Anuac
Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia culturale

12 (1) | 2023
Anuac Vol 12 No 1 (2023)

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/anuac/295
DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-5207
ISSN: 2239-625X

Publisher
Società italiana di antropologia culturale

Printed version
Number of pages: 3-28

Electronic reference
Silvia Cirillo, "Conceptualizing care practices in women's lives", *Anuac* [Online], 12 (1) | 2023, Online since 22 June 2023, connection on 14 October 2024. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/anuac/295 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.7340/anuac2239-625X-5207

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2023 | Anuac. Vol. 12, n° 1, Giugno 2023: 3-28

Conceptualizing care practices in women's lives

A domestic work case study in Ethiopia and Tanzania

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Abstract: Drawing from the lived experiences of female domestic workers in Ethiopia and Tanzania, this article illustrates different ways in which domestic work can be practiced and defined in both countries. It analyses women's narratives in the present and past tense to explore different situations before and after they come into contact with an NGO that advocates for domestic workers' rights. Since their childhood, the women interviewed have worked in various kin and non-kin households, and performed different types of domestic work (formal and informal, paid and unpaid, live-in and live-out). The asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships between employees and employers are ambiguous and often confused with kinship or distant kinship. These ambiguities come to the fore precisely when projects fostered by labour activists aim at the formalization of hired care work, that is, skilled employment made up of clearly defined tasks, regulated by written contracts, rights and responsibilities. In contexts where labor protections are poorly enforced, proposals to formalize domestic work can provide an essential reference point for the collective mobilization of women workers. At the same time, proposed solutions favoring the formalization of hired work might clash with local realities and not necessarily be perceived as appropriate by domestic workers.

Keywords: Domestic work; Worker's rights; Gender; Ethiopia; Tanzania

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Conceptualizing care practices in women's lives. A domestic work case study in Ethiopia and Tanzania.
2023 | Anuac. Vol. 12, n° 1, Giugno 2023: 3-28.
ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-5207

Introduction[1]

In this paper, I draw from an ethnographic research which I have carried out in Ethiopia and Tanzania as part of my PhD programme, jointly with an NGO that supports domestic workers in both countries. The domestic workers involved in my study are young women who have moved from rural to urban areas to work in their employers' households. Their main work activities include housecleaning, washing clothes, cooking, running errands and taking care of children and sick people. When I met them, they were primarily live-in domestic workers, so they resided in the households where they worked.

Through an analysis of their narratives, I have shed light on the gendered relations in which women's lives are embedded, and on the complex interweaving of personal strategies and social constraints regulating such relations. I have privileged a relational approach (Strathern 2014) to understand what it means to be a female domestic worker exposed to contemporary forms of labour exploitation, in contexts based on asymmetric and hierarchical relationships that include – as I will show – idioms and practices of power and domination, as well as of protection and care (see Malara, Boylston 2016).

Most of the studies focusing on domestic work in Ethiopia and Tanzania adopt a human-rights approach to describe how domestic workers have experienced exploitation, discrimination and marginalization with regard to pay, working conditions and legal rights, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Mulugeta 2012; Matheka *et al.* 2020). These approaches need to be integrated with studies having a more nuanced approach, as the scholarship on domestic work has done in other geographical contexts worldwide, by providing contextual analysis which allows us to observe the multifaceted portrait of women's experiences as migrant workers, and how they are able to carve out spaces for action (see, among others, Hondagneu-sotelo 2000; Parreñas Salazar 2001; Ribeiro Corossacz 2018). Despite the restrictions on their time, mobility, behaviour, body, domestic workers enact mobility strategies, manipulating individual and collective resources and personal networks to achieve their goals. They sometimes might try to emancipate themselves from traditional roles and obligations, or to renew or even reinforce them. Their future plans, expectations, ambitions, actions, can be understood only

1. I would like to thank the *Anuac* editorial team and the three anonymous referees who helped improve the structure of this article and enhance its content. I would also like to thank them for suggesting bibliographic references that I found stimulating while writing the article.

if placed within the broader framework of their relationships. Thus, agency shouldn't be simply reduced to absolute freedom or individual "free will", but rather conceived as a sociocultural product framed within a set of conscious and unconscious practices (see Ortner 2006) which might even reinforce or reproduce structural forms of "unfreedom" (Fernandez 2014: 52).

When discussing domestic work in Africa, it is important to consider that its nature and content can diverge from one society to another and take new forms as social and economic change occurs (see Bryceson 2019; Hoerder *et al.* 2015; Jacquemin, Tisseau 2019). During the colonial rule, in many countries male domestic servants worked in the colonial homes, while their wives and mothers were obliged to remain in their home areas bearing double workload. This is the case of Tanzania (Bujra 2000), Mozambique (Zamparoni 1999) and Zambia (Hansen 1990), among others[2]. Throughout the post-colonial period there has been a gradual feminization of domestic service as a form of employment in towns and cities. However, each context had its different realities and specificities. For example, in colonial Eritrea, domestic work at the service of Italian colonists was predominantly a female occupation (Barrera 2011: 108). In the mid-1980s Janet Bujra expected to uncover the inside story of the "feminisation" of domestic service in Tanzania, but she found that men in Tanzania were still predominant in the domestic workforce. Thus, "the challenge to scholarship is not to take these assumptions for granted but to examine the changing interaction of structural, historical, and cultural factors involved in producing particular gender conventions in employment" (Hansen 1990: 122). Although I have so far mainly mentioned domestic service as wage-labour, there are multiple forms of domestic work in Africa: "Whether informal or formal, salaried or freelance, paid in money and/or in kind, full-time or part-time, residential or non-residential, all-round or specialized, or even professionally qualified, domestic service forms a complex intertwining of situations, a wide range of statuses and social relations" (Jacquemin, Tisseau 2019: III). This aspect recurs in my study, where domestic workers in both countries perform different typologies of domestic work during their life course, they work in various kin and non-kin households, and move from house to house in search of better working conditions.

2. These studies do not refer to domestic labour within the local society with its African employers. Indeed, Janet Bujra points out that in Tanzania "when colonial officials made estimates of the numbers employed in domestic service they generally counted only those employed by fellow Europeans and Asians" (Bujra 2000: 6). Thus, the estimates must be viewed with skepticism.

In this paper, I analyze women's narratives in the present and past tense to explore different situations before and after they come into contact with the NGO CVM (Comunità Volontari per il Mondo). In the first section, I discuss the terminology that I use and illustrate Amharic and Swahili terms adopted to define a domestic worker. In the second section, I produce figures and facts on domestic work in Ethiopia and Tanzania. The third section briefly presents my methodology and the contexts of study. The rest of the paper reports the life stories of Tesfanesh (Ethiopia) and Beatrice (Tanzania), and connects their experiences to the NGO projects involving them. This is done to shed light on some ambiguities that stem from the existing multiple forms of domestic work, and might come to the fore precisely when projects fostered by workers' organizations and other activists aim at the formalization of hired care work, that is, skilled employment made up of clearly defined tasks, regulated by contracts, rights and responsibilities. This point is crucial because in contexts where labour protections are poorly applied, while proposals to formalize domestic work can provide an essential reference point for the collective mobilization of female workers, formalization can undermine the power practices historically and culturally cultivated by women – from the "intimacy" of their work – to promote their own interests (Castel-Branco 2021: 159).

Defining domestic work

The term "domestic worker" is a broad term that lacks a common definition across countries regarding its constitution (Hoerder *et al.* 2015: 4). The International Labour Organization (ILO) considers the shift to "worker" as a way to replace ancient terms that clearly imply subservience, such as "servant" and "maid" (Blackett 2011: 44). Indeed, some scholars prefer to use the word "servants" when dealing with a (rather) distant past, and the term "domestic workers" when speaking about more recent decades (Sarti 2014: 279). The ILO defines "employment relationship" as a relationship between an employer and an employee in which the latter performs work in return for remuneration, and under certain conditions. The household is recognized as a place of work, which functions also thanks to the care and support provided by its domestic workers. Studies in East Africa highlight that in the domestic work sector girls may be recruited "through kinship networks, commonly referred to as *Undugu* in Swahili" (Kiaga, Kanyoka 2011: 13), literally meaning "brotherhood/sisterhood". Since the practice of *Undugu* reflects cultural values of working together for the sake of and as part of the larger family, domestic workers

hardly identify themselves as employees, but rather as family members. Thus the relationship employer-employee may become blurred and sometimes be confused with a sort of kinship, or distant kinship.

Historically and until today, in many parts of Africa and elsewhere, children have been transferred from rural to urban areas to serve as domestic labourers in kin and non-kin related households. In the academic literature, this child placement is often termed "fosterage" or "child fostering" (see Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). This practice – usually (but not only) involving poorer rural and better-off urban households – may provide complementary opportunities for both hosting households and those who are fostered. It often meets wider socio-cultural needs within a certain community, being a means to promote social bonds, a form of long-standing community strategy of labour redistribution, and a strategy for coping with adversity based on family supporting networks (Kassa, Abebe 2016: 48). Yet studies highlight that the traditional institution of kin support "has transmogrified in some places towards forced labour or indeed slavery" (Bryceson 2019: 326). For example, Ina Gankam Tambo (2014: 17) points out that in Nigeria, in precolonial times, child fostering consisted in community based practices of child relocation regulated by customary law, contained in specific normative and moral frameworks. Yet, in contemporary Nigeria children are likely to be "exploited fostered children" (*ibidem*: 209), and the difference between employment and fostering can be blurred (see also Bourdillon 2007: 27; Sommerfelt 2001: 25). These studies acknowledge the emergence of commercial recruiting agents who obtain pecuniary gain transferring the girls from their natal rural home to a well-off urban household, and argue that the changing nature of social relations under conditions of capitalism have contributed to this reality. However, contextual historical studies on child fostering also demonstrate that "the practice has always had economically productive underpinnings" (Howard 2011: 7). If we go beyond the dichotomization between the "good" foster family that displays "real" parental love, and the "bad" one exploiting children, foster care strategies might also be conceived as sociopolitical relationships between adults (Bledsoe 1990: 72), aimed at building complex networks of patronage relationships between biological and foster parents, without any immediate and direct utility for the children themselves necessarily deriving from these relationships.

In light of these considerations, I adopt a broad and inclusive definition of domestic work which appears in multiple forms: it can be "paid or unpaid,

forced or free, formal or informal employment" (Hoerder *et al.* 2015: 2). Similarly, I use the term "household" – conventionally understood as a group of people who live under the same roof or eat "from the same pot" (Declich 2015: 628) – in a broader sense: the people related to the owner and for whom the labourer works, as well as the place where this group resides. The household is also a place of maintenance and recreation of people's wellbeing. Indeed, domestic work is extended to care work, or more precisely, it is a form of care work. Care practices themselves can be seen as a starting point for the analysis of the meaningful relationships of interdependence that characterize everyday lives of domestic workers and the people they work for. Just like domination, care should be released from an overly positive normative framework and seen as a process with an open outcome: it can lead to positive and conflictual relationships, to stable relationships or to their dissolution. Thus, it can create, maintain and dissolve meaningful ties (Thelen 2015: 508).

I shall conclude this section by mentioning the words used in Amharic (in Ethiopia) and Swahili (in Tanzania) to define a domestic worker.

Amharic and Swahili terms

In Ethiopia, the Amharic term *yebet serategna* (የቤት ሠራተኛ) literally means "domestic worker". The women interviewed, the NGO staff, Trade Unions and other workers' organizations in Ethiopia adopted this Amharic term and the English "domestic worker" when speaking in English. In the Ethiopian literature, scholars point out that after the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, the *Derg* regime listed domestic servants as oppressed and banned terms used in a pejorative way, such as *ashker* (አሽከር, for male servants) and *gered* (ገረድ, female servant/slave) which was gradually replaced by the term *yebet serategna* (Belete 2014: 193). Yet the term *gered* is still widely used, and many Ethiopian domestic workers I interviewed reported that employers and other people addressed them using this word as an insult.

Regarding Tanzania, in my study the women interviewed, the NGO staff, Trade Unions and other workers' organization, tended to use the Swahili expression *mfanyakazi wa nyumbani* or *mfanyakazi wa ndani* (indoor worker) and the English term "domestic worker". Domestic workers are also referred to as *dada wa kazi* which literally translates into "work-sister", the latter reflecting the idea of the domestic worker as a family member. Lastly, the colonial term "houseboy/housegirl" is still widely used. This leads to the question of how colonial legacies shape the way contemporary patterns of domestic service are

defined, performed and conceived (Higman B.W. 2015: 19). Overall, in my study the English term "domestic worker" was widely adopted in both countries and defined as the most inclusive term, often associated with a "proper" type of employment that should guarantee domestic workers' rights. But I take into consideration that many research participants knew the NGO, its projects and terminology adopted by the ILO. These aspects, as well as my own presence in the field, certainly influenced the choice of research participants to use a term rather than another. Before illustrating the study contexts, my methodology and research results, I shall discuss figures on domestic work in Ethiopia and Tanzania and the legal instruments that are relevant in both countries.

Sparce figures and facts

As ILO itself acknowledges, determining the number of domestic workers is a challenge especially in contexts where the majority of female and male domestic workers are members of the extended family (ILO 2021: 41). In 2013, the ILO report on domestic work across the world still refers to a 2005 estimation in its description of the domestic work sector in Ethiopia: 248,600 people employed as domestic workers in private households in urban areas, with a female share of 91 per cent (ILO 2013: 34). Between 2015 and 2016, the Population Council undertook a study of migrant out-of-school girls in six Ethiopian regions. Overall, 4,540 out-of-school female migrants were interviewed: while 1,094 were employed in domestic work at the time of the survey, 67 percent of migrant girls entered domestic work as their first working experience (see Erulkar *et al.* 2017).

As for Tanzania, a situation analysis of domestic workers conducted by the ILO in 2016 estimates at least 883,779 domestic workers in mainland Tanzania, and 203,622 in Zanzibar. However, if we consider people performing domestic tasks who are involved in very informal arrangements, this number increases to at least 1,728,228 (75 percent women) (ILO 2016: 98). Further surveys suggest that about 53 per cent (5,009,076) of all households in Tanzania were employing a domestic worker (*ibidem*: 109).

Overall, the instruments for estimating the number of domestic workers are currently inadequate and the international definition of domestic workers proposed by the ILO "is still insufficient for capturing the plurality of forms of domesticity [...] in Africa" (Jacquemin, Tisseau 2019: X).

Recent decades have seen increasing concern over domestic workers' labour rights globally. One of the most important landmarks in this area was ILO

Convention No. 189 Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (C189), which was promulgated in Geneva in 2011 and came into force in 2013. The Convention requires that ratifying countries ensure equal treatment between domestic workers and workers from other sectors, for example, in relation to working time, minimum wages, paid leave, and beyond. Recent studies are questioning in which ways C189 and the global campaign for its ratification have been incorporated, fuelled or resisted, from a social movement perspective, in different local contexts (Cherubini *et al.* 2018: 719).

Like most other countries, neither Tanzania nor Ethiopia have ratified the 2011 ILO convention. In the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation No.1156/2019 domestic work is defined as "employment of private service" and excluded from the coverage of the Labour Proclamation [Articles 2 (16) cum 3 (2) (c)].

Domestic workers under Tanzanian laws are considered jointly with other employees. Their rights are provided for under the Employment and Labour Relations Act, 2004 and Regulation of Wages and Terms of Employment Order, 2010, yet no specific provision strictly applies to domestic workers alone. Both in Ethiopia and Tanzania, the NGO CVM promotes and facilitates coordination between institutions and trade unions as regards the implementation of actions and policies that protect domestic workers and recognize them as a professional category. In particular, since 2011 the NGO has established Domestic Workers' Associations, facilitating the organization of meetings, workshops and social exchange tables involving various representatives of institutions at National, Regional and Local level in both countries.

Study contexts and methodology

I carried out fieldwork for seven months in Ethiopia and five months in Tanzania in 2018 and 2019, mainly in two cities where CVM has premises: Debre Markos (Ethiopia) and Morogoro (Tanzania). Debre Markos is in the Amhara region and has an estimated population of 133,810. Morogoro, with a population of 305,840, is in the Morogoro region. They are urban centres of attraction for young people from rural areas who want to work in the city. Both cities are recently witnessing a rapid urbanisation process, with investments in the construction of new infrastructure and roads connecting them to important commercial centres. The two cities are strategically located and often perceived by young migrants as "transit cities", where they can gain the necessary work experience before moving and finding a better job in larger cities. For example, many domestic workers I interviewed in Debre Markos aspired to

migrate to Bahir Dar (capital of the Amhara region) or Addis Ababa. Similarly, Morogoro's central location links the city to Dar-es-Salaam, the country's largest commercial centre, and to Dodoma, the national capital. Several women I met in both countries had already gained work experience in other towns and cities, but having failed in their migration project and therefore in improving their condition, they had returned to Debre Markos and Morogoro to acquire more experience, as well as to expand their personal network, so they could leave again and find a better job elsewhere. The notion of transit is not only understood in geographical terms, but in its temporal and existential dimension that is part of migratory and biographical paths (Massa 2021: 124). On the one hand, domestic workers felt "stuck" in urban contexts that exposed them to risks and exploitative working conditions from which it was difficult to escape; on the other hand, they perceived their condition as a transitional phase and lived in "active waiting" for a better future (see Brun 2015).

Debre Markos and Morogoro are also the main bases of CVM, which works with projects supporting domestic workers and their associations. During their meetings, members of the associations share their life and work experiences and develop strategies for mutual support, as well as ways to engage new potential members and strengthen the associations. CVM organises combined training courses in labour law, domestic worker's rights, reproductive health, time management in the workplace, communication and professional skills, among others. All these activities are facilitated by the NGO in close collaboration with local leaders and community representatives in both countries. The aim of my research was also to understand the point of view of female workers regarding the training courses organized by the NGO, as well as the impact of these activities on their lives. Furthermore, I practically collaborated in some organizational and planning aspects of these activities. But above all, I was asked to collect relevant information on female working conditions, and then to discuss and reflect together – with the NGO staff and with the women workers themselves – on possible activities that CVM could organise in the future to meet the needs of these women, elaborating as a team possible solutions to their problems. I gathered information by collecting semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion (FGDs), individual in-depth interviews and life stories. While the FGDs and semi-structured interviews were collected by working in team with the CVM staff during different activities organised by the NGO, I collected in-depth interviews and life stories – with a female interpreter – in secluded places where these women could talk more at ease (such as quiet courtyards and uncrowded

coffeehouses). My study is mainly based on the analysis of these 30 life-stories gathered in Ethiopia and 25 in Tanzania which were subsequently transcribed from Amharic (Ethiopia) or Swahili (Tanzania) into English, thanks to the work of local interpreters. I changed the names of these women in order not to disclose their identities. Most of the interviewed domestic workers were between twenty and twenty-five years of age. During my fieldwork, I would have liked to "follow" (Epstein 1969: 112) the women in several situations along urban paths, through observation and active participation in community life. But domestic workers are barely reachable and have little time available. They usually start their work very early in the morning and end late in the evening after the last meal. Overall, their freedom of movement often depends on the will of other household members. This condition is reinforced by the overlapping of living and working spaces and times, typical of a job where the employee "inhabits workplaces" (see Sanò, Piro 2018). Thus, I followed the migratory trajectories and the experiences of female workers mainly through the analysis of their personal narratives. Clearly, the latter are given from a specific point in place and time, they are about "how the passage of personal time is remembered and recounted" (Brettell 2002: S45). But they are also a space in which women imagine and plan their futures; they are about the process of construction of the self and, simultaneously, "provide a vital entry point in the interaction between the individual and society" (Personal Narratives Group 1986: 6).

I interviewed several times the women with whom I was able to establish a stronger relationship during my fieldwork. Points of view of employers, intermediaries for recruitment process, relatives and friends, the NGO staff, as well as other social actors, were also gathered. Daily conversations, observation and participation in the daily life of the community, markets, community gatherings and ceremonies, as well as visits of girls at the workplace (the household) were highly valuable opportunities. Further information was gleaned from representatives of various organizations, institutions, local and international NGOs working on internal migration-related issues and workers' rights in both countries. Finally, the exchange of ideas with interpreters regarding the methodological approach and the analysis of the research results was vital throughout the entire research process.

Being a domestic worker

In Debre Markos and Morogoro, as in many other cities in the two countries and abroad, the working conditions of female domestic workers vary

from situations where they are exposed to severe forms of exploitation (unpaid wages, physical and verbal abuse, lack of free time, strong control over women's mobility) to others where women workers are able to negotiate better conditions, for example a salary (albeit limited) that allows them to accumulate small savings. The factors influencing the position of domestic workers are multiple and concern aspects such as women's background, age, economic situation, social relations that they turn to to protect themselves from abuse and to negotiate better working conditions. The majority of women I interviewed came from families economically dependent on agriculture, and generally moved into middle-class households in urban areas that were in some way connected to their rural households: either a kin tie, even a tenuous or distant one; or a common village or ethnic group; or a dependency relationship of some form between the rural and urban households. Most of them were between the ages of twelve and seventeen when they first left their villages. For many poor families in rural areas, sending their daughters off as domestic workers in urban wealthier households was a useful strategy to earn money, combined with the hope that the city would offer their daughters better life opportunities. Many domestic workers hoped they might be able to attend school in the city, or a training course that would enable them to find a more qualified job. One of their ambitions was to set aside savings to start a small business in the future (e.g. a coffeeshop), or to marry a wealthy man, thus improving their lifestyle and that of their rural families. Therefore, the experiences of work and migration are intertwined with hopes for growth, social and existential mobility based on the relational dimensions that shape women's lives. Usually, domestic workers invested their meagre savings to enable their families to buy better quality food, or so their siblings could pay school fees. However, their work was often free of charge and the rhetoric of fostering was used by employers to disguise working relationships that permanently indebted these girls to their protective employers for the hospitality they received. Not to mention that, in some cases, girls were moved to the city as a disguised form of pawning, where women's labour was used to pay off debts (Bryceson 2019: 325). Moreover, as in other contexts in Africa and elsewhere, domestic work is perceived as a "natural" activity for women and girls who, in return for their services, receive accommodation, meals and, in the best of cases, meagre (irregular and occasional) earnings and schooling. Somewhat like the case of apprentices in urban Ivory Coast described by Fabio Viti (2007), the work of female domestic workers is thus situated in a

broad "in-between" zone: between work conceived as free family service and a form of paid labour (*ibidem*: 195). From the intimacy of their work, with its forms of personal dependency and asymmetric relations, women develop strategies to solve problems and achieve goals.

In my study, after their first (usually unpaid) work experience, domestic workers moved to other households to perform remunerated work, and then from house to house in search of better working conditions, facing both enabling and constraining situations. For example: at one household they received a monthly salary, but were not allowed to go to school; or, they received a salary, attended school, but suffered sexual harassment; or they went to school, but were not paid and were exposed to various forms of mistreatment. Some of these aspects will emerge through the ethnographic cases of Tesfanesh in Ethiopia and Beatrice in Tanzania.

Working in Debre Markos: the case of Tesfanesh

Tesfanesh, a twenty-one-year-old Ethiopian woman, was born in a village in the Amhara region (about seventy kilometres from Debre Markos). She dropped out of primary school at the age of twelve, when she moved to the city of Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara region. The decision was taken by her parents and other family members in her community of origin. She was told that her aunt and uncle in Bahir Dar could offer her a better education[3]. Although she initially did not want to leave her birth place, she soon became convinced that working and studying with a middle-class family in the city was an opportunity not to be missed. Moreover, she valued this opportunity as a way to postpone an arranged marriage back home. Indeed, working in the city can also be perceived as a way to escape specific gender norms. Yet promises about school were broken from the very beginning, and Tesfanesh remained for three years in Bahir Dar without any chance to continue her education.

> They told me they would send me to school, but instead they just made me work, clean the house, wash clothes, cook, take care of kids. They used to send their children to high-quality school, but they didn't do the same for me (Tesfanesh, 21 years old, 02/12/19, Debre Markos in Ethiopia).

Tesfanesh argued that her parents were not aware of the exploitative working conditions to which she was exposed in Bahir Dar, and in particular about

3. Often, despite the use of kinship terminology these aunts, uncles and cousins were not related by blood. In this case, Tesfanesh specified that her aunt and uncle were "distant" relatives, somehow connected to her paternal uncle's family.

the fact that she was not attending school. She was not given the chance to communicate with them. Her uncle used to visit her village and informed her parents about her situation: "He lied all the time. He told them that I was fine and going to school, while I was only working!".

The relations between her parents and the people she worked for are not clear. Three years passed before Tesfanesh took the drastic decision to leave that house. In her account, she waited this long because her uncle in Bahir Dar was covering part of her father's medical treatment during a period of illness. This aspect shows us that her work involved some form of "family" compensation. Furthermore, it shows that domestic workers are responsible for taking care of their employers on the basis of expected and experienced reciprocity. For a long time Tesfanesh shows deference, trust and gratitude towards her uncle (employer), adhering to a model of justice and values according to which rewards are achieved only with and through the long-term display of loyalty and submission (Malara, Boylston 2016: 46). Yet once her expectations were completely disappointed, she was ready to leave the household and look for another job. Expectations and confidence in the actions of others, as well as the perception of future risks that certain relations imply, change over time and can be renegotiated. In this case, disappointed expectations lead to a radical dissolution of ties. Thus, care responsibilities and obligations must be analyzed by considering also their "temporalities" (Thelen 2015: 506-7). The event that finally convinced Tesfanesh to break all relations with her uncle occurred when her mother got sick. Her uncle told her he would also cover her mother's medical treatment. But one day she found out that her mother had died: there had already been a funeral and she had been buried. In Tesfanesh's account, in this way she was prevented from attending her mother's funeral, she was cheated as her uncle was pretending to continue to cover her mother's medical treatment even after the death of her mother. After this event, Tesfanesh left Bahir Dar and, at the age of fifteen, she moved to Debre Markos. She started working without remuneration for a married couple who agreed to cover her school expenses, although the workload made it difficult for her to attend school every day. She occasionally received pocket money from her female employer because she assisted her in running a coffeehouse. With this money, she was able to financially support her siblings in the rural area. She moved to another house when her male employer sexually harassed her and her female employer blamed her for provoking him. This is a common experience for many female workers, as sexual violence is often naturalised and women are held responsible

for the behaviour of men who react to their sexual instincts (Ribeiro Corossacz 2018: 398). Following the experience of sexual harassment, Tesfanesh temporarily abandoned domestic work and worked for about a year as a day labourer on construction sites. This is a very strenuous job with low wages, exposing women to additional risks. Tesfanesh formed solidarity relationships with other female workers with whom she shared an accommodation, but the difficult working conditions were not sustainable in the long term. Although this job allowed a degree of freedom of movement and access to new personal networks in the urban context that domestic work made impossible, working as a domestic worker for someone who promises safety and protection can be a certain guarantee of freedom. Tesfanesh stopped working on construction sites when a domestic worker in her neighborhood who was moving from Debre Markos proposed her as a replacement in the household where she was working. Here Tesfanesh established good relations with her employers, and for the first time she received a monthly salary as a live-in domestic worker. At the time of our encounter, she had been working in the same household for three years. Her living and working conditions had improved compared to the past, but she had abandoned the idea of completing the Primary education, and she used her salary to allow her siblings to buy better quality food and satisfy other needs. At the same time, she saved a small amount of money that she could invest in other personal plans. Indeed, her ambition was to attend a business course, to move to Bahir Dar and open a coffee shop with an older woman and former neighbour who was a live-out domestic worker in Bahir Dar.

Working in Morogoro: the case of Beatrice

Beatrice, a twenty-four-year-old Tanzanian woman, was born in a village about 40km from Dodoma city. When her father died, her mother married another man and Beatrice was raised by several relatives, moving from house to house within and near her village of origin.

> I was raised by many people because my mom had many relatives, so I was living with my uncle, although before that I was living with mom, I was moving here and there [...] I went to my aunt, from there I went to my step mom, from there I went to another aunt... (Beatrice, 24 years old, 21/08/19, Morogoro in Tanzania).

Before moving to Morogoro (where I met her), Beatrice relocated to a small town close to her village, where she helped her relatives in household chores and in running a small restaurant. She moved to her "granny's place", she started working for a woman – owner of a small restaurant – that during the

interview she called "grandmother", then "little grandmother" and "granny". It should be noted that both in Tanzania and Ethiopia there is a conception of kinship that includes people who are not related by blood (see Gelaye 1998; Kraska-Szlenk 2018). Both workers and employers use the language of kinship and blood to shape and naturalise their statements. They use it strategically to legitimise mutual obligations and commitments, responsibilities of care and support, attitudes of domination or subordination, to make or break bonds, as well as to strengthen or weaken them.

Beatrice specified that her employer was not her biological grandmother, but rather "like a granny, my father used to call her aunt". From her point of view, by working at her "granny's place" she would be spared the exploitation she had experienced in the Dodoma region. In particular, she reported experiences of mistreatments at the hands of her aunt who used to overwork her, beat her for any mistake and would segregate her from the other kids in the household. Moreover, Beatrice intended to continue her studies, at that time she had completed her primary education and she wanted to enroll in secondary school. Yet her expectations about school were only partly met. At the "granny's place", during the day Beatrice alternated housework and running the small restaurant, but the amount of work did not allow her to attend school regularly. After the first two years of secondary education she dropped out of school. Beatrice then decided to move to another city and found a paid job through a domestic worker who had previously been employed at her granny's restaurant. And so she moved to Morogoro town, where I met her. She described her choices, and in particular the decision to migrate and find a paid job, as part of her gradual transition into adulthood, which she defined as a gradual process of awareness: "before that moment I was not fully aware of myself. When I became fully aware of myself I moved to Morogoro and told myself 'I want my own salary now'". Thus, the moments of transition from city to city, from household to household, from unpaid to paid job, intersect with other transitional processes that have to do with the construction of subjectivity. The latter is an ongoing process through which domestic workers construct a sense of self, and the kind of people they want to be, as they navigate uncertainty and attempt to find an agreement between apparently irreconcilable options (Massa 2021: 26).

When I met her in Morogoro, Beatrice had been working in the same household for six years. Her monthly salary was higher than that of other domestic workers I interviewed, who considered her a successful woman and a role

model. She repeatedly highlighted her ability in negotiating better wages. She asked for a salary increase on two occasions: when her female employer gave birth, hence Beatrice would have to take care of kids; and when the employers decided to move to a larger house that required more housework. With her money, she helped her relatives build a small house in the rural area of the Dodoma region, thereby fulfilling her desire to actively repositioning herself in family networks of reciprocity, which matches the ambition of many women. During the interview, she described herself as the leader of the "business", the one who had the idea and was able to give directions for its success. Yet she had less free time than other women. She was one of the hardest women to reach, her employers exercised strong control over her by limiting any movement outside the home where she worked. This shows that achieving certain goals, for example negotiating a higher salary and improving living standards by entering a wealthy household, does not necessarily imply that the control that employers exert over women's bodies and freedom of movement will relax. In Beatrice's case, her dependency increased, as did her submission to those who provided protection. Moreover, she did not achieve all her ambitions, since in Morogoro she neither got the chance to continue secondary school, nor to attend a tailoring course, which was one of her plans. While feeling the uncertainty and unpredictability of her future, she was reframing other ambitions. She gave up on the idea of attending formal school, but she wanted to invest her savings to pay for an intensive Technical and Vocational Education and Training course. She didn't have a clear idea of the field in which she could work in the future, available opportunities were uncertain. Yet she wanted to find a better paid job, for instance in a hotel, and seemed to be worried about the passage of time. As she put it: "there will come a time when I will no longer be able to work as a domestic worker".

When domestic workers meet the NGO

In both cases described above, the women's working conditions improved slightly over time, especially compared to their first work experiences, when they were denied both wages and access to education. But as the conclusions of the two sections above suggest, it was partly their wish to leave domestic work at some point in order to find a more qualified job, perhaps in another city. Up to now this has not been possible, and on the contrary, the achievement of certain goals might have led to a strengthening of the dependence upon their employers. But this does not mean that dependency was perceived

as a permanent or static condition. Their imagination and hope suggested that with time they would be able to negotiate protection through work activities less regulated by the direct control of employers. Despite all the limitations, migration and work experiences were perceived by these women as events that would allow them "to go somewhere" and thus escape a condition of existential immobility (Massa 2021: 133). The meeting with an NGO such as CVM – engaged in the struggle for the social and labour protection of domestic workers – was considered as potentially functional to the realization of future projects. Moreover, CVM was organising vocational training courses which, according to many women, could help them in their search for a better job. The NGO's action strategies were mainly directed towards the formalisation of domestic work. Yet in the two study contexts, attempts at formalisation was potentially problematic and with limitations, which I will discuss in this section using the example of written labour contracts.

When I met Tesfanesh and Beatrice, they had come into contact with the domestic workers' Associations that CVM had established two years earlier. Like other women I interviewed, they were eager to strengthen the Associations in the battle for domestic workers' rights. They shared with members of the association their knowledge of the urban context, the strategies employed in previous years to negotiate better wages, and the forms of collective solidarity mobilised to improve their situation. Association meetings became a way to discuss politics, socio-economic inequalities and labour exploitation, thus revealing the political element of women's informal ways of organising, which could play a key role in the development of collective strategies of resistance (Hepburn 2019: 46). Many of the interviewed domestic workers are now joining the International Campaign for the Ratification of the ILO C189. Paradoxically, while on the one hand they extol Convention 189 by calling for its ratification by governments, on the other hand they argue that the formalisation of domestic work with employment contracts is impossible to achieve. It would inevitably exclude and fail to protect workers engaged in informal work, for example unpaid girls who had been transferred from their rural natal home to better-off households in the urban area as part of traditional institutions of kin support. In this regard, a male representative of a community-based organization (CBO)[4] in Ethiopia argued:

4. At the time of my fieldwork, several representatives of community-based organization (CBO) in both countries were helping CVM find new women who could be involved in the NGO's activities and become members of the Domestic Workers Associations.

> When labour activists came with this idea of advocating for domestic workers' rights, honestly at the beginning we were very surprised… we wondered "In what angle did they see domestic work as a social problem?!" For example, if you have a relative or other good relations in the rural area you may find a domestic worker who is your blood relative… maybe she is leading a low standard of living in the rural area… And so you may say to her family "send your daughter to us, don't worry we will nurture your daughter like our own daughter" […] But it is also true that nowadays domestic workers may find themselves in very exploitative situations (Personal communication, 18 July 2018).

This was also the point of view of many employers who tended to describe themselves as "good employers", "saviours" and "protectors" of "needy" rural girls living in extreme poverty. These statements are part of a strategy that employers use to legitimise and reaffirm the hierarchical and power relations they exercise over their employees, to emphasise the subaltern position of domestic workers, gain prestige for themselves and reaffirm the superiority of their social status (see Gardini 2019: 88-91). As also shown by studies on care work in other parts of the world, deep ambivalences can emerge from the intertwining of paternalistic attitudes and working relationships that recall master-servant relations. What is said in words – phrases such as "I want you to feel at home" – is often contradicted by the derogatory practices and attitudes of employers towards their workers (Marchetti 2016: 139-40). At the same time – and this is one of the most interesting aspects of care relationships – becoming "one of the household" means establishing asymmetrical relations of power, gender and class within a domestic space, where people of different ages, habits and personal histories interact, a space to which both the employers' and the workers' families, located elsewhere, belong. Thus, several domestic spaces are brought together to create a larger and more fluid one in which complex affective and social relationships are intertwined (Vietti 2019: 29). Hence, unequal relationships might "include strong idioms of protection and care that can neither be reduced to power nor wholly separated from it" (Malara, Boylston 2016: 4). Nor is such separation something that people necessarily desire.

Given these considerations, it should come as no surprise that written employment contracts highly praised by CVM find little room for applicability in the study contexts I have examined. Interestingly, in specific contexts, the formalisation of hired care work might produce recalcitrant realities and contradictory consequences, and even reinforce structures of classed, raced and gendered inequality. This is the case of post-apartheid South Africa (see Ally 2010), which witnessed one of the most remarkable efforts to recognise paid

domestic work as a form of employment. A new labor legislation was established that included domestic workers and gave them a national minimum wage, formal contracts of employment, extensive leave, a pension fund, and other rights. In 2013, South Africa ratified the ILO C189. Yet Shireen Adam Ally (2010) argues that in South Africa – like in postcolonial Zambia (Hansen 1990), Tanzania (Bujra 2000), and Zimbabwe (Pape 1993), among others – democratic values have coexisted with continued servitude relations within paid domestic work. In her study, domestic workers were refusing to sign contracts and instead chose to informally negotiate the conditions of their work. The context of South Africa is clearly very different from the Ethiopian and Tanzanian, particularly when we consider the specificity of white racism during apartheid. However, even in the latter contexts, proposals for the formalisation of domestic work – as they are advanced by formal laboir movements and international organizations – sometimes clash with local realities and are not necessarily adequate in specific circumstances. In Ethiopia and Tanzania, during my fieldwork, CVM staff was distributing a sort of formal contract prepared according to standards proposed by Trade Unions to protect domestic workers. Yet this project was often rejected both by employers and domestic workers. Indeed, in the contexts under study it could be considered culturally wrong, or not appropriate, to ask people (kin or non kin) closely related to domestic workers' families to sign a contract. This request might be interpreted as lack of trust or suspicion (Mulugeta 2012: 19). The presence of a bond of some kind, the existence of a patronage or family relationship, are conditions that make any form of labour bargaining, as well as the explicit declaration of the conditions of engagement, almost impossible. The logic of debt binds the worker to a relationship of personal dependence that associates domination with protection and demands their total availability (Viti 2007: 175-6). With few exceptions, both in Ethiopia and Tanzania the different agreements applied to domestic workers were informal and verbal. Usually, they were stipulated between influential adults without any clear agreement on the responsibilities of the worker. Ethiopian women who had worked in Addis Abeba mentioned a brokering agency where written contracts could be produced for both internal and international migrants. But usually this was a further step for those who wanted to find a job within a household who was completely unrelated to the village, community or families of origin.

Interestingly, many domestic workers said they feared that, if applied, a written contract would bind them "forever" to their employers. This point illu-

minates several aspects. As has already emerged in the article, the positioning of women workers vis-à-vis employers is not unidirectional and changes over time, as women may aspire to remain under their protection and at the same time wish to leave. But only by manipulating the asymmetrical relations of power and care – from the intimacy of their work – can they try to loosen the bonds of dependency, without this having too negative an impact on their lives and threatening the need for protection. On the contrary, from the female workers' point of view resorting to a formal employment contract could have negative effects: that of undermining relationships of trust and relegating the worker to a condition of immobility and static dependence.

The statements of the Ethiopian domestic worker Alemtsehay make the point. She describes her female employer, within the same narrative, in different and contradictory ways. She condemns her for using derogatory terms (such as *gered*) against her. At the same time, she describes her as protective and caring. She refers to a hierarchy employer-employee that the domestic worker is willing to maintain if she is "treated as a daughter". If not, she will leave the household in search of a better job. In this way Alemtsehay expresses both her need of caring and being cared for.

> If she (employer) insults me I can leave this house and find another job! [...] If she acts like a mother I just keep silent. It is not a problem if she beats me when I commit a mistake. I keep my head down and never leave her house.

This aspect also shows that, although domestic workers employ everyday practices to challenge relations of domination and carve out spaces of resistance for themselves, these "tactics" do not lead to a radical change of the hierarchical relations that permeate the everyday life. Relationships of mutual dependence between workers and employers are hierarchical and inevitably shaped by complementary relations of domination and submission. Recognising the complexity of these relationships is important to understand the care work that is performed by domestic workers in its many forms, assisting the functioning of rural and urban households structures at different levels.

Conclusions

This article has shown that care work reproduces itself in various forms in the different phases of women's lives, from their childhood in rural areas and when they are domestic workers in the city. The women change several households where they work. A woman might have worked with no remuneration for someone (kin or non-kin) who offered accommodation and education,

or someone who needed domestic help due to difficult family circumstances. She might have worked performing domestic chores within the house but also helping relatives or other people working in the informal sector. The same woman might have then moved to another household to work with a remuneration. Overall, it is not easy to identify and disentangle the various forms of hosting by pseudo-parents, friends, acquaintances, as well as the diverse forms of work performed by women. Domestic work in Ethiopia and Tanzania is often associated with values of intense caring that should assure the well-being of household structures within the framework of a kinship ideology. The women often perform domestic work free of charge, live in asymmetric power relationships that, on the one hand, expose them to exploitative circumstances and, on the other, may provide them with some form of protection. From the intimacy of their work, domestic workers manipulate power relations to achieve certain goals, but they do not overturn the nature of hierarchical relations that incorporate steep power relationships with the ethics of care. Importantly, everyday practices of power and care must be analyzed in their temporal dimension, in terms of how they are transformed and renegotiated as agents' expectations, risk perceptions, as well as expectations and trust in the actions of others change (Thelen 2015).

In the light of these considerations, solutions proposed by formal channels which foster the formalisation of hired care work sometimes clash with local realities and are not necessarily perceived as adequate by domestic workers. This is the case of formal, written contracts of employment that might threaten the implicit covenants of trust between the women and the people for whom they work, and more broadly, between rural and urban households in their labor redistribution practices. Recognising these historically cultivated practices of power in the affective world of domestic work is important precisely to ensure that attempts at formalisation do not disempower domestic workers, but rather take their needs into account by working towards alternative solutions.

Ethnographic research can play a key role in exploring how domestic workers sustain, manage and live with asymmetric relationships in negotiation with a dominant value system (Malara, Boylston 2016). These reflections might generate new insights into the creation, reproduction and dissolution of significant ties, and open up space for a broad reflection on the "fundamentals of care" (beyond established classifications), without diminishing the focus on its varied registers in different contexts.

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Conceptualizing care practices in women's lives: a domestic work case study in Ethiopia and Tanzania.
2023 | ANUAC. VOL. 12, N° 1, GIUGNO 2023: 3-28.
ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-4932