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Please, thank you and sorry – brokering migration and constructing identities for domestic work in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on interviews with migrant domestic workers and brokers in Accra-Tema, the capital city of Ghana, this paper throws light on the everyday practices of brokers in producing ideal workers for urban middle class and expatriate families as well as overseas employment. The authors map the different kinds of brokers who are involved in the selection and placement of domestic workers and show how they filter and represent workers to potential employers. Women and girls from the poorer north and Volta regions are positioned into precarious employment with an ever-present risk of abuse, non-payment and sexual exploitation. In the absence of effective state protection these workers depend heavily on brokers for negotiating better working conditions and switching jobs if they are in a difficult position. By examining such dynamics the authors demonstrate how the process of brokerage itself offers these workers opportunities for exercising agency that have the potential of setting them on an upward path. The authors conclude with calls for a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of the role and the practices of brokers to better inform Ghana's efforts to minimise exploitation of domestic workers.

KEYWORDS

Female domestic workers; migration; precarity; Ghana; labour agency

Introduction

This paper offers empirical evidence on the ambiguous relations between brokers and migrants in the process of placing domestic workers and shaping them into ideal workers for middle-class and expatriate families in urban Ghana as well as overseas employment. There is very limited information on the specificities of brokerage for international and internal migration in Ghana or indeed in Africa in general, and as such this is an important empirical contribution to the literature. 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. For women and girls from such backgrounds, low-paid and insecure domestic work in urban areas of the south is a critical avenue of employment. International migration for domestic work is also on the increase, especially to the Gulf countries. Migration and entry into domestic work is often facilitated and sustained by

an entire industry centred around recruitment agencies and their chains of brokers, but very little is known about their modes of operation and the impacts on migrants' welfare.

The growing importance of domestic work as a sector of employment in Ghana is connected to shifts in gender roles within relatively more wealthy families. Care work previously performed by female household members is being substituted 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 jobs to support their families and save money for themselves (LAWA-Ghana 2003; Tsikata 2009). Domestic workers are believed to be a substantial segment of the workforce; studies show that there is at least one domestic worker per urban family and the more wealthy, larger families may employ as many as six (LAWA-Ghana 2003). Census data show that roughly 0.6% of the economically active population was employed as domestic workers in 2010, a figure likely to be an underestimation, given the difference in official definitions of domestic work and domestic work not being formally recognised as work in Ghana (Awumbila et al. 2012). Domestic work has emerged as an important avenue of employment for migrant labour from other African and Asian countries for similar reasons. There has been a marked increase in the employment of foreign domestic workers in wealthy homes which has occurred as more women in Middle Eastern countries have entered the workforce and with changing cultural conceptions of their responsibilities (Manseau 2006, 28).

Employing a qualitative research approach, this paper examines the mediating role of brokers in facilitating the recruitment of rural migrants from the poorer regions as well as urban suburbs of Ghana into domestic work in Accra and abroad. It takes a deeper look at the nature of the social relations between migrants, employers and brokers and 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 show that recruitment agencies and brokers also play a range of multiple and often contradictory roles that straddle hazy boundaries between subjugation and empowerment. These activities can entrench patriarchal values and the subordination of female domestic workers, and also reinforce labour market segmentations where women from marginalised and poor ethnic groups are pushed into low-paid, precarious work. At the same time, brokers may also aid domestic workers to negotiate better terms and conditions of employment to meet their aspirations for personal development. Assisting migrants in this way helps to consolidate the reputation of brokers but also boosts their chances of survival in an increasingly competitive market. Brokers and migrants are therefore part of a system that contributes to growing circuits of labour mobility that benefit them both.

Conceptualising brokerage in migration

The 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 evidence from other parts of Africa that recruitment agencies, intermediaries and businesses involved in the migration industry can become an important part of risk management strategies of migrants (De Haas 2007). However, there is little empirical research on migration brokerage 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). Others have also highlighted the critical role of brokers in connecting the local and the global, the peripheral and the central, and the poor and the rich (Agunias 2013; Kern and Müller-Böker 2015). 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 examine how brokers manage the expectations of migrants looking for paid domestic work and employers and the role they play in co-constituting precarity together with employers and, in the case of young migrants, together with their parents.

Exploitation in domestic work

Much has been written about the specific vulnerabilities of domestic workers which arise from the intimacy and highly personalised relations among people (often women) from different backgrounds where boundaries of class and race are being established through a variety of control mechanisms. Common forms of control relate to the manner of dressing and whether this is 'provocative' or 'decent', the extent to which make-up is applied, subduing body language, enforcing silence and demanding servile behaviour. For example in Hong Kong, Filipina workers must dress and do their hair according to their employers' directives (Constable 1997; Anderson 2000). In more severe cases the employer may subject the worker to corporal punishment, restrictions on movement, control over communication, denial of personal time, scrutiny of sexuality and humiliating tasks which reflects the perception of their bodies as disposable, dirty and less human than their employers (Anderson 2000; de Santana Pinho 2015). Symbolic boundaries may also be drawn through enforcing inferior and cramped living quarters to protect the status of the family (Dickey 2000). Indeed the testimony of domestic workers in Ghanaian homes adds to this evidence.

Brokers' role in precarising migrant domestic workers

Rich accounts have recently emerged of the particular vulnerabilities of female domestic workers who migrate through brokers. For example, Fernandez's study of brokerage of migrant domestic workers from Ethiopia travelling to the Gulf over land routes illustrates other extreme forms of exploitation and precarisation such as being abandoned in the desert or being raped (Fernandez 2013, 828). Migrant domestic workers are clearly vulnerable to a variety of risks on account of the particularities of domestic work itself and also because they are often placed through brokers who are well placed to exploit them. However, rather than analysing the experiences of migrant domestic workers in Ghana through a risk and vulnerability lens, we invoke the concept of precarity as an analytical

tool. Louis Waite's conceptualisation of precarity and differentiation from risk and vulnerability helps us to apply a precarity lens to the situation observed in Ghana. She argues that unlike risk and vulnerability, precarity is useful in examining the structures of inequality that relegate certain groups of people to exploitative conditions, but at the same time it provides room for the possibility of workers resistance to such conditions.

... the socio-political framing and conceptual depth of the term precarity encapsulates both a condition and a point of mobilisation in response to that condition, whereas risk and vulnerability generally refer to just conditions. (Waite 2009, 421)

While we find Waite's ideas helpful we also note that the acts of resistance and negotiation that we observe in our case study are individual, opportunistic and not organised in the way that workers' movements might be. Not only that, as we discuss below, these individual acts may be undertaken with the help of a broker. The potential of such individual acts of resistance to transform the balance of power for domestic workers as a whole is unclear. But the role of the broker in acting as a conduit for information on bargaining strategies with employers has the potential to amplify their impact beyond the individual. Secondly, precarity can also help us to situate the experience of migrant domestic workers in the historical and institutional context in Ghana, where migrant domestic workers typically come from marginalised regions and ethnic groups (Tsikata 2009). As Paret and Gleeson (2016) argue,

the central significance of the precarity concept lies in the way in which it connects the micro and the macro, situating experiences of insecurity and vulnerability within historically and geographically specific contexts. (Paret and Gleeson 2016, 280)

Such a conceptualisation of precarity can be used to understand how gender and ethnic hierarchies intersect with the organisation of paid domestic work and working conditions inside homes in Ghana. As a concept, precarity is not new and has long been used to describe the casualisation of the workforce in post-Fordist and post-welfare economies (Bourdieu 1963; Standing 2011). Others have sought to understand wider unpredictability and precariousness of the human condition; Butler 2004 in the context of post 9/11 America and Ettliger 2007 who also described it as a generalised 'condition of vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict' (320). Recent scholarship has blurred these boundaries of 'labour' and 'life' due to the difficulties of separating them and recognising their mutually constitutive nature (Strauss 2017; Paret and Gleeson 2016; Neilson and Rossiter 2005).

In line with the focus of this special issue, our focus here is on examining whether and how brokers' activities of selection, placement and subjectivation are linked to the precarisation of domestic workers in Ghana. We are also interested in examining how brokers expand workers' agency and help them achieve their personal goals for development. Several thick accounts exist of the role of brokers in identity ascription and subjectivation through the practices they engage in to supply 'ideal' workers. For example Rodriguez and Schwenken 2013; Constable 1997 and Gardiner 2008 show how brokers perpetuate the production of the 'ideal' migrant domestic worker with qualities of deferential femininity, docility and subservience, so that she fits into specific labour-market niches at destination. Liang (2011) lists the stages in identity ascription, starting with the upgrading of skills, then the acquiring of a certain attitude and, thirdly, the essential ethics that are considered

appropriate by the employers for 'live-in maids'. These latter are trained to work very long days, obeying strict hierarchies, performing docilely and working under high pressure. There are marked similarities between the situation that Liang describes and what we encountered in Ghana.

Conversely, we also draw on insights from the interviews to show how domestic workers use brokers to challenge structures that keep them in positions of low-paid precarious work. As Constable (1997, 203) has noted, domestic workers are rarely passive victims of oppression and they do engage in strategies to fight back. Gamburd 2000 (121) makes similar observations in her research on the migration of women for domestic work from Sri Lanka. Like Spener (2009), we challenge portrayals of brokers and intermediaries purely as a 'migration business' (Salt and Stein 1997) and frame 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). Spener also observes that profit-centred and exploitation-focused 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). In the coming pages, we delve deeper into the issue of precarity and the production of the ideal internal and international female domestic migrant worker in the Ghanaian context to examine the different kinds of brokerage arrangements, where and how precarity is created and the role of brokers and other actors in that.

Research methodology

The study was conducted in Accra-Tema, the capital city of Ghana, because it is the most important migration destination for poor migrants from the north providing a good setting for understanding migrant-broker relations. Given the objective of delving deeper into the nature of this relationship, a qualitative research approach was chosen which would enable a deeper understanding of the experiences and behaviours of research participants (Creswell 2009). The main method of data collection was in-depth interviews; altogether 76 respondents were interviewed, made up of 23 formal and informal brokers and intermediaries of various categories, 24 domestic workers, 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 for information on the regulatory framework of the industry. Snowballing was used to select brokers, employers and domestic workers. The limitations of snowballing, particularly the tendency to select only actors in similar networks (see Bryman 2012), were addressed by selecting several entry points to ensure variety in the categories of respondents. For instance, the criteria considered in selecting brokers include the mode of registration, the brokers' possession of a licence and the socio-demographic characteristics of the persons recruited. Employers were selected in such a way in order to ensure that they came from different backgrounds in terms of educational level, occupation, type of intermediary used and type of contract. Similarly, the criteria followed to select domestic workers included socio-demographic characteristics, type of work, mode of recruitment, duration of service, number of employers worked for and contract status (verbal or written).

Typology of brokers

A multiplicity of actors are involved in the recruitment of domestic workers for internal and external placement. Brokers differ in terms of their adherence to state regulations and, in particular, to registration/licencing stipulations, administrative structures, recruitment processes used, motivations, fees charged and contract arrangements. As Lindquist (2012) notes, almost anyone with the ability to connect people from different cultures and inspire trust in their promise to find them a job can become a broker. Based on our empirical findings, we loosely classify brokers into three different types, while at the same time recognising that boundaries can be blurred and one type of broker may depend on another. Furthermore, the typology we offer below presents categories that are not exclusive, i.e. the roles between them may overlap and an individual may inhabit more than one of these categories. Even those brokers who are registered with government and seemingly 'above board' with their operations depend on local brokers who work completely outside the government system of regulations.

We classify Type 1 brokers as formal fully registered recruitment agencies, who have registered their business with the Registrar General's Department, and have a licence to operate from the Labour Department. Type 1 brokers function like an employment exchange, advertising through formal channels, taking potential workers through formal registration processes, including a formal interview. They tend to deal with more skilled applicants, preferably those with some level of education (usually high school and above) and work experience. They mostly supply workers to the Ghanaian upper and middle class, expatriates, companies and overseas placements. They ostensibly operate within the confines of the law, including adhering to the minimum work age limit of 18 years. Most of them provide training in domestic skills. However, they may rely on other brokers, who operate in an informal way (Type 3) to scout for workers if they need to boost the 'supply' of workers.

We classify Type 2 brokers as semi-formal partially registered agencies. These are brokers registered with the Registrar General's Department but do not have a licence to operate from the Labour Department. Type 2 brokers also 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. However, formal education is less important, although it may be required for specific employers. The recruitment process is less formal as well, with most workers being recruited through word of mouth. For example, the spokesperson for the Leroy Recruitment Agency, which recruits mostly for middle- and upper-income families in Accra, indicated that she recruits through recommendations from domestic workers she had placed in jobs before. On the other hand, Broadway Initiative Limited, an agency based in Nima, (a low-income area in Accra) recruits domestic workers, for both internal and external placement.

Type 3 brokers cover a wide group of individual informal recruiters and their sub-agents. They are not registered with the Registrar General's Department nor possess a licence to operate from the Labour Department. This category also includes networks of families and friends who recommend family members for recruitment. Type 3 brokers operate within the confines of informality and non-regulation and operate often as interlocutors for migrants, their families and prospective employers. They tend to recruit mainly from rural areas, matching workers to employers' requirements with

an emphasis on subservient behaviour, honesty and 'decent' character. Their 'informality' and therefore accessibility makes them attractive to a majority of domestic workers as well as employers.

As per our typology above, Type 1 brokers are fully compliant with government regulations and are mediating relations between the state, the migrants and employers. Partially registered Type 2 brokers mainly connect migrants and employers; and Type 3 brokers who are mainly unregistered and unregulated often act as the link between migrants, their families and prospective employers.

Formal labour-recruitment requirements in Ghana are stringent in terms of the registration and acquisition of a licence to operate. For instance, the Labour Act of 2003 (Act 651, Article 7) and the Legislative Instrument of 2007 (LI 1833) both prohibit agencies from recruiting labour, whether for internal or external placement, without a licence. Despite these legal provisions, a large number of brokers in Ghana are only registered with the Registrar General's Department, but without having obtained the appropriate licence from the Labour Department to operate or have neither registration nor licence to operate. Non-compliance is ostensibly due to the length of time it takes to register a company, the bureaucratic hurdles in the form of absentee officials and the demands for bribes which delay registration. However, it is possible that not being registered opens up possibilities for employing under 18 years of age who are in much demand in Ghanaian middle-class families. A key point of differentiation is that while for Type 1 brokers' responsibility is limited mainly to the recruitment/placement, Type 2 and 3 brokers maintain varying degrees of responsibility for the welfare of the migrant domestic worker even after placement. This link between the broker and worker is especially strong in Type 3 agencies and includes providing guidance during the recruitment, transit and placement process, character references for employers, advising on money management, helping with career progression and long-term aspirations. Although we identify these three typologies, we focus at length in this paper on Type 2 and 3 brokers, as the majority of domestic workers tended to use these brokers.

There has been a sharp rise in the number of Type 1 and 2 agencies from only 3 in the mid-2000s to nearly 200 that recruit domestically and another 19 that recruit for employers abroad as of 2015 (Labour Department 2015). This indicates a growing market at the higher end that caters to skilled migrants for international clients as well as wealthy or corporate employers in the city. However, they also rely on Type 3 brokers to find them clients from hard-to-reach informal settlements in urban areas. Both Type 1 and 2 prefer urban workers and were often reluctant to engage new arrivals from rural areas – whom they refer to as 'village people'. They limited themselves to producing ideal migrants for wealthy Ghanaians and international clients. The task of training and placing rural women and girls who were yet uninitiated into urban ways of conducting themselves was left to Type 3 brokers.

Recruitment processes for the informal brokers (Type 3) are more informal, grounded in the places and spaces of everyday life. Advertising is mainly through word of mouth, in places of worship (mosques and churches) and via previously placed domestic workers. These brokers also employ sub-agents who scout rural areas for potential workers. Informal agents recruit from a wider pool of potential workers including those under 18 years of age and we found that this is one of the main reasons that they survive in the labour market despite Government's efforts to delegitimise them. For some such as the Hammani

agency, which has an overtly Christian ethos, this was a source of pride and as their representative told us that they are happy to recruit girls who are under the age of 18 and show them a ‘decent and honourable’ way of making a living. Hammani seeks to mould the girls’ behaviour to be appropriate for teenage girls. The agency was started in one of the Pentecostal churches by a female church member who claims her ‘calling’ was to help the poor, especially the elderly, orphans and young women who could not make it in life. Being completely unregistered, Hammani is able to recruit and place under 18 years of age.

Contrary to the case of Hammani, is the case of Alex an individual broker whom we classify as a Type 3 broker. He works as a security guard for an expatriate enclave and also has a side business as a broker for migrants from rural areas. The business grew from occasional requests from his employers to find them ‘unspoilt and innocent’ maid from the village and has now become a large, established 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. He also relies on personal recommendations from employers who have used his services. 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 describes his business as an organisation that serves the poor. He says that he will help girls from disadvantaged backgrounds find jobs in the city and act as a guarantor (more on this below) for them even if they do not pay him. His motivations are clearly morally ambiguous and even if no money is exchanged immediately as is the case with Alex and his clients, the relationship and the claims for reciprocation that might be called on at a later date are clearly understood by both parties. Osella and Osella (2009) note a similar ambiguity in patronage underlying brokerage arrangements in India. There may even be no money exchange at all and the only payment is in kind by recognising the standing of the broker as socially powerful and publicly displaying this recognition to others in the community (De Neve 2014).

It was evident from the interviews with domestic workers that many from rural areas had migrated through informal brokers and trusted them to find the best deal for them as the case below illustrates.

I went to see a woman called Grandmother, she is the aunty of the man I was to work for. She easily gets jobs for people. My friend gave her number to me. (Cynthia, 29, domestic worker)

I called John and he asked me to come. When we met, he asked me what job I wanted and I said house help. He explained to me that for Ghanaian homes, many domestic workers do general work. And so he found out from me if I would take such jobs. He also told me that foreigners employ many domestic workers for the different types of jobs. They could have a nanny, cleaner and a cook in the same house. After the explanation, I then indicated my preference. He sent me to the house himself. But I wasn’t part of the salary negotiation. Usually if the salary is not good, he would find another place for you. (Livia, 40, domestic worker)

We discuss below the way in which brokers co-create precarity while constructing ideal female domestic workers for work in the city or abroad.

Constructing ‘good’ girls for urban work

Types 2 brokers play a critical role in placing girls from poor backgrounds in domestic work among wealthy families in the city. Leroy Recruitment Agency which seems to

work exclusively with new arrivals in the city sees it as their responsibility to ensure that the appearance and behaviour of workers meet the expectations of the employers. Their emphasis is on stripping the girls of their ethnic identity and village ways and recasting them into urban working-class girls.

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', '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.

They also instil the idea that the girls should not have time of their own and surrender themselves to the job.

We don't encourage that (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?

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*', he explains.

Brokers are also aware of strong preferences among employers related to ethnicity; they may ask women to suppress their ethnic identities and behaviour to find a job, but they also play to stereotypes related to ethnic identities when they look for workers. 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?

Dela, a 23-year-old migrant from Biriwa, a fishing and farming town in the coastal district of Mfantseman provides testimony on such discriminatory attitudes. She describes how her employer tells her to speak in her (the employer's) language and that 'when I speak in my native language it shows a sign of disrespect.' Yet it is invariably girls belonging to historically disadvantaged communities that urban middle-class employers seek as they can invoke long-established cultural hierarchies to assert their superiority. The most sought after are 'untainted' or inexperienced girls who have no social networks or knowledge of their rights and support systems in the city so that they cannot argue back and escape the treatment that is being meted out to them. In fact, it is the ability to supply such workers that makes informal brokers so attractive to employers as one of the interviews show.

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 informal recommendations to the agency recruits.

Character references

Obtaining character references thus becomes critical for finding a job as a domestic worker. This is especially important for girls who leave their home without the permission of their guardians. The broker vouches for the girl's/woman's 'character' by assuring the employer that she is not a thief and will not seek sexual liaisons with the man of the house, that she is clean, obedient and hardworking. In doing so he is speaking to widely held beliefs among urban middle-class Ghanaians about the bodily attributes and behaviours of the poor, especially those who belong to ethnic groups from the northern and Volta regions of the country. As noted at the start of the paper, constructing domestic workers in ways that emphasise their inferiority and their bodies as promiscuous and sources of labour that can be exploited has been documented in research from other parts of the world (De Santana Pinho; Anderson 2000).

Placing into exploitation

While brokers insisted that they wanted to protect their wards against exploitation, their role in placing women and girls in highly exploitative work arrangements and thus playing a key role in reproducing structures of inequality was evident. Interviews with domestic workers provide disturbing details of the level of servitude and limits to freedom that they experience. Cynthia, a teenaged worker, summed up her day's work, which was typical of many of the live-in workers we interviewed.

I iron her bedsheet and scrub her bathroom every day. I do the same in her children's rooms. We change the sheets and towels in the house every Monday. When the cook is not around I take over the cooking. I make sure the children are fed as well as their parents. I remove and scrub the sun screen on their sliding doors and windows every two weeks. I machine wash the clothes of the children and iron afterwards. I wash her panties and iron as well. I also wash her bras. ... I don't have specific hours of work. As I said earlier on I can work the whole day and close at dawn. If I am lucky and they go out around 7 or 8, I know they will be back after 12 pm so I can go and sleep. Before I leave I have to sweep and mop the kitchen, check if all the windows and doors were locked.

After meals, she will not allow me to leave to my room. She claims she might need something so I have to sit and wait. When its 10 pm I go and ask if she will need my assistance; she normally asks me to send water to her husband or prepare some green tea for her. When we organize parties we do not sleep early, that is when I said we sleep after 3 am.

The precarity created by limits on freedom, long hours and backbreaking work was compounded by constant threats of dismissal. This would be terrifying for workers with few sources of support in the city. Another domestic worker described how she was always presumed to be the thief if anything went missing and how she lived in constant fear of being handed over to the police or being fired.

She wrongfully accused me of stealing her dollars which she had kept in her purse. Before this incident she was always complaining of her things going missing. When this happens I have to run and help her search for the item. She usually says I am the only stranger in the house because the rest of her house members will not do that. She did not have any idea about her children's smoking (marijuana) habit. The children invite their other affluent friends to the house to smoke, it is likely they stole the money. Some other times, she would not carefully search the item before announcing it is missing. She usually finds them later on; sometimes she tells me other times she keeps it to herself.

Such strategies reinforce the totality of the power the employer has over the body and survival of the worker. A bad reference from an employer can adversely impact the possibility of finding another job. But here too as we discuss later in the paper, brokers can be an important source of support and assist workers to escape situations of extreme control and degrading treatment.

Co-creating precarity with parents

Ironically the worst cases of precarisation were seen when parents used the services of brokers to place very young girls in work. This was seen most often in extremely poor families, where single women were struggling to feed their children or where the father had remarried and there was conflict between stepmothers and daughters. Often the girls are persuaded by their parents to go to the city on the promise of continuing with their education and earning money for themselves. But the tragic accounts below show that their employment conditions are extremely exploitative and promises are rarely kept.

At the age of 13, Kay was told to migrate to Accra by her parents through a broker named Aunty Aba (Type 3). Aunty Aba found a family through another broker, Sister Evelyn. *I knew I was going to continue my education. So I told my mother that I will go to school (in Accra). I also told my mother that if everything will be okay then I will go. She said that the sister who is taking me will take care of me. When I came I took only few clothes. The sister asked me why I took only few clothes. I told her that my mother said I should take few things so they will buy new things for me.* But far from being treated well, she was subjected to cruel treatment on a regular basis, beaten for the slightest reason.

Sometimes when I do something bad, then the madam will slap me [crying]. If she sends me, and I come back and I don't bring the right thing, she slaps me. .. There was a day I went to bath, when I finished bathing, there was blood in the bath and I didn't know. She called me and ask why. By the time I explain, she slapped me. Her precarious situation is compounded by the lack of support from her family. *If I report to my daddy (employer's husband), he will say that it is my fault. And the woman tells the man to tell my father to come and take me away. So my father came and pleaded with them and they took me back.*

The inability of the parents to support the girl and their extreme poverty created the conditions for such extreme exploitation. Even in our small sample, there were several such cases where desperately poor parents see domestic work in city as one of the few 'decent' jobs where their child will be fed and housed. It is not clear from the interviews whether and how much the brokers were paid or what their incentives were for acting in this way. It was also not clear whether the earnings from the worker were being sent to the parents. Some girls were often told that their earnings were being saved for them and

would be given to them at the end of their employment, but this sometimes did not happen and became source of conflict between the domestic worker and the employer. The collusion between brokers and the girls' families created a situation of precarity which could, if left unchallenged, trap the girls in poverty and dependency for the rest of their lives. Next, we discuss the dynamics of recruitment for international migration which has grown by all accounts and has become a source of concern for the government due to reports of maltreatment.¹ The accounts below show the differences in which recruitment for international and internal migrants differs and how both kinds of brokers are involved in different kinds of identity formation and work with a different set of aspiring migrants.

Producing the good international migrant

Recruitment for international migration for domestic work appeared to take place in certain pockets of low-income settlements in Accra where brokers specialising in international migration were active. It was difficult to determine from the interviews whether the agents were operating completely outside the formal system by linking up directly with other brokers in the Gulf. They recruit mainly urban residents, either those who have always been in the city or those who have been there for a number of years. Those with experience of working for expatriates in the city are in great demand. This preference reflected brokers' conceptualisation of what employers want in terms of behaviour and knowledge of the workings of wealthy families. Broadway, a Type 2 agency in the informal settlement of Nima, plays an active role in selecting and training women for employment in Gulf countries. They select workers based on requirements communicated to them by brokers in destination countries who have an understanding of 'what Arabs want' (cf Osella 2014). Communication technologies, such as Skype and Whatsapp, have made it possible to tailor the 'production' and 'supply' of workers to match the requirements of employers. Although the agency claims to perform a social service and invokes a moral obligation to their clients, the commodification of workers and the near-absence of a moral sense of responsibility is evident from this statement:

So it is like exchange by barter. We recruit them here, we give them to our colleagues over there and they too finalise their activity by sending them to the families. ... You send them from here, you take them to the office and the office distributes them.

They check credentials, train and counsel migrants about working norms at destination before departure. The agency prides itself for supplying good workers and also for being a respectable representative of the country. Agencies like Broadway epitomise neo-liberal ideologies of the 'good' migrant as the one who prioritises servitude over their own personal freedom and remits money back for the good of the country.

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.

Instilling such rules into the minds of women prepared them for employment in a context where domestic workers enjoy few rights and liberties and the risk of abuse is high. As Manseau (2006) observes workers are vulnerable to exploitation by employers,

government officials and recruiters through various means including financial, physical and sexual exploitation. Heavy borrowing to pay brokers may place them in debt which forces them to enter debt bondage and slave-like working conditions. Furthermore, the working conditions inside homes have been compared to prisons because of the isolation and absence of legal protection and social networks (Manseau 2006, 33). The denial of rights was clear from the interviews. A 42-year-old Jani changed her mind about migrating when she heard from her friend how she had been deceived by brokers about the conditions at destination.

The report from my friend was a bad one so I changed my mind about going ... When my friend got there she told me that after about 2 to 3 months they told her they will pay an amount equivalent to 500 cedis as against the 1,100 cedis equivalent promised. They took her passport and her phone. The phone is given to her only on Sundays.

Despite such reports and the undeniable role of brokers in positioning migrants in exploitative and precarious working conditions, agencies like Broadway appear to be thriving. This is symptomatic of a context where women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds are not adequately protected against exploitation from unscrupulous agencies and not provided with meaningful employment within the country.

Offering protection in the city

The narrative also indicated ways in which brokers might help migrants to further their own agendas. Brokers like Alex help new arrivals in the city by providing them with a place to stay and while this could be theorised as part of the process of recruitment where he has the power and control, it can also be seen as protection against risks in the city. 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.

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.

Switching jobs, negotiating working conditions, amplifying agency

Alex also helps domestic workers to switch jobs to improve their wages and working conditions. He channels information about job availability and the bargaining strategies that other workers have used with his help or with the help of other brokers known to him. Through such activities Alex and brokers like him are supporting and perhaps amplifying individual acts of resistance and bargaining.

One domestic worker explained how this works. *I went to work with some Indians at Tesano. One day she told me I stole egg and I told her in my tradition, we do not steal egg. Even though I was not cooking, she accused me of stealing her tomatoes. I complained that I did not like the things she was accusing me of. Sometimes, I could be in the kitchen and she would go to my room and ransack everything saying she was looking for missing items. I*

told Mr Smith and he advised me to cope with it until he finds a different job for me. So he got another job for me at Kokomlemlé (Nao, 28 year old domestic worker).

Alex also helps workers move on to better jobs or get a 'promotion' He says:

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. 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.

Arguably this does have the potential to change the terms of employment for domestic workers as a whole if other brokers are involved in similar activities. Recall that Alex's motivations to enter brokerage were a combination of profit and a reaffirmation of his standing and reputation as a 'big' and 'generous' man in the city. The help that he offers his clients reflect this. Additionally he also, through his chains of sub-agents, reassures the parents of the girls that he will ensure that they send remittances home. By offering migrants with support in the city and parents with assurances of their safety and remitting, he can demonstrate and perform his role of being a patron who should command respect. Other brokers offered to mediate discussions on working conditions and wages. Phedelis Plus Recruitment Agency provides an example of the importance of recruitment agencies in negotiating and ensuring that the employee receives reasonable wages for their experience, age and the amount of work to be performed:

Let's take for instance you want someone around 40 years to do house chores and take care of your children. At that age, for the person to be paid 300 Cedis is not fair. Or assuming you wanted someone with 4 years experience or more, you can't pay that person a meagre salary. So we actually negotiate well to get fair payment for them. If we do not do the negotiation well, sometimes, the workers come back to us complaining that the salary is not good compared to the kind of work they are doing.

Another area where recruitment agencies played a key facilitation role was in the area of work conditions and specifically with the issue of 'off days'. 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 stated by Phedelis Plus agency,

Normally we tell the employers to be flexible. If the person is going for an off day you have to allow him/her. If you won't allow them then you have to pay some allowance to him. So we do negotiate between the employer and the workers

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 that in order for the person to stay on Saturday and Sunday, you need to pay extra to the person. If the person doesn't agree, you can't force him or her.

This was also seen most often among brokers working with new arrivals from the village who (according to the brokers) were not fully aware of their 'market value'. Despite the commodification that this implies, the brokers were prepared to negotiate on behalf of their wards the protection of whom was their duty, they felt. By performing the role of protector in this way, brokers were able to enhance their own social standing.

There was some evidence that the power dynamics between workers and brokers did change over time. While this was to be expected as workers became more experienced,

better connected and knowledgeable about ways in which they could bargain with their employers, there were aspects of this that were aided by brokers. Those at the top end of the market with qualifications and job experience and deemed to be capable of taking on the best jobs can 'call the shots' as the conversation with the Director of Leroy Business Solutions (a Type 2 agent) shows:

She has junior high school qualifications. She's very enlightened, extremely enlightened and she told me clear-cut 'Madam, I am not interested in any salary under 500Ghs (£98.04)'. And you know that she's got what it takes to do the job. She's got good references. In fact some of the staff call the shots.

Conclusions

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. 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.

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. This corroborates Lindquist's (2012) broadening of the notion of who can act as a broker. Fully registered agencies operate by the book and assess workers mainly on formal qualifications and experience. On the other hand, informal agencies and individuals are heavily involved in moulding prospective workers to fill specific niches in the labour market abroad as well as within the country which demand subservient, docile, polite, hardworking and asexual beings. As our title suggests, by training domestic workers to say 'Please, Thank You and Sorry', brokers are involved, to varying degrees, in subjectivation as they train workers to suppress their own identities and behaviour and conform to the expected behaviour of a subservient, polite, docile class of domestic workers in urban areas. Brokers thus play a key role in the production of the 'ideal migrant'.

The accounts of working conditions show the exploitation that is inherent in domestic work spaces and the relations that define them. Employers use a variety of tactics to control and humiliate workers, and remind them of the precarity of their existence through threats of termination of the arrangement. Brokers are thus an integral part of the system that keeps women and girls from poor rural backgrounds in rural areas in precarious subordinate positions. On the flip side, informal brokers provide other services such as help with settling in urban areas, mediating disputes, negotiating better wages and working conditions, switching jobs and counselling the workers on the wise use of earnings. These functions contribute to fulfilling the long-term goals of personal development for migrants. 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.

Note

1. Joint statement issued by several ministries and the International Organization for Migration, for International Migrants Day in 2016. https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/press_release/file/IOM-Joint-Statement-14-Dec-2016.pdf.

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