered free accommodation.

The cost of transport forms a major part of the monthly expenses of workers who do not live in. One must also take into account such indirect costs as time consumption, which has a direct impact on the quality of life, especially as far as the care and education of children is concerned. By way of illustration, Cecilia earns R950 a month, which she spends in the following way:
Table 6.1: Cecilia’s monthly expenditure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item of expenditure</th>
<th>Cost in rands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Train</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School transport for her daughter</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School fees for her daughter</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water*</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>993</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cape Times, 19 August 2002

* The amount that Cecilia spends on water is a theoretical amount, as effectively she does not pay her water bills. Her non-payment of her water account seems to confirm that the so-called ‘boycott’ of urban services is at least partly due to poverty (Morange, 2006).

Inadequate transportation systems increase the time spent on travelling to work. In Johannesburg, physical access to domestic jobs – especially in the residential suburban areas – requires that workers use minibus taxis more than any other mode of transportation. Therefore, in this regard, the place of residence matters a great deal. Alexandra township, which is central to the Johannesburg urban-growth corridor, is well connected to the rest of the city by virtue of its being on the routes of three different taxi associations. This explains the wider spatial scale and the greater diversity of Alexandra residents’ job locations. Diepsloot and, a fortiori, Zevenfontein (a so-called temporary informal settlement) are less well supplied with taxi services, but are close to the residential suburbs where workers can find employment. Kliptown, which is linked to the inner city by train (as a leftover from Fordist apartheid times, when Soweto’s residents were largely workers in the industrial parts of the city centre) has become much more peripheral to the new low-skilled job market: Kliptown domestic workers seldom find a job in the northern suburbs.

The time spent on commuting increases with the number of taxis that domestic workers have to use in order to reach their workplaces: many of them use three different taxis, which is extremely costly, both financially (there is no general taxi pass, since no agreement is in place between the various taxi associations) and time-wise (the waiting time for a taxi can be more than one hour). Domestic workers also have to walk long distances from taxi stops to the suburban houses.
where they work. Public transportation cannot fully accommodate the spatial scattering of jobs: most domestic workers have to walk about 30 minutes each way to and from work (accounting for one hour a day spent just on walking). The walking time is currently rising, because of the increasing number of road closures in Johannesburg, and workers have to take long detours, as well as cope with changes in taxi routes. Martha, who lives in Zevenfontein and works in the northern suburbs, now has a 30-minute walk each day, instead of a five-minute walk, as she had previously, due to the development of gated communities.

In Cape Town, domestic workers often have to use three different kinds of transport network to get to work: trains, buses, and taxis. In addition, they often have to combine the use of these networks with long walks. However, they still do not have to cope with as many difficulties as do domestic workers in Johannesburg, for three reasons: the public transportation network is more developed in Cape Town, especially in the white northern and southern suburbs; the metropolitan area is not as widespread as it is in Johannesburg, so that the distance to work is usually shorter; and access to public spaces is not widely impeded by private closure of roads and entire areas. However, domestic workers in both cities have, in certain respects, to cope with the same kinds of difficulty: long, time-consuming queues at bus and taxi stations, an irregular train service (few trains run outside peak hours), and numerous changes of trains that they have to make due to having to pass through the city centre or a secondary station, in order to commute from the townships where they live to the residential areas where they work. Rebecca, like many others, has to live such a nightmare each day.

REBECCA

Transport – fast, secure, or cheap? A hard-to-make choice

Rebecca works five days a week in Plumstead. She stays in Khayelitsha (Site C). To go to work, she can choose from one of three different options. Her first option involves her walking in the morning to the nearest railway station, which is only a five-minute walk from her house. A train journey to town would take her approximately 35 minutes. She would have to change trains at the central Cape Town station and board a second train for Plumstead, where she would arrive approximately 20 minutes later. From Plumstead station, she would need to walk to work, which would take her approximately another 15 minutes. As the train service is unreliable, according to her own experience, her first option would take her more or less one hour to complete, and would cost her R88 a month.

Her second option involves her taking a taxi in the morning (for R6) to Wynberg station. The taxi ride would take her 40 minutes to complete. The taxi does not leave as early as the train, so if she were to choose this
option, she could sleep later. However, she would have to walk for longer in order to reach the taxi rank, as it is further away than the Khayelitsha train station. Otherwise, she could take another taxi for another R3. From Wynberg station, she would then have to take another taxi (costing her R6) that would get her to Plumstead in approximately 20 minutes. When taken altogether, Rebecca’s second option would cost her between R12 and R15 one way (depending on whether she were first to take a taxi or walk, taking into account that if she does not take a taxi she is likely to be late for work). If Rebecca were to make use of taxis every day that she goes to work, she would spend R120 to R150 a month, which amounts to 10% of her current monthly income.

Rebecca’s third option involves her taking a bus to Wynberg station, which would take her approximately one hour. She could then take a second bus, by which means she would reach Plumstead in about 15 minutes’ time. However, the bus service is infrequent and unreliable, as it is affected by the amount of traffic on the roads. Moreover, if she were to make regular use of buses, it would cost her R175 a month, since she would have to buy two different *clip cards* (monthly tickets) for the journey. Although the municipality is responsible for the bus service, the bus fares are not standardised. Each bus network determines its own fares, so that there is no general metropolitan pass that might otherwise help to reduce the cost of commuting by bus. The fragmented pricing system is the result of the outmoded urban migration pattern between townships and factories in an industrial city where workers had only, in the past, to use one train or one bus to get to work.

Upon consideration of her three different options, Rebecca has decided to take a taxi to work in the morning and a train home. The result is that she has to pay more in order to ensure that she is on time in the mornings, but is able to cut her costs to a certain extent by returning home by train in the evenings, when she has more time for the journey. Nevertheless, she still finds it necessary to buy a monthly *clip card*, which she only uses 50 per cent of the time.

**Finding a job: Spatial proximity or social networks?**

Nonetheless, the authors’ findings show that concentration of jobs around the place of residence has more to do with the way in which domestic workers actually look for, and eventually find, employment, than with the inadequate transportation networks.

Melanie Jacquemin, in her paper on domestic work in Abidjan (Jacquemin,
2002), stresses that ‘the most common way of finding a domestic job is through one’s social network’ (2002), consisting of family, ethnic or regional kin, friends, and neighbours. She compares this model to that of using a more formal and collective labour organisation – the labour bureaus (both formal and informal), currently developing in Abidjan. As such labour bureaus are not commonly found in Johannesburg and Cape Town, the authors will further analyse domestic workers’ access to job opportunities in terms of the so-called spatial proximity hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, domestic workers find their jobs through direct, physical contact with their future employers. In highly segregated cities, such as Johannesburg or Cape Town, and in cities lacking employment nodes, such direct contact seldom occurs. It requires that workers have the opportunity to leave their ghettos in order to visit the shops, to attend schools, or to work at their first job. Direct contact with prospective employers can also occur when jobseekers canvass door to door for work in residential suburbs, or when they visit suburban malls. However, approaching prospective employers in this way is an extreme measure, and occurs, most of the time, in neighbourhoods where the jobseeker already has a practical knowledge.

According to the social network hypothesis, domestic workers find their jobs through their networks, whether they are personal (involving friends, other family members, neighbours, or even former employers, who liaise on behalf of the workers with prospective employers), or through impersonal means (such as through placing or answering advertisements in the media, or through labour bureaus).

In both Johannesburg and Cape Town, domestic workers reported that they found employment more easily through their social networks than they did through making use of spatial proximity to prospective employers (see tables 6.2 and 6.3). In more than half the cases that the authors investigated, domestic workers found a job by using their personal networks (other family members and friends). In the other cases, job access relied heavily on former participation in the job market: in many cases (20% in Johannesburg and 24% in Cape Town), the employers found new work for their employees. Utilisation of past participation in the job market appears to be important and largely underestimated, since door-to-door canvassing for work often occurs in the vicinity of the current employer’s residence. The securing of new work tends to depend more on the knowledge of potential employers than on their actual physical accessibility.

In Johannesburg, door-to-door canvassing and direct encounters with prospective employers represent an important way of finding a job for domestic workers, comprising approximately 25 per cent of the cases that the authors investigated. Use of such a modus operandi can be explained in terms of the less spatially segregated structure existing at metropolitan level, which allows for direct
contact between potential employers and jobseekers. However, this important means of finding work is highly compromised by current urban development in Johannesburg, which is characterised by gated communities and road closures.

**Table 6.2: Finding a job in Johannesburg**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means of finding a job</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By means of spatial proximity</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct contact</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door-to-door canvassing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By means of social networking</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members and friends</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour bureaus</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements in newspapers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>67</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.3: Finding a job in Cape Town**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means of finding a job</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By means of spatial proximity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct contact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door-to-door canvassing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By means of social networking</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members and friends</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour bureaus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements in newspapers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Bénit and Morange, Personal surveys, August 2002*

Note: The people whom the authors interviewed reviewed their entire working histories and related how they found each job in turn.

If social networks are more important for finding a job than spatial criteria, one could expect live-in domestic workers to be freed of the *ghetto effect*, of feeling trapped in their employers’ place of residence. However, social networks themselves have a very strong territorial basis: they are spatially segmented, as can be seen from the details depicted on the maps included in this chapter. Personal
networks of family and friends have a very narrow spatial scope, though they play an important role in accessing housing, as well as work, in local townships and informal settlements.

Even employers’ recommendations within their own networks of neighbours, family members, and friends are often surprisingly spatially confined in quite narrow spaces. The spatial segmentation of urban networks and practices, not only at the lower but also at the upper urban social extremes, may be explained by the excessive social and ethnic specialisation of urban space inherited from the system of apartheid, even if it is undergoing some change in the current post-apartheid era. In Johannesburg, Sandton’s residents have traditionally been wealthier and predominantly Anglophone, while the residents of Randburg have tended to be more middle income and Afrikaans speaking. The middle-income residents of Eldorado Park (a former coloured township) and Lenasia (a former Indian township) still appear predominantly ethnically segregated. A similar ethos of segregation can be found in Cape Town, with Anglophone middle-to-upper-income neighbourhoods prevailing in the southern suburbs, and Afrikaans-speaking middle-income neighbourhoods predominating in the northern suburbs, behind what is sometimes nicknamed the ‘boerewors curtain’. This spatial segmentation is relevant to both personal and impersonal networks, of which the latter consist of job agencies, newspaper advertising, and churches, which, most of the time, have a very local scope.

Finding a job as a domestic worker ultimately depends on many different factors. While the jobseeker’s personality obviously plays a role (Amelie and Sina reflect their personal abilities in the way in which they found their jobs – by showing that they are clever, mobile, creative, determined, cheerful, and extrovert), knowledge of urban space is crucial to successful job hunting. A prolonged presence in an urban environment and possession of a good education are key elements to building what Jacques Lévy (1994) has called spatial capital, borrowing from Bourdieu (1993). When this spatial capital is lacking, as in cases of recent migration to the city, use of regional or family networking is the only means of accessing the job market, while those jobseekers who have been living in the city for a long time can use a variety of means to find work. Amelie, who has spent the last 15 years in Johannesburg, knew immediately in which newspaper to publish her job advertisement; her understanding of the local job market and of available training opportunities and costs is quite accurate. Johanna, born in Alexandra (Johannesburg), was also able to use a whole range of means (advertising, social networking, door-to-door canvassing, and church contacts) to find her various jobs. She also benefited from being able to use her training as a nurse to offer a specialised service (medical assistance) to her future employer in order to secure a higher wage (R1 440 a month). Being able to find a job easily, she has also always
been able to quit when she found working conditions to be unsatisfactory (such as in the case of overly fussy employers, racist behaviour, or low wages).

However, knowledge of the urban environment is not enough in itself to secure employment, but has to be combined with a certain level of literacy and education. Mary, who has been living in Kliptown (Johannesburg) for 22 years, but who is illiterate and speaks little English, is not as confident as the other Johannesburg-based women whom the authors have already discussed. Thanks to her outgoing personality and knowledge of the city, she can complement her social network with door-to-door canvassing, but her canvassing remains limited to the neighbouring suburb of Eldorado Park where her employer imposes harsh working conditions on her – a very low wage of R300 a month for a seven-hour working day six days a week.

Segmented labour markets: Varying working conditions in the workplace
The spatial proximity and social network hypotheses combine to form the concept of a spatially segmented job market for domestic workers in metropolitan areas. Not surprisingly, working conditions differ greatly due to job location, as can be seen in figure 6.3. Domestic workers’ wages in northern Johannesburg can amount to three times the wages of domestic workers in the southern part of the city. This difference can be explained by the difference in the income of employers, who, in the northern suburbs, tend to be largely in the high-income group and, in the southern suburbs, middle income. However, the difference in wages is also due to the varying ability of domestic workers to negotiate their working conditions in the local job markets, which the workers experience as differing widely – as being flexible in Randburg, secure in Sandton, and captive in Soweto–Lenasia.

The most extreme contrast in employment patterns lies between northern and southern Johannesburg. Working in the southern part of Johannesburg generally means having a single low-paid, full-time job. Daily wages are, on average, four times lower than those generally paid in Randburg and Sandton, as can be seen in figure 6.4. The lower wages reflect the lower income of employers living in Eldorado Park or Lenasia, who largely belong to the Indian or coloured middle-income group. However, lower wages also reflect the very tense interracial relationships that prevail in the area and that are much more tense than the relationships experienced between black domestic workers and white employers in the northern suburbs. Many domestic workers actually complain about being despised and ill-treated, or even of being treated as slaves, by their employers.12

In contrast, as can be seen in figure 6.5, Randburg has a larger number of employers (per domestic worker), resulting in higher autonomy for domestic workers and the beginning of professionalisation (Destremau & Lautier, 2002).
Average total wages are higher, giving greater bargaining power to domestic workers, as it is easier for them to quit one of their part-time jobs if they have several others. The network of potential future employers is also larger. Amelia, who has two part-time jobs in Randburg, says: ‘My mother was a domestic worker in the old days, in Kimberley. She wasn’t free. I am free.’
6.4 Regulating domestic work: The emergence of a professional identity?

Domestic work appears to be a sector of the job market that is extremely diverse in terms of situations and arrangements. It is highly flexible, diluted, and scattered throughout the urban space, informal and unregistered. In such conditions, regulation of the relationship between employers and employees, and of conditions of work, seems unfeasible. Traditionally, domestic work was regulated by the paternalistic attitudes of employers toward their employees, whom they considered to be personally bonded to them. Such conditions are no longer clearly apparent in the charring system, but have not yet been replaced by another form of control. That is why, initiated by both public authorities and trade unions, (SADSAWU, 2002a) new legal and official rules were voted for and implemented between 2002 and 2003 in a sector that had up until then been relatively neglected by legislation.\(^\text{13}\)

The challenge of unionising scattered and fragile employees

The first South African trade union, formed in 1943, to focus on the needs of domestic workers is the African Domestic Servants Trade Union, one of the oldest of South African trade unions. However, very few domestic workers are, even now, actually unionised, due to their relative social invisibility, and to the fact that they have been subjected to paternalistic practices that continue to rob them of their
independence. Unlike factory workers, they do not usually meet and socialise at their workplaces. Although they can be verbally encouraged to join a union, such verbal encouragement takes a very long time and is relatively unrewarding, as it requires going from door to door, handing out pamphlets, organising meetings, and convincing often intimidated and exploited workers to attend the meetings in order to end their social isolation. By 1994, only 20,000 domestic workers (around 2% nationwide) had joined a union. By 2002, that number had more or less stabilised. Currently, the number is somewhere between 20,000 and 25,000 members, who actually pay their subscriptions to the main union, SADSAWU (the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union) (see SADSAWU, 2002b), according to its main Somerset West-based rival, the South African Domestic and General Workers Union (SADAGWU), which splintered away from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

SADSAWU has been weakened by its stormy history and lack of financial resources (see Naledi, 1996). Created in 1984 from the merging of several locally based organisations, which joined COSATU in 1989, SADSAWU only managed to remain active until 1994, due to the financial support of a number of foreign NGOs. In 1994, when the financial support came to an end, all 13 local bureaus closed down. After additional foreign financial resources had been found, SADSAWU reopened in 2000. However, its fluctuating history reveals the structural weakness of a union that depends on the goodwill of a distant foreign sponsor. In 2000, only 10,000 members were recorded as regularly continuing to pay their monthly R10 subscription fee.

Despite their structural weaknesses, unions, by means of formal wage claims, try to ensure a R1,200 a month minimum wage for all workers. Domestic workers are traditionally among the most poorly paid workers in South Africa: in 1995, the median national income was close to R1,400 a month, whereas the median national domestic worker’s income was only R333 a month (including both rural and urban areas) (Bhorat, 20009). The unions also insist that employers pay transport costs and school fees for domestic workers’ children, when they have to attend expensive formerly white local schools. The unions also support new migrants, who run the risk of being victimised by their employers, especially when they have been hired by means of suspect labour bureaus. Some labour bureaus charge potential employers a R100 fee for recruitment of a domestic worker from the rural areas of South Africa. The employer also has to pay for any train, taxi, or bus fare to bring the worker to town. Some employers recoup the money spent on bringing employees to town by not paying the employee for his or her first couple of months’ work. Unions also play an important role in denouncing domestic violence against live-in domestic workers.
Significant changes, at least in the law
In 2002, full-time urban domestic workers obtained a minimum wage of R800. Moreover, since 2003, employers have been obliged to register their employees with the Unemployment Insurance Fund. Registered domestic workers are entitled to financial support for a six-month period if they lose their jobs. Finally, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCea) of 1983 (that has covered basic conditions of domestic workers since 1994) currently regulates their conditions of work, redundancy, and dismissal, as well as their right to strike.

Conditions of work, the right to leave and vacation benefits according to the BCea
Conditions of work, the right to leave, and vacation benefits, according to the BCea, include the following:\(^{14}\)

- A 45-hour work week prohibits domestic workers from having to work more than nine hours a day for five days a week, or for more than eight hours for a period of six days per week.
- A domestic worker may not work more than 12 hours in any one day.
- All domestic workers are entitled to 36 continuous hours off per week.
- Domestic workers may not work more than three hours a day overtime, and 10 to 15 hours’ overtime in any one week.\(^{15}\) Employers must pay their domestic workers one and a half times their normal wage for any overtime that they work.
- Employers must increase their workers’ hourly rate if they require them to work before six a.m. or after six p.m.
- A lunch break of 30 minutes is compulsory for every five hours of non-stop work done by domestic workers, if their entire workday does not exceed six hours.
- No employer can expect a worker to work on a Sunday without the worker’s agreement. If a domestic worker agrees to work on a Sunday, his or her employer must double his or her hourly rate.
- Employers must provide female workers with unpaid maternity leave for four months.
- All workers are entitled to three weeks’ leave a year, as well as sick leave.
- No person may employ a child who is younger than 15.
- All employers must sign a written contract with all their workers.
- The Labour Relations Act strictly forbids firing someone with no reason and without notifying him or her in advance. The act also protects the right of all workers to strike.
For several reasons, the legislation currently in place was criticised even before being voted in (see Bhorat, 2000 and Cape Times, 2002a).

First, such rights remain largely theoretical, since the law relies on the employer’s goodwill for their implementation. Physical and social isolation hamper controls on the application of the law. If a conflict arises, it is up to a judge to decide on which one of two opposed versions he or she should trust. Determination of how conditions of work and rules regulating labour practice are applied in the privacy of employers’ residences is problematic. Employers can still discriminate against domestic workers by insisting that they hold an access card to fenced, high-security complexes, or by insisting that they undergo HIV/Aids testing (Cape Times, 2003a). The registration of domestic workers for UIF, which started in March 2003, was widely publicised in national and local newspapers, which also contained application forms to encourage employers to apply for registration of their domestic workers (Cape Times, 2003b). However, only 34 000 employers had registered their employees by the deadline, though 800 000 employers had been expected to apply for registration.

Second, the latest legislation is said not to be protective enough, since it aims mainly to encourage a mental shift among employers: The minimum wage is far below the mean level of wages currently being offered in Cape Town and Johannesburg. For four hours of work in the Cape Town city centre, a domestic worker should earn at least R18, but the taxi fares alone (to and from Khayelitsha) were as high as R17 in August 2002. Transport costs have clearly not been taken into consideration in the legislation. Therefore, the value of setting a minimum wage rate is debatable, since domestic workers include the cost of transport when they calculate how much money they can earn and whether it will be worth their while to accept a specific job offer.

Third, legislation does not currently cover part-time work: the BCEA only covers employees who work more than 24 hours a month. Therefore, conditions of the act do not cover employers who only make use of domestic workers once or twice a week. The question has been raised as to whether fiscal deductions for employers would not be more efficient in such a situation.

It is difficult to take stock of recent reform: is the glass half-full or half-empty? A total of 34 000 domestic workers emerged from the shadows when they were registered for UIF, but it is estimated that 750 000 people are still working in complete darkness.
6.5 Conclusion: The rise of a collective identity for domestic workers?

Domestic work in South Africa has undergone important changes since the collapse of the apartheid regime. Domestic workers now have increased autonomy, since they are able to work part time and to escape the live-in system imposed by employers, which often resulted in the splintering of families. The increasing professionalisation of domestic workers has been encouraged by several attempts to regulate the conditions of domestic work, despite the high flexibility and spatial scattering of the sector. The growth of domestic work, however, is also linked to post-Fordist de-industrialisation and the rise of unemployment, which has been accelerating since the 1990s. Both full-time and part-time domestic work constitute the major response to the threat of long-term unemployment, which is particularly serious in the townships and informal settlements of Cape Town and Johannesburg. These changes reflect normalisation of the conditions of domestic workers in South African post-apartheid cities.

In spite of its inefficiencies, the new legal framework being built to protect domestic workers makes them more visible to society as a whole, and is in the process of raising, if not a shared class consciousness, at least a social-group consciousness. In Johannesburg, for instance, some local security initiatives have set up a Domestic Workers Watch, enabling domestic workers to gather to discuss security issues and to receive some training from the watch, in conjunction with assistance provided by the South African Police Services. Though setting up such a watch may be seen as a way of accessing domestic workers as a source of information, the process involved also acknowledges the workers’ role as that of a collective, networked, and important urban stakeholder in residential middle-income and upmarket neighbourhoods.

Legal debates might also encourage domestic workers to organise themselves, to join trade unions, and to become more aware of their social rights, as well as to build new collective initiatives. As an example, recently in Sea Point – a mixed suburb adjoining Cape Town’s inner city – a group of domestic workers, supported by the NGO Development Action Group (DAG), united to explore the feasibility of a social housing programme dedicated to their specific needs. This was made possible through the provision of an institutional subsidy by the South African government to housing associations and NGOs for building and running social housing complexes (see DAG, 2003 and RHC, 2003a). This is the first time that such an initiative has been envisaged in South Africa. Even though the project is still far from getting off the ground, the fact that domestic workers have engaged in difficult negotiations with local authorities in order to buy a plot with significant site value, opposite the renowned Cape Town Waterfront, shows that their perception
of their place in the city, and of their own social importance, has greatly improved. Their self-image as a social group has increased both their social capital and their ability to negotiate. Their perception of the urban space and of the advantage of a much sought-after location in the city also proves their increasing spatial capital (Lévy, 1994), a form of urban integration that one would not have expected after such a long confinement in their employers’ backyards.

Notes

1 The in-depth interviews were conducted during August 2002, with 22 domestic workers in Johannesburg, and with 11 domestic workers in Cape Town. In Johannesburg, interviewees were selected according to their place of residence, while in Cape Town they were selected among those known to the main trade union. The questionnaire dealt with the domestic workers’ personal trajectories and histories, the way in which they found their jobs, their conditions of work, and their choice of transport to and from work.


3 This is especially true of women who had to leave their young children at home, because the employers refused to allow them to bring their children to town with them.

4 Between 1994 and 1998, it is estimated that 22 000 black people and 8 000 coloured people moved to Cape Town, after a peak period between 1989 and 1993, when 37 000 black people and 10 000 coloured people made the same move (see Cross, Bekker & Eva, 1999).

5 Theoretically, casual domestic workers (unlike independent contract workers) are entitled to the benefit of the Unemployment Insurance Fund as long as they work more than four hours per week for a given employer. However, most of them do not access this social net, as their working conditions are generally precarious and their employer seldom complies with the legal requirements.

6 In multi-centered cities, such as Johannesburg, the concepts of centre and periphery seem inappropriate. However, it still makes sense to talk of centrality in reference to the conjunction of density and diversity (see Lévy, 1994), and also the ability to link and to be linked to many different places in the city. We use centrality in the latter sense.

7 Not to mention the Gautrain, which is being planned to link the Johannesburg central business district (CBD) to Pretoria by way of Sandton and Alexandra, despite the realisation that the route will inevitably have some problems.

8 Road closures and the development of gated communities do not only increase the walking distances to jobs, they also prevent jobseekers from going door to door to look for jobs, which we see as an important way of accessing domestic workers’ jobs. Moreover, domestic workers often have to prove their identity at gates to closed-off
neighbourhoods, as they had to show passes under the apartheid regime. Some domestic workers working in Hurilton Manor, a gated community in northern Johannesburg, protest against such practices: ‘It is like apartheid all over again,’ one domestic worker says. ‘It is as if they are expected to produce a dompas to go through a public road again,’ says Jody Kollapen, Human Rights Commission chairperson (Cape Argus, 2003: 7).

Advertisements for domestic workers appear more often in local newspapers, such as the Sandton Chronicle, than in a national newspaper, such as The Star.

The role that the church plays in enabling domestic workers to secure other jobs requires further study. Some researchers suggest that the role played by the church might be important in enabling jobseekers to secure domestic work (see Dolbeau, 2000).

This self-promotion of personal qualities is also a means by which the domestic workers whom we interviewed reconcile themselves to the low social status attached to their social condition – and by which they strove to gain the respect, personal, if not social – of the interviewer, which they probably do not receive in their everyday experience (see Vidal, 2002).

Allegations of slavery are more common, surprisingly, than are complaints regarding the apartheid era.

Domestic workers were mentioned in none of the following acts: the first Wage Act of 1925, the Workmen’s Compensation Act of 1941, the Labour Relations Act of 1956, the Wage Act of 1957, the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1966, and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1983. No legal framework regulated hours of work or minimum wages. However, trade unions were, at least theoretically, allowed, and domestic workers had access to the courts in respect of disputes concerning minor claims for payments of less than R2 000. The Manpower Training Act of 1981, the Guidance and Placement Act of 1981, the Machinery and Occupational Safety Act of 1983, and the Small Claims Courts Act of 1984 contained minor rules regarding domestic workers. However, generally speaking, domestic workers’ conditions of work were defined by common law: an employer had to pay his or her domestic worker a salary, which both parties negotiated fairly. The wage negotiation implied that the two parties were equal, though this was far from being the case (see Delport, 1994).

For more details, see Kehler, 2002.

The exact number of overtime hours was still being debated at the time of completion of this chapter.

The BCEA and the Labour Relations Act both prohibit arbitrary and sudden decreases in salaries.

An employer is forced to pay half a day’s work on the basis of a minimum of four hours.