

DIALECTICAL RELATIONS AND AGENCY IN MIGRATION BROKERAGE FOR DOMESTIC WORK IN GHANA

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Abstract

Domestic work in urban middle-class families is an important avenue of employment for women and girls from poor rural backgrounds in Ghana. Brokerage in migrant domestic worker recruitment is widespread for women and girls who are socially constructed as being unable to find work on their own and requiring a guarantor who will vouch for their character and skills. In the migration literature, brokers have often been portrayed as unscrupulous traders who are complicit in the exploitation of domestic workers and the state’s reluctance to protect them (Tsikata 2009). While brokerage in domestic work finds mention in many studies, it has not been studied in its own right. This paper adds to the scholarship in the field through a case study of brokerage for domestic work. The paper draws on conceptualisations of migrant agency within the brokerage relationship (Spener 2009) to challenge portrayals of brokerage purely as a “migration business” and take an approach that shows how migrants use brokers to further their own agendas. Brokers help migrants with integration into urban areas, bargaining and job-switching for better working conditions and wages; negotiating and managing multiple roles and responsibilities and counselling them on the wise use of earnings. Thus they are an important part of migrants’ strategies to exercise agency which they would struggle with given the highly unequal power relationship with the employer. The broker is therefore also a *power broker* aiding migrants in their efforts to make migration for domestic servitude work for their own personal goals. The paper provides insights into the social relations that underpin the recruitment process in Ghana and how aspiring migrants and brokers build trust to lay the foundations for complex and risky journeys. The analysis is informed by Lindquist’s (2012) rich ethnographic research in Indonesia which highlights the importance of a grounded understanding of brokerage in order to understand how those based in remote rural locations are able to access labour markets in destinations that are well beyond their normal cultural and social spheres of interaction. The paper draws on in-depth interviews in Accra conducted in 2015 with female migrant domestic workers including child migrants, employers, brokers and government ministries concerned with labour and gender as well as unionised labour units.

Introduction

Rural–urban migration from the poorer regions of Ghana to the south is an important part of the livelihood portfolio of less well-off families. In the urban areas of the south, domestic work – which is typically low-paid and insecure – is an important avenue of employment for women and girls from such backgrounds. Their migration and entry into domestic work in southern urban centres is often facilitated and sustained by an entire industry centred around recruitment agencies and their chains of brokers and sub-agents as well as migrants’ own social networks.

Within Ghana’s rapidly increasing informal sector, domestic work has emerged in the last few decades as a growing economic sector, as more households are substituting care work previously performed by female household members with external domestic services (Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum 2011). The growing demand for domestic work in Ghana has been linked to a number of factors, including greater female labour-market participation and the absence of strong social policies that make it conducive for women to combine formal work with reproductive and domestic work (Tsikata 2009). This increasing demand for domestic workers is largely filled by migrant women who move from rural areas in search of decent jobs to support their families (LAWA-Ghana 2003; Tsikata 2009). Although data on domestic workers are almost non-existent for Ghana, domestic workers are believed to be a substantial segment of the workforce. Studies by Apt (2005), and LAWA-Ghana (2003) indicate that, in urban Ghana, there is at least one domestic worker in each house, and large houses could have as many as six. Despite this, the 2010 census records 0.6 per cent of the economically active population of Ghana as employed as domestic workers or home helps (GSS 2013), a figure likely to be an underestimation, given the difference in official definitions of domestic work and the undocumented status of domestic workers in Ghana (Awumbila et al. 2012; Tsikata 2009).

Despite anecdotal information about a growing ‘migration industry’ comprising of brokers, agencies and training centres facilitating migration across a range of occupations and geographical regions (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen 2013), very little data exists on the migration industry for internal and regional migration streams. The limited literature on the migration industry for internal migrants is often presented within the context of the smuggling and trafficking of persons, thus focusing on the ‘illegitimate’ end (Salt and Stein 1997). In particular, brokers are often portrayed in a negative light as unscrupulous exploiters of domestic workers for their own profit and gain (Hernández-León 2008; Kyle 2000). Furthermore, the migration-industry literature tends to frame migrants using the facilitative services of brokers and intermediaries as passive and having no agency in setting their own migration agendas (Agunias 2009). Yet there is some evidence that the wide array of recruitment agencies, intermediaries and businesses involved in the migration industry can become an important part of migrants’ risk management strategies (de Haas 2007). Furthermore, there is little empirical research on the social relations that underpin the recruitment process in Ghana and how aspiring migrants and brokers build trust to lay the foundations for complex and risky journeys. It is important to gain a grounded understanding of these processes in order to understand how those based in remote rural locations are able to access labour markets in destinations that are well beyond their normal cultural and social spheres of interaction (Lindquist, 2012).

Employing a qualitative research approach, this paper examines the mediating role of employment and recruitment agencies and brokers in facilitating the recruitment of rural migrants from the poorer regions of Ghana into domestic work in Accra and abroad in order to provide a better understanding of the nature of the social relations between migrants, employers and brokers and how these help migrants to access the labour markets in destinations that are well beyond their normal cultural and social spheres of interaction (Lindquist 2012). It therefore fills a critical gap in the understanding of an important yet under-researched phenomenon that is increasingly discussed in the context of workers' rights and exploitation.

While our findings corroborate many other studies that have shown how brokers perpetuate exploitation and produce a docile workforce, we argue that recruitment agencies and brokers also play a range of multiple and often contradictory roles in facilitating and mediating migration for domestic work. These activities can entrench patriarchal values and the subordination of female domestic workers, but also sometimes aid domestic workers to negotiate better terms and conditions of employment and to meet their aspirations for personal development. Thus brokers are an important part of migrants' strategies to exercise agency in the face of highly unequal power relationships with employers. Drawing mainly on conceptualisations of migrant agency within the brokerage relationship (Spener, 2009), the paper moves beyond the largely negative perceptions of brokers in the popular discourse and argues for a more-nuanced, more-differentiated understanding of the role and the practices of brokers and intermediaries as they navigate the multifaceted space in the recruitment process for migrant domestic workers.

Conceptualising brokerage and the migration industry

This paper draws on conceptualisations of agency within relationships between migrants and brokers. Following Spener (2009), we challenge portrayals of brokers and intermediaries purely as a 'migration business' (Salt and Stein 1997) and take an approach that reveals the complexity of social relations between them. We therefore draw on a conceptual approach which frames migrants as playing a participatory role in the migration process and actively seeking out the services of migration 'entrepreneurs' or agents in fulfilling their own migratory agendas (Mahmud 2013; Spener 2009).

Early research on brokerage granted no active role in the migration process to migrants themselves but, rather, portrayed them as 'streams' that are 'managed by a string of intermediate institutions' that stand outside the stream (Salt and Stein 1997: 480). With regard to the 'illegitimate' component of the migration business – trafficking – migrants are objectified as 'commodities' that are transported in order to be traded (1997: 480). Later research on the migration industry, while recognising the role of institutions and actors which were also involved in facilitating migration, continued to view intermediaries as entrepreneurs providing services in pursuit of financial gain or profit. For example, Hernández-León (2008) argues that the migration industry consists of an 'ensemble of entrepreneurs who, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, provide a variety of services facilitating human mobility across international borders' (2008: 154). These services include legitimate services as well as some clandestine ones such as smuggling and the dispatching of false documents. He further argues that, even in cases where migration entrepreneurs emerge from the migrant community itself, the fact that they run for-profit businesses structures their

relationship to the rest of the community, according to a logic that produces social distance and asymmetry between them and other community members (Hernández-León 2008: 193). Kyle (2000: 67) further emphasises that this key feature of operating for financial gain distinguishes the migration industry from the assistance which migrants and members of their social networks provide for one another and from any assistance which migrants might receive *gratis* from the state and non-governmental organisations.

Our analysis resonates with Spener's (2009) argument that such characterisations of migrants' relationships with brokers are problematic as they fail to seek an adequate account of how migrants and their families actively seek out the services of migration entrepreneurs as a way of fulfilling their own migratory agendas. He also observes that such analyses do not expressly contemplate the social process through which migrants choose whose services to contract or how they negotiate migration 'deals' with the entrepreneurs whose services they contract (Spener 2009: 13).

We are informed by the literature on brokerage, which recognises that these brokers are instrumental in connecting the rural and the urban, the local and the global, the peripheral and the central, and the poor and the rich; sometimes they even provide the connection between expectations and reality (Aguias 2013; Kern and Müller-Bücker 2015; Lindquist 2012). It is therefore important to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role and practices of brokers as they navigate this multifaceted space in the recruitment process for migrant domestic workers.

We focus on the relationships of trust and reciprocity between domestic workers, their families and the brokers, recognising that profit-making is but one part of the relationship between migrant domestic workers and recruitment agencies and intermediaries. In traditional societies, trust plays a central role in creating and supporting transactions and ensuring honesty – one side enters the transaction in the expectation that the other side will cooperate and not default on the deal (Lyon 2000; Platteau 2014: 91). Reputations are important in gaining trust (Lyon 2000: 665) and social norms dictate what is regarded as acceptable and not acceptable.

Our conceptualisation of trust and reciprocity thus extends existing frameworks on brokerage by highlighting social aspects of the latter which are critical to understanding the relationship between migrants and brokers and why informal brokers continue to be popular both among aspiring migrants and employers. We also draw on the literature on the role of brokers in identity ascription and subjectivation (Rodriguez and Schwenken 2013) and how they perpetuate the production of the 'ideal' migrant domestic worker, with her qualities of deferential femininity, docility and subservience, so that she fits into specific labour-market niches (Gardiner 2008: 1268), in the Ghanaian context, the urban middle-class Ghanaian families and overseas employers in the Middle East.

Research methodology

The study was conducted in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. The choice of Accra was based on the fact that it is the dominant migrant destination, and thus provides a very good setting for understanding the experiences of the migrants themselves and of actors in the migration industry. Given the objective of delving deeper into the nature of the social relations between migrant domestic workers and brokers, a qualitative research approach which would enable a

deeper understanding of the experiences and behaviours of research participants (Creswell 2009) was employed.

In-depth interviews with 76 respondents were the main method of data collection. These included 23 formal and informal brokers and intermediaries of various categories, 24 domestic workers selected on the basis of a number of criteria, 7 employers of domestic workers, 18 government agencies, trade unions and civil society organisations, 2 faith-based organisations, 2 travel and tour companies and 1 researcher. State officials of the relevant state institutions in the migration industry were purposively selected and interviewed as key informants who could provide information on the regulatory framework of the industry. A snowball sampling strategy was used to select brokers, employers and domestic workers in the Accra/Tema area. To deal with the limitations of snowballing, particularly the tendency to select only actors in similar networks (see Bryman 2012), several nodes were used as entry points for selection to ensure variety in the categories of respondents.

Typology of brokers

The study finds a multiplicity of actors involved in the recruitment of domestic workers for internal and external placement. We distinguish four main typologies of brokers as follows:

Type 1: Formal fully registered recruitment agencies (registered and with a licence to operate)

Type 2: Formal partially registered agencies (registered, but with no licence to operate), or informal agencies.

Type 3: Individual informal brokers and their sub-agents (neither registered nor have a licence to operate)

Type 4: Networks of friends and family.

There are marked differences between the different types of broker in terms of their mode of operation as well as their clients, both migrants and employers. Formal, fully registered agents (Type 1) function like an employment exchange, advertising through formal channels and take potential workers through formal registration processes, including a formal interview. They tend to deal preferably with applicants who have some level of education and generally operate within the confines of the law, including adhering to the minimum work age limit of 18 years. Most of them provide some level of training in domestic skills.

Type 2 agents tend to recruit domestic workers for middle- and higher-income Ghanaian and expatriate families in large urban centres or, for overseas employers, mainly in the Gulf. Formal education is less important, although it may be required for specific employers. The recruitment process is less formal, with most workers being recruited through word of mouth.

Recruitment processes for the informal brokers (Types 3 and 4) are more informal. Advertising through word of mouth, in places of worship (mosques and churches) and via recommendations by previously placed domestic workers, as well as through family and friends, constitutes the major recruitment channels. Sometimes sub-agents are used who scout rural areas for potential applicants. Informal agents recruit from a wider range of applicants,

including those under 18 years old.

Churches are a major medium of recruitment for informal agencies. First they are used as a medium for advertising; secondly they provide a platform for actual recruitment. Alex is an individual broker (Type 3) who works as a security guard for an expatriate enclave but who also has a business on the side as a broker for migrants from rural areas. The business grew from occasional requests from his employers to find them a maid and has now become a large enterprise. Personal bonds of trust, reciprocity and respect are at the heart of Alex's business, which is built on the relationships that he has established with people he has placed in jobs:

These people I place, in turn call their brother and sisters in the village.....When I tell them about a resident needing help, they tell me they have brothers and sisters in the village who will be interested.

Alex's model of recruitment is to charge the employers to find a suitable match and to ask the workers to give him something, based on goodwill and gratitude. He emphasises the help that he is giving girls from disadvantaged backgrounds and says he will act as a guarantor for them even if they do not pay him.

When the girls come to me looking for jobs I do not charge them any fee. Initially I used to charge them about GHC 20 (£3.92) to look for a placement for them but I realised they could not afford it; as a result I had to stop charging fees and I decided to run it as an NGO. I always tell them that, if they are able to accumulate about two to three months' salary, they can at least support me with GHC 20 (£3.92) but when they get the job that's it.... Normally it's their employers who already know me; they give me some money for transport in appreciation of my efforts – that is how I also benefit.

Thus although, at face value, these acts suggest a totally selfless approach to recruitment, they are often carried out in anticipation of future payment by workers.

Multiple Roles and Services provided by brokers

While our findings corroborate many other studies that have shown how brokers perpetuate exploitation and produce a docile workforce, we also identify critical areas in which brokers work in the interests of migrants, thereby increasing their bargaining power and allowing them to exercise agency in highly unequal power relations with employers. Brokers therefore play important multiple, often contradictory, roles before, during and after migration. We discuss below the key areas where brokers work to perpetuate the *status quo* as well as other areas where they work in the interests of migrants.

Establishing trust and cultural brokerage

The broker is not only someone who makes the journey materially feasible by assisting with transport and arranging documentation and certification but, as Lindquist (2012) notes, he or she is also a cultural mediator between these different worlds. The trust-based functions of

brokers include, *inter alia*, reassuring the family that their ward will be found a good job and acting as a character witness – to reassure both parties that they will fulfil their moral obligations under the terms of the ‘contract’. They provide a character reference for the employer as being fair and one who pays both promptly and the amount promised. For the prospective worker, they will provide a reference to her being ‘of good character’ and hardworking. The broker also acts as economic guarantor – s/he will promise the employer that the agency will pay, or arrange for the worker to work to make up the time, in the event that the worker steals or damages any property in the employer’s home. The Hammani Recruitment Agency (Type 2 agent), for instance, holds both employers and domestic workers to terms listed in written contracts:

So our girls cannot mistreat our clients’ kids and they also cannot do the same to our girls. Whatever he/she damages, you, the client, let us know and, if you want her to pay, she will work for it and pay but you cannot mistreat the person because she is your home help. She is not your slave, she is there for you and you are also there for her, so you work together.

For Type 3 and 4 brokers, personal relations with the domestic workers and in-depth knowledge of their family and their religious and cultural backgrounds allow for the initiation of informal verbally agreed ‘contracts’ guided by cultural notions of reciprocity. From the interviews with brokers, it is evident that they possess the skills to act as cultural brokers (Lindquist 2012) in addition to being placement agents. The interviews with domestic workers indicate that their families placed trust in the agents who brought them to the city. Employers also preferred informal brokers to the formal ones both because of the cost and also because they felt they would bring more trustworthy people to them. As one employer noted:

We don’t just go in for anybody. We go in for people who are recommended by someone who is well known. That is why you contact someone whom you trust to get you someone whom he or she trusts. You don’t just pick them from the street. I know there are agencies that can provide you with a worker but I have not utilised their services before because they actually don’t know the background of the domestic workers. These job-seekers just approach them and express their interest in working as domestic workers, so all they do is to train them and give them to a household. The probability that the worker they would give you would not be up to your standards is high so I usually prefer the family recommendations to the agency recruits. Moreover, the agencies also charge too much.

Reinforcing patriarchal ideologies of subordination and immobilising domestic workers’ bodies

As observed by Silvey (2004), patriarchal ideologies of domesticity travel transnationally and spatially and can explain the persistence of subordination in domestic work by both gender and race and nationality. Thus women and girls belonging to certain ethnic groups and possessing certain regional identities are more likely to become domestic workers for the more-privileged and rich. Brokers play a key role in reinforcing these ideologies and stereotypes by creating a docile and subservient workforce and repeating and confirming stereotypes related to ethnic identities. As a representative of Leroy Services put it:

People mostly don't trust the Ewes [the third-largest ethnic group in Ghana, mainly from the Volta region] partly because of the fear of juju (voodoo). You would be amazed about how many enlightened people will tell you that. Yes, the Ashanti girls are loud and lazy, yeah a lot of people don't like them... People prefer Fantes, Akuapems, yeah. Central and Western regions. Oh, Akuapems are polite, do you know what I mean?

The regulatory environment for domestic work in Ghana is less controlling of domestic workers' bodies than in countries such as Singapore in South-East Asia (Yeoh and Huang 2010). Nevertheless brokers collude with employers to impose immobility on domestic workers in time and space through a range of controlling mechanisms. This is observed particularly in the case of very young girls who are recruited as workers – while the worker herself is often told that her wages are being saved by the employer and will be paid to her at the end of the employment period or that she will be sent to school in exchange for work, in actual fact these promises rarely materialise. The girl's family, the broker and the employer sometimes collude to agree that she will be housed, fed and provided with the essentials but there is no agreement on wages. She is often not aware of this until it is time to leave. For instance, Lucy (a domestic worker) was misled by a broker into believing that her services were in exchange for the opportunity to gain an education:

She (the broker) told me that the man would take me to school. But I never heard the man talking about school issues. Later the man told me personally that he was not going to take me to school. He said he could not take care of me and his children at the same time. So one day, as I was there in his house, he just told me to pack off. He had complications in his marriage, so he was not close to his wife. So when I was about to leave the place, she (the broker) gave me GhC120 Cedis (£23.53) for me staying there for a year.

Producing the ideal domestic worker: docile and subservient

Despite significant differences in modes of operation, nearly all informal brokers are involved, to varying degrees, in identity ascription and subjectivation (Rodriguez and Schwenken 2013) in the production of the “ideal migrant”; in this case docile, subservient, obedient, honest and hardworking domestic workers. The process starts with screening and continues through selection, training and matching where desirable characteristics are emphasised and less desirable ones are downplayed to construct migrants with specific class identities and subjectivities that fit into specific labour market niches (Gardiner Barber, 2008: 1268). Liang (2011) lists the stages in identity ascription starting with upgrading of skills, second is the acquiring of a certain attitude, and third is the needed ethics that are considered appropriate by the employers for ‘live-in maids’. They are trained to work very long days, obeying to strict hierarchies, the performance of docility and working under high pressure.

While the role of brokers in making ideal workers in international migration is well recognised, our interviews indicate that they play a similar role with internal migrants being placed in homes in the city. Brokers play a key role in subjectivation and identity ascription, as they train workers to suppress their ethnic identities and behaviour and to conform to the expectations of middle-class urban employers with regards to politeness and appearance.

The Broadway agency checks credentials, trains and counsels migrants about working norms at destination before departure and prides itself not only on supplying good workers but as being respectable representatives of the country.

Yeah, so for their processing you have to make a passport, have health checks – because each person has to pass a medical exam – obtain a police report, get vaccinated and get a yellow card; then we buy you the ticket. Then you go there and we contact you through an agent and you finish the rest of the process there. Yes, we do give training. We counsel them. Before they go, we counsel them because they are going to another terrain. We let them know that they are there to work hard and to project a very high image of Ghana. So we tell them ‘Don’t just go and think, because you are in a white man’s country, you can just do what you like.

Similarly, the Hammani Recruitment Agency (a Type 2 broker) sees it as their responsibility to ensure that the appearance and behaviour of workers meet the expectations of the employers. These qualities are critical in the transformation of the identity of the worker from their original ethnic identity to an urban working-class girl.

We teach them how to talk. When they come from the villages everything annoys them so we tell them that this is not how we live in the city. In the city, when you see an elderly person or a child, you say ‘Please’. We introduce them to three key words that would help them – ‘Please’, ‘I am sorry’ and ‘Thank you’. ‘Whenever you want to talk you use “Please”; when somebody gives you something you say “Thank you Mummy” or “Thank you Daddy” to show appreciation and also if anything goes wrong and you are being questioned you say “I am sorry, I won’t do that again” and it ends it all. We also teach them table manners, how to make beds, folding bed sheets, ironing and other things.

Hammani Recruitment Agency also see themselves not just as the makers and custodians of good character among the girls, but as key in supplying a docile workforce which downplays its own needs and privileges the demands of the employer.

we don’t encourage that (ie negotiating days off) because what will you be doing when you are off? You are being paid well, housed, fed and taking this huge sum as a salary, so why would you ask for days off? You expect your employer to treat you well but you don’t want to return that favour – what are you going home to do? If the person says you will be off for two days per month or over the weekend or after three months, you will be taking days off; but you also have to think that this person needed you, that is why he came for you, so why don’t you do the person’s work first, so he can also think of helping you? When the person sees that you think good about him/her, other things will follow. It is ‘give and take’ so don’t think of days off. Where are you even going to go?

Leroy Business Solutions, a Type 2 brokerage agency which recruits for high- and middle-income urban families, also promises to deliver honest and hardworking people to its clients in the city and has devised a thorough background check system that includes checking their guarantors – people who will vouch for the character of the worker and for their behaviour. The behavioural qualities that the agency is looking for are clearly patience and subservience, which are critical when selecting a person with the right qualities. Alex, the individual Type 3

broker, also has an informal system of training which emphasises the behavioural aspects of the job including learning how to speak ‘respectfully’ to their employers, ‘*how to greet their superiors, desist from stealing and other issues like that*’. Most brokers said that they also have a system enabling them to assess employers and match them to suitable staff. In this regard, employers who are perceived as strict are provided with experienced and skilled workers while those judged to be liberal are assigned workers who might not be as experienced.

Offering informal social protection and risk management

Informal brokers can help migrants to mitigate the costs and risks of migration through the provision of informal social protection and risk management strategies. Some help migrants with paying for travel and accommodation at destination. Type 3 informal brokers like Alex help new arrivals in the city by providing them with a place to stay. Having come from a poor background himself, he is aware of the help that new arrivals in the city need and he offers them assistance with settling in. Informal brokers may even provide accommodation when the worker is between jobs. They help newly arrived workers to navigate the challenges of city life and to surmount cultural barriers.

I normally meet the person at the bus station and take them straight home. Most of them do not know their way around Accra and that is why I have to meet them to send them to their various work places. Sometimes they call me asking for my support to travel to the South. For example, a girl travelling from the Volta Region to Accra; I can talk to the GPRTU driver in the Volta Region, informing him that I will be the one to pick the girl up from the station. In that case he brings the girl without pre-payment and I have to pay for the transport immediately she arrives.

The administrative assistant from the Hammani recruitment agency (a Type 2 broker) explains how they assist potential migrant domestic workers through an informal system of pre-financing transportation costs:

Sometimes, too, when you see any indication that the person doesn't have the money and she is so desperate to come and work, we send her the money through MTN Mobile Money or any other transaction to pay, so that when they work they can pay us back.

If costs are incurred, these are deducted through payments spread over a few months but it was not clear what the welfare implications were for the migrant of such deductions. Nonetheless, faced with having to manage travel, settling down in the city and looking for jobs on their own, migrants and their families would otherwise find the task almost impossible.

Acting as a guarantor

One of the most important requirements for finding a job as a domestic workers is to be able to produce a guarantor. For those girls who leave home without the permission of their

guardians, brokers such as Alex provide critical support by acting as their guarantors. Alex does this to ensure that employers can report to him in the event that there is a problem.

Yes, I am the guarantor for almost all of them and it is very risky; for most of them it is because I know either their brother or their sister so I am able to guarantee them..... With most of the girls I send to work for expatriates, the least thing that happens, I am the first person to be called, so it is very risky and I always pray that nothing bad happens. So I always ensure I talk to them about staying out of trouble, I always tell them I did not take a penny from anyone when they arrived. Instead, I fed them and paid for their transport so they should stay out of trouble. By the grace of God, nothing bad has happened.

In the case of child migration, brokers not only facilitate the transportation to Accra, but also act as guarantors for the children. This latter role includes providing details about the job and payment terms, the employer, the recruiter's contact details and the address of the employer and an offer to arrange for the parents to visit their wards periodically.

Mediating relations between employers and domestic workers

Our study found that recruitment agencies play a key role as a facilitating interface between employee domestic workers and their employers as they navigate the different interfaces. This ostensibly positive role in enabling mobility is, however, often missing in the literature. Our study finds that informal brokers often mediate relations between employers and domestic workers in a variety of ways, some of which are discussed below.

Serving as a medium for bargaining over wages, working conditions and workers rights

While brokers can be complicit in urging workers to accept jobs where the conditions and wages are poor, they can also be an important medium for women in vulnerable positions to exercise agency as they mediate discussions on working conditions and wages. Rural – or what are regarded as ‘raw’ – migrant workers conceptualise the value of wages differently from urban or urbanised domestic workers. Recruiters therefore bridge the gap in expectations by negotiating up low wage quotes while revising down overly ambitious ones. They also help the migrants with one of the most important strategies for improving their working conditions and wages, which is job switching. Examples of some of the issues negotiated between the informal recruitment agencies and brokers and the employer are the level of wages, the number of working hours and days, the work schedules, payment terms if the domestic worker does extra days, hours or chores and the managing of employer–employee expectations.

The facilitation role for negotiating wages was especially important for domestic workers recruited directly from the rural areas by brokers. Such first-time recruits often asked for lower wages, but were guided by brokers to request higher sums. Several brokers recounted instances where they had negotiated a higher salary than was being demanded by the domestic worker.

Another area where recruitment agencies played a key facilitation role was in working conditions – specifically with the issue of ‘days off’. Matching the expectations of the

employer with those of the domestic workers was often problematic and recruitment agencies played a key role in mediating these expectations. As Margarete, from Hammani, stated:

You send somebody to a place and maybe the agreement was that he/she was supposed to stay at work till Friday and go away on weekends but maybe the employer will say 'I want you to stay Saturday and Sunday'. Then we draw their attention to the fact that, in order for the person to stay on Saturday and Sunday, the employer needs to pay extra to the person. If the person doesn't agree, the employer can't force him or her.

Acting as a mediator for payment and counselling on financial management

Acting as an intermediary and manager of the domestic worker's earnings was seen for both internal and international migrants but the reasons varied. Some brokers say they have started doing this to prevent employers from cheating the workers out of their pay:

On the other hand, brokers for international placements described their role as protecting workers from over-demanding family members. For instance, a broker for international placements, Rabat Ventures, offers to receive remittances from the migrant workers and send them on to their parents, possibly because the parents do not have access to bank accounts. However, they also advise workers to save money for themselves in preparation for their future return.

I tell them they can send money through me so that I can give it to their parents. I make sure that all monies that I receive are delivered to their families. I also tell the workers to save some of the monies because sometimes, when they remit the monies, the families spend everything and when the workers come back, they have nothing to live on. So sometimes I tell them that, when they are called to send home money, they should say that they are not paid. When they are able to save some money for themselves, after the two years, they can get money to come back when they are willing to come back.

More broadly, some employment brokers support workers in developing savings and remittance-sending habits in spite of the meagre nature of their earnings. These wide-ranging activities present brokers as the transmitters of life skills and enforcers of culturally constructed notions of reciprocity.

Facilitating the long-term plans of the domestic worker

Informal employment brokers also negotiate conditions that allow for the realisation of the long-term aspirations of domestic workers. For those who aspire to improve their educational levels or acquire some skills training, some brokers – particularly Types 3 and 4 – mediate working relations between employers and workers to obtain some flexibility that enables workers to earn a wage while pursuing their education. Alex sets it out quite clearly:

Yes, some of them come to look for work with the intention of going back to school. In this case, when the time approaches, I talk to her [domestic worker] madam and explain everything to her. I also tell the madam that, by the time she leaves, I will get someone to replace her.

Others, such as Alex, may help domestic workers to move up the career ladder through switching jobs.

Most of the girls learn how to prepare Indian or Lebanese dishes now and, as such, when they lose their jobs, I am able to find a new job for them with other residents or companies. They are able to earn high wages because they now know how to prepare Indian and Lebanese dishes which they learnt from previous employers. For instance, some start as cleaners or home helps and are able to learn how to cook. Within two or more years they leave to move to other places; some will actually tell you that they want to work for two years or that number of years. After two years, when they have learnt other things, I recommend them to other places – like in the Indian companies – as cooks and they get higher wages

The above discussion thus highlights the multiple and often contradictory roles played by the different categories of brokers, who facilitate both the migration and the placement of migrants into domestic work in Accra. This shows that brokers are an important element in the strategies of female migrants who move to Accra to work in domestic positions. It also indicates a complex plethora of social relations between recruitment agents, domestic workers and their employers, which often have mixed outcomes, sometimes working to entrench the *status quo* and sometimes providing opportunities for domestic workers.

Conclusions and policy implications

This research on the role of brokers in the labour market for migrants seeking domestic work shows the diversity of agencies and individuals involved in terms of their legal status, modes of operation and client base. While formal and fully registered agencies operate by the book and assess workers mainly on criteria such as qualifications and experience, informal agencies and individuals provide diverse services to migrant domestic workers, far beyond a simple transactional service; this can involve help with settling in urban areas, acting as a guarantor, mediating disputes, negotiating better wages and working conditions, and counselling the workers on the wise use of earnings. All these functions contribute to fulfilling the long-term goals of personal development for migrants. However, at the same time, they are an integral part of the system that keeps women and girls from poor rural backgrounds in rural areas in a subordinate position, working in conditions that are far from ideal.

The discussion highlights that recruitment agencies and brokers have become important facilitators of migration and that they play important multiple and often contradictory roles in the migration industry in Ghana. Although there are clear cases of exploitation, we also find several areas in which brokers work in the interests of migrants, thereby increasing the latter's bargaining power, enhancing the realisation of their self-development and allowing them to exercise agency in highly unequal power relations with employers, among others. Therefore uncritically labelling recruitment agencies and brokers purely as agents of

exploitation, and migrant domestic workers as victims without any agency, does not reflect the entire situation. As observed by Castle and Diarra (2003), and Whitehead and Hashim (2005), a simplistic categorisation of all brokers as traffickers, especially within the West African context, is problematic.

Our research reinforces the view that a simple analyses and the demonisation of brokers in domestic work are not a sound basis for formulating policies that would help to minimise the exploitation faced by domestic workers. Given the lack of opportunities for gainful employment faced by women and girls in mainly rural societies in Ghana, migration for domestic work can represent an important avenue for earning and change. Brokers are an important element in migrants' strategies to exercise agency, which they would probably otherwise struggle with, given the highly unequal power relationships they face at home and also at destination with employers. We therefore urge the need for a more-nuanced, more-differentiated understanding of the role and the practices of brokers and intermediaries as they navigate the multi-faceted space in the recruitment process for migrant domestic workers. This is especially important as efforts to regulate the domestic-work sector in Ghana intensify.

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