

Call for proposals to the journal *Politique africaine*

Politicizing the domestic worker.

Socio-historical perspectives on domestic labor in Africa

Special issue coordinated by Mélanie Jacquemin, sociologist at the IRD (UMR 151 LPED, AMU/IRD) and Violaine Tisseau, historian at the CNRS (UMR 8171 IMAf, AMU/CNRS/EHESS/IRD/EPHE/Paris 1).

Presentation of the present issue

The impetus of this special issue is a finding in a field of research and publications that is, at the very least, fragmented: studies about work done in the private sphere remain on the sidelines in the literature on labor in Africa. Here we invite authors to further explore how a domestic service market has established itself in societies won over by *modernity* and new forms of legal regulations, despite the frequent persistence of *traditional*, hierarchical relationships, extolled through the language of kinship, in domestic labor. This language generally dilutes the concept of *work* (value and social relationships) and maintains the permeable line between domestic labor/employment for the benefit of others and non-delegated household chores. Combined with the trivialized nature of the occupation, the domestic workers' status as "society's youngest family member" raises questions. How do these categories of workers participate in countries' social and economic citizenship, which sometimes has been refused to them on the grounds that household work is fixed in the status quo of beliefs and the private domain, while rationality and public recognition are still deemed appropriate to labor performed outside of the domestic sphere?

Context and challenges

Because it is performed in private settings, domestic labor is unique in that it is usually perceived as unproductive and eluding both economic accounting systems and State regulation. Nevertheless, there are multiple forms of employment or domestic service: formal, informal, paid, paid in kind, reported or not, etc. With the goal of considering and deciphering this diversity with its sometimes-blurred contours, we have adopted a broad meaning, with an updated definition of "putting people to work (*mise au travail*)" (Lautier, 1998) as a minimum criterion. By reconsidering this activity as labor, we are able to introduce the issue of policy, firstly, because domestic work is perceived the same way as work performed in any other space. Secondly, investigating the various conditions and modalities of domestic service; how it is regulated (via private, community, State, or intermediary entities); and the forms of domestic workers' resistance, and even protest (from the most discreet to the most overt) sheds further light on the inner workings of establishing citizenship and constructing a State.

By focusing on empirical approaches, we hope to highlight the importance of contexts—whether political, social, economic, or historic—and bring together articles examining different spaces and time periods. The conditions of domestic service, ways in which dissatisfaction can build up, and opportunities for protesting differ in the colonial period, under apartheid, or throughout the fight for independence, for example, or during periods of economic growth or crisis. While a refusal, or even a denial, to be noticed or recognized renders many male and female domestic workers invisible (Jacquemin, 2009), are their

mobilizations also doomed to remain invisible because they are rare and barrow from multiple forms? Definitely not, and by analyzing the situation of domestic employees in Rio de Janeiro, Dominique Vidal (2007) convincingly showed how they were at the very heart of Brazilian democracy.

This special issue also encourages authors to consider a new international context, emerging from the adoption of normative tools driven by United Nations agencies, and to examine how this context is conveyed. In June 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted Convention No. 189, encouraging States to regulate domestic employment to “extend basic labor rights to domestic workers worldwide.”¹

For the youngest workers (including the many “little maids” in Africa), the ratification of ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182 on Child Labor is becoming more widespread in African States, which have all ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1989. At the same time, NGOs and associations have redoubled their child protection programs; while the dominant abolitionist platform can antagonize supporters of child-worker practices or “demands,” some organizations under the banner of the African Movement of Working Children and Youth have joined together to give a voice to domestic workers who are overlooked by society and often forgotten in the academic field.

Objectives

While most of the current research on “domestic workers” applies a globalized economic approach that links this issue to the rise in female South-North migration, this special issue aims to focus on African domestic labor from yesterday to today, which—despite a substantial migratory component on both an internal and intra-African scale and remarkable changes—remains overshadowed by more dramatic transformations seen in the North, such as those spurred by international migrations or the phenomenon of trafficking in women and children. Drawing from our research on “the” domestic worker in Africa from the perspectives of a historian and a socio-ethnographer, we support the merits of an expanded exploration of the multiple forms of domestic service in Africa in this special issue. At the very least, this promotes continuity, via the issue of domestic labor, to support efforts to “reconnect discussions on the link between the political and social order to be able to report from a non-culturalist stance on the ways in which it is possible and imaginable to be heard” (Siméant, 2013: 141).

We want to examine the economic, political, and symbolic significance of the changes at play in diverse social contexts and then identify other aspects that have remained unchanged and what these mean, while unveiling elements specific to the African context, especially with respect to gender relations. We will do this in three ways. First, we will examine the changes in labor relations (from familial logics to wage-type contractual relationships; task specialization; forms of hiring; maintaining dependent relationships, passed down through slavery; the force of paternalistic relationships; etc.). We will also analyze day-to-day relationships within households in terms of gender, class, “race,” and age and how these factors are embodied and transcribed in practices and discourses, or even in spaces. Lastly, we

¹ ILO Convention No. 189 and Recommendation No. 201, on Decent Work for Domestic Workers. Entered into force in September 2013, this convention has only been ratified by 25 countries to date. On the African continent, only South Africa and Guinea have ratified it. In Senegal, for example, despite campaigns led by unions since 2011 in support of the international initiative “12 ratifications in 2012,” the government has left this issue unresolved.

will examine these changes by describing what means are available—or not—to domestic workers to resist domination.

The gender perspective is highly encouraged in this special as a crosscutting tool for analysis. Since research overall shows that domestic service is socially constructed around the globe as a subordinate function defined in terms of gender, the study of domestic labor in Africa—in all its variations and evolutions—provides especially fertile ground for analyzing the potential transformations of dominant gender relationships through reconsideration or consolidation. Central to the analysis of inequalities between women and men that primarily affect women, domestic labor in Africa often and still specifically identifies as masculine (recalling, for example, the Burkinabe “*boys*” in Abidjan or the “*ababuyi*” of Bujumbura), urging us to examine how the different relationships of domination overlap.

Three key points could be explored (though other approaches could be combined with these):

1) *Describe, recognize, and quantify domestic labor in Africa*

The first key point aims to describe the various forms of domestic service in Africa, by varying the scope in time and space. It will focus on showing the diversity and plurality of employment status, employers, working conditions and situations, etc.

When attempting to typologize domestic labor, researchers face challenges with vocabulary. Ordinary Francophone (and Anglophone) terminology does not fully express the range of working conditions, so vernacular terms will also be studied: in Madagascar, for example, the use of the term *boto* (right-hand man, servant) has shifted towards using *mpanampy* (someone who helps).

Moreover, many African societies share a specific feature, namely, the existence—both in the past and now—of the status of slave² (passed on via kinship), as well as child circulation practices (“fostering”) that keep individuals in situations of dependence and even servitude (Jacquemin, 2000). Colonization did not do away with the social status of slave and descendants of slaves by abolishing slavery, leaving domestic jobs immune to any regulation (Haskins, 2015). Domestic labor is often performed by individuals who are exposed to diverse forms of vulnerability in a given social context, with their status as an employee not always recognized as such. Therefore, domestic workers’ age, sex, and geographic and social origins will be variables to consider, given that radical changes are sometimes observed in the workforce. While Karen Hansen (1989) emphasizes that domestic workers were primarily men in Zambia, the opposite was true several years later when more women held these jobs (Hepburn, 2016).

2) *Plurality of standards*

This second key point will address the issue of regulating domestic service in order to document the varied ways it is implemented: by the State, “communities” (families, lineages, parishes), the private sector (placement agencies, etc.) or associations, etc. It introduces the issue of a plurality of standards and their dynamics (Chauveau *et al.*, 2001), seen through the prism of the range of domestic service practices, from the co-existence of formal and informal standards on different levels, stemming from “varied sources of legitimacy.”

² On this point, the special issue proposed here could be seen as an extension of special issue No. 140 of *Politique africaine* (“La question de l’esclavage en Afrique: Politisation et mobilisations [The Issue of Slavery in Africa: Politicization and Mobilizations],” which does not include any articles specifically addressing the issue of domestic labor.

The broad formalization of domestic service is therefore a point to explore, in connection with the gradual State supervision of labor and the implementation of social protection systems, such as: Do domestic workers pay into social security or pensions? Are they reported in the national tax records? The use of contracts for work over time is another issue for reflection.

By continuing to ask the explicit question about economic recognition of domestic labor, which, achieved through hard-fought struggle in several countries (Ibos, 2016), remains quite incomplete in Africa, we can also strive to understand exactly how barriers and progress come into play depending on the socio-political contexts. Focusing on female domestic workers' involvement in negotiating ILO Convention No. 189 concerning "Decent Work for Domestic Workers," Helen Schwenken recalls that "the *sine qua non* condition for mobilization is seeing these women as "employees"—and not as "maids" or "servants"—and recognizing the private household as a workplace" (Schwenken, 2011: 114).

3) *Mobilization: actors and repertoires of action*

In an effort to challenge representations of domestic workers' eternal consent, we also urge authors to explore the notion of a moral economy through domestic workers' expressions and positions. As Johanna Siméant suggests, this especially involves questioning the ways in which "forms of lateral dissent" are captured (2013: 136) and "discerning the expression of dissent in instances without necessarily proposing an articulated political agenda" (Siméant, 2010: 150). Thus, reproducing social positions, the relationship to the State, and the expression of dissatisfaction are central issues that merit a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness.

Of course, domestic labor cannot be addressed as a specific sphere of activism, but it can no longer be completely excluded from the field of studies on collective action and mobilizations, even if the former take (or took) on different and unusual forms of expression and means of action in the space of urban labor movements in Africa. This is now well documented through the sociology of social movements that have spread across the African continent for twenty years (Siméant, 2013; Tall *et al.*, 2015).

Using a micro-ethnography of conflicts or a more conventional analysis of institutionalized movements, this last point seeks to investigate the potential registers for mobilization—individual (avoidance, resistance to the routine, fleeing, legal action, etc.) or even implicit, or collective and public (unions, associations, etc.)—that this diverse category of workers can develop, from a combination of historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives and in varied contexts. What strong correlations exist between a social group's transformations and its propensity to mobilize itself? How does one go from resistance that leaves structures unchanged to broader action that is greater than any individual or private space? In an extension of the special issue in *Politique africaine* devoted to post-slavery and collective mobilizations (No. 140, 2015/4), here we will be interested in mobilizations founded on the demand for a common worker status. What connections might exist with workers organized around a common ancestry (descendants of slaves) and with extroverted forms of struggles? Under what conditions does one go from socially recognizing subordinate groups' activities—in this case domestic workers—to normalizing their participation in citizenship and political life?

Proposals of unpublished articles (1 page) may be sent in French or English to the coordinators of the special issue until **4 December 2018**.

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Schedule

4 Dec. 2018: deadline for sending article proposals (1 page maximum) to the special issue coordinators

14 Dec. 2018: author's notified about selected proposals

15 March 2019: deadline for sending articles (50,000 characters, spaces and notes included) to the journal's editorial board

Summer 2019: publication of the special issue.

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