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An exploration of work-related experiences of domestic workers in Accra, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study explored work-related lived experiences of domestic workers in the Ghanaian context. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 domestic workers in Accra to develop insights into how various characteristics associated with domestic workers' jobs shape their psychological well-being and how they thrive in the face of their experiences. The study revealed that domestic workers face exploitation and abuse, have no written formal work contracts, and enter that kind of work as a means to addressing existential needs. It was further observed that the work situations of domestic workers expose them to potential psychological distress, and many of them use emotion regulation to cope with abuse and exploitation on the job. However, the study also found evidence that domestic workers derive satisfaction from their job when they are given fair employment conditions. These findings suggest the need for policies and interventions targeted at providing psychosocial support and regulating the domestic work sector to safeguard the health and wellbeing of domestic workers.

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of individuals with significant caregiving responsibilities are entering the labor market and engaging in full-time work (Cipollone, Vallanti, & Patacchini, 2014; Mokomane, 2014). In contexts like Ghana where there is a lack of formal family support services, this labor market trend has created a situation in which household labor is increasingly outsourced to domestic workers (Awumbila, Teye, & Yaro, 2017a; Pla-Julián, 2014). In tandem with this development, increased rural-urban and international migration as well as lack of formal employment opportunities have pushed many individuals, especially migrants, into the informal economy in which domestic work presents as a major source of employment (Awumbila, Teye, & Yaro, 2017b; Kedir & Rodgers, 2018; van Der Ham, Ujano-Batangan, Ignacio, & Wolffers, 2014). Collectively, these

factors have contributed to a significant expansion in the domestic work sector over the past two decades. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the estimated number of domestic workers has doubled over the past two decades, increasing from 33 million in 1995 to 67 million in 2015 (ILO, 2016, 2017). In Ghana, it is estimated that domestic workers constitute approximately 0.5 per cent of the workforce (Ghana Statistical Service, 2016).

The ILO defines *domestic work* as “work performed in or for a household or households” and a *domestic worker* as “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship” (ILO, 2011, p. 4). Although the specific roles performed by domestic workers vary across contexts, some of their main roles often include cleaning, cooking, and caring for children, the sick and older members of a household. In some contexts, domestic workers may also be involved in secondary roles such as gardening and trading (Adom-Asamoah, Baah-Ennumh, & Yeboah, 2016). Live-in domestic workers in particular spend a considerable amount of their daily hours with their employers and thus share their lives with them (Iecovich, 2011). Although domestic work is done by both men and women in most countries, domestic workers are predominantly female, and are often from economically deprived households or regions (Tsikata, 2011).

A burgeoning stream of research has accumulated over the past two decades that focuses on the employment conditions and psychological experiences of domestic workers in different contexts. Instances of poor living conditions, mistreatment, abuse, and violence have been reported among domestic workers in several studies (e.g., Akurang-Parry, 2010; Tariq, Shaikh, & Musharaf, 2020; Tsikata, 2009). Tsikata (2009) noted that domestic workers are vulnerable to the extent that they lack the voice and will to talk about or report violence against them. The emotional needs of domestic helpers are often overlooked (Gorbán & Tizziani, 2014); hence, domestic workers often feel dehumanized and worthless because they lack a sense of belonging (Mkandawire-Valhmu, 2010). These experiences can undermine the mental health of domestic workers. However, evidence of positive experiences has also been reported in a few studies among domestic workers. Focusing mostly on job satisfaction, these studies suggest that the presence of fair employment conditions and a guarantee of basic rights are important antecedents of domestic workers’ satisfaction with their jobs (e.g., Bai, Kwok, Chan, & Ho, 2013; Baldassar, Ferrero, & Portis, 2017; Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2019; Iecovich, 2011).

In Ghana, even though domestic work is increasingly recognized as an important segment of the informal economy (Tsikata, 2009), literature on the plight of domestic workers is sparse. The few studies that exist have focused predominantly on how legal frameworks governing employment in

Ghana impact the regulation and organization of domestic work (e.g., Tsikata, 2009, 2011, 2018). Tsikata (2018, p. 2) argued that “the regulatory regimes for domestic work in Ghana have been deficient,” as domestic workers are largely excluded from many statutory provisions. Like most employees in Ghana’s informal sector, domestic workers are denied guarantees such as fixed wages, specified working times, and leave periods (Tsikata, 2011). The passage of the ILO Convention 189 instigated efforts from various stakeholders toward the ratification of the convention in Ghana. These efforts contributed to the passage of the Labor (Domestic Workers’) Regulations, 2020 (L.I. 2408), which came into force in July 2020. Among other things, L.I. 2408 guarantees a minimum wage for domestic workers and requires that employers enter into a written employment contract with domestic workers. Although this new legislation signals a shift toward an improvement in the governance framework for the regulation of the domestic work sector in Ghana, its impact on the plight of domestic workers in the country remains to be known. Other studies have also focused on the employment conditions of domestic workers. These studies suggest that domestic workers in Ghana are mostly paid below the national minimum wage and are exposed to adverse working conditions including long working hours, work overload, abuse, and harassment (Akurang-Parry, 2010; Awumbila et al., 2017a, 2017b).

The existing evidence paints a gloomy picture of the domestic work sector in Ghana, and the prevalence of key predictors of psychological distress such as harassment, abuse, and exploitation should be a cause for concern among stakeholders. Although extant research has informed our understanding of the nature of domestic work in the Ghanaian context, they mostly focused on the conditions of employment for domestic workers. Consequently, they provide little insight into how the employment conditions of domestic workers impact their psychological well-being. The limited scientific insights into the psychological experiences of domestic workers in Ghana may undermine mental health and assistance intervention for workers in the sector. The present study therefore examined the lived experiences of domestic workers in Ghana. Specifically, the study examined motivations and employment conditions as well as psychological experiences and coping strategies of domestic workers in the Ghanaian context.

The study draws on the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Nachreiner, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2001), an occupational stress theory that attempts to explain how certain job characteristics shape employees’ well-being and job outcomes. The theory suggests that employee well-being and job outcomes are shaped by the interplay of job demands and resources. Excessive job demands are assumed to result in burnout, health deterioration and negative work outcomes, whereas job

resources engender positive work outcomes by fostering growth and development and buffering the effect of job demands. The present study contributes to literature by demonstrating how various characteristics, particularly demands and resources, associated with domestic workers' jobs shape their psychological well-being and how they thrive in the face of their experiences. An understanding of aspects of domestic workers' jobs that undermine their well-being or foster their personal growth and development would enable institutions to better support and contribute to better working environments for domestic workers.

Theoretical background and literature review

At the heart of the JD-R theory is the assumption that two categories of job characteristics influence employees' well-being: job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are defined as the "physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Job demands include aspects such as work overload, emotional demands, role conflict, and time pressure (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Gauche, de Beer, & Brink, 2017a). Crawford, LePine, and Rich (2010) expanded the definition of job demands by distinguishing between challenge and hindrance job demands. They explained that challenge job demands (e.g., heavy workload, time pressure, and high job responsibilities) may be perceived as opportunities for personal growth and mastery, whereas hindrance job demands (e.g., role conflict and harassment) may be perceived as having the potential to undermine personal growth and mastery. In contrast to demands, job resources include those "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that may [...] be functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands and its related costs, or stimulate personal growth and development" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501).

Two psychological processes are assumed to link job demands and resources to employee well-being: a health-impairment process and a motivational process (Demerouti et al., 2001). On the one hand, the health impairment process links job demands to employee well-being via exhaustion, which is defined as feelings of being used up due to prolonged exposure to intense physical, cognitive and emotional demands of the job (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Specifically, this process suggests that chronic job demands deplete employees' energy, leading to feelings of exhaustion and job strain, which undermine employees' psychological well-being and job outcomes. On the other hand, the motivational process links job resources to employee well-being via work engagement, defined as a state

of fulfillment that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). The motivational process suggests that by being instrumental to achievement of work goals and fostering employees' growth, learning, and development, job resources may enhance one's engagement and work performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Crawford et al., 2010). Job resources may also buffer the influence of job demands thereby reducing the impact of high demands on job strain and exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

In an attempt to expand the JD-R theory, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2007) introduced the concept of *personal resources*, which they argued have similar motivational potential to job resources. They described personal resources as "aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency and refer to individuals' sense of their ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully" (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007, p. 124–125). Individual characteristics that reflect positive self-evaluations such as self-efficacy, organization-based self-esteem, optimism, hope, and various coping styles have commonly been studied as personal resources (Airila et al., 2014; Gauche, De Beer, & Brink, 2017b; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). By enabling individuals to resist stress, it is assumed that personal resources have the potential to contribute to positive individual and organizational outcomes (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

A large body of research has examined aspects of the JD-R theory across different occupations. In line with the health impairment process, a number of studies have associated high job demands with burnout, mental health problems, and undesirable organizational outcomes (e.g., Ângelo & Chambel, 2015; de Beer, Pienaar, & Rothmann, 2016; Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009; Lesener, Gusy, & Wolter, 2019; Mudrak et al., 2018). For instance, using a three-way longitudinal approach, de Beer et al. (2016) found that work overload predicted burnout, which in turn resulted in psychological problems. Likewise, among a sample of university faculty, Mudrak et al. (2018) found that job insecurity, work-family conflict, and quantitative job demands were associated with high job stress, which resulted in lower job satisfaction. Similarly, in accordance with the motivational process, several studies have shown that job resources have a direct positive impact on work engagement (e.g., Ângelo & Chambel, 2015; Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2014; Lesener et al., 2019) and that work engagement has beneficial influence on employee psychological health and organizational outcomes (e.g., Airila et al., 2014; Upadaya, Vartiainen, & Salmela-Aro, 2016). For instance, based on a two-wave longitudinal data, Airila et al. (2014) demonstrated that job resources and self-esteem were associated with employees' ability to work after one year, and that this relationship was mediated by work engagement.

Although, to the best of our knowledge, the JD-R theory has not been applied in studies on domestic workers, aspects of domestic workers' job characteristics can be conceptualized as demands and resources. Accordingly, previous studies on domestic workers have linked experiences of stress, abuse, and stigma to adverse mental health outcomes. Utilizing a qualitative approach, Heng et al. (2019) found that inadequate rest due to excessive job demands as well as lack of social support underpinned experiences of stress inherent in caring for older people among foreign domestic workers in Singapore. In a similar study that utilized a qualitative approach, Hall, Garabiles, and Latkin (2019) found that poor working conditions marked by abuse by employers, among others, were key underlying factors in reports of physical and mental health problems among Filipino domestic workers in China. In an earlier study, Bosmans et al. (2016) found that stigma associated with domestic work resulted in poor mental well-being. Other studies suggest that symptoms of depression, anxiety, and acute stress disorders are high among domestic workers (e.g., Lau, Cheng, Chow, Ungvari, & Leung, 2009; Malhotra, Malhotra, Østbye, Matchar, & Chan, 2012; Malhotra et al., 2013).

In contrast to the above studies, some studies suggest that aspects of domestic workers' jobs that may be conceptualized as resources have beneficial influence on their job satisfaction. For instance, income has been found to be an important determinant of domestic workers' job satisfaction (e.g., Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2019). Specifically, Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi (2019) reported that domestic workers who received higher wages were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs. Other studies have also found that job characteristics such as decision autonomy, job variety and social support; personal characteristics such as domestic workers' self-efficacy; and the quality of relationship between domestic workers and employers have positive influences on job satisfaction and life satisfaction (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Baldassar et al., 2017; Iecovich, 2011; Leung & Tang, 2018). Moreover, the meanings domestic workers derive from their experiences on the job also constitute an important determinant of their satisfaction. Chowdhury and Gutman (2012) found that elder care workers in Canada demonstrated overwhelming satisfaction with their job because they perceived their services "to be rewarding in the sense of giving to others, being a learning experience, enjoyable, a challenging experience, and a practical career move" (p. 237).

Methods

Research approach

A qualitative description approach was adopted in this study. According to Sandelowski (2000, p. 336), qualitative description entails a "comprehensive

Table 1. Details of participants in the study.

Participant no.	Gender	Age	Religion	Marital status	Education	Job tenure	Living arrangement	Form of remuneration
1	Male	23	Christian	Single	J.H.S	3 years	Live-in	Apprenticeship
2	Female	30	Muslim	Single	J.H.S	4 years	Live-in	Cash
3	Female	20	Christian	Single	J.H.S	3 years	Live-in	Apprenticeship
4	Female	18	Christian	Single	J.H.S	2 years	Live-in	School
5	Male	18	Christian	Single	J.H.S	4 years	Live-in	Allowance/ school
6	Male	26	Christian	Single	S.H.S	4 months	Live-in	Cash
7	Female	26	Christian	Single	S.H.S	6 years	Live-in	School
8	Female	18	Christian	Single	J.H.S	1 year	Live-in	Apprenticeship
9	Female	37	Christian	Single	J.H.S	2 years	Live-in	Cash
10	Female	33	Muslim	Single	Tertiary	3 months	Live-in	Cash
11	Female	30	Christian	Single	J.H.S	14 months	Live-in	Cash
12	Male	22	Christian	Single	S.H.S	3 months	Live-in	Cash
13	Male	36	Christian	Married	S.H.S	15 months	Live-in	Cash
14	Male	20	Christian	Single	S.H.S	10 months	Live-in	Cash

Note: J.H.S = Junior High School; S.H.S = Senior High School.

summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events.” The qualitative description approach has its roots in naturalistic inquiry, which seeks to understand phenomena based on the meanings individuals assign to them (Bradshaw, Atkinson, & Doody, 2017). Although qualitative description research seeks in-depth understanding of people’s experiences of phenomena, it involves less inference and less abstract rendering of data (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Sandelowski, 2000). Thus, researchers adopting qualitative description “stay closer to their data and to the surface of words and events” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). The use of qualitative description helped to obtain rich information from domestic workers and to understand their experiences from their own perspective.

Participants

The sample included 14 domestic workers selected from their places of work in Accra using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling was necessary to identify individuals who were engaged in domestic work as a form of employment. Through snowballing, participants who were identified initially referred the researchers to other individuals who were also employed as domestic workers. Efforts were made to ensure a fair representation of both male and female domestic workers in the study. The participants were aged between 18 and 37 years and just over half ($n=8$) were females. Eight of the participants had completed junior high school, five had completed senior high school, and one had tertiary education. All the participants lived with their employer (i.e., “live-in” domestic workers) and only one (a male) was married. Most of the participants ($n=12$) were Christians and the remaining were Muslims. The participants had worked between 3 months and 6 years

with average job tenure of approximately 2 years. Details of the participants in the study are presented in [Table 1](#).

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews with participants, using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the study's objectives. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview approach allowed us to explore participants' experiences in greater depth. The questions on the interview guide were open-ended and focused on issues such as participants' motivation for their job, relationship with their employer, experiences on the job, coping, and aspirations. Relevant probes and follow-up questions were used to elicit detailed responses and clarifications from participants. We obtained informed consent from each participant prior to the interview and participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Following a rapport-building process, each participant was interviewed once in a private setting away from their work setting. The interviews were recorded with permission from the participants and lasted between 30 and 45 min.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data by following the thematic analysis approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). We began by translating and transcribing the audio-recorded data as some interviews were held in *Twi*, a Ghanaian language. Each collaborating author read each transcript thoroughly and picked out codes independently, after which all authors met and discussed the codes. Codes that were unanimously agreed on were selected to form the basis of theme formation. The codes together with their extracts were collated to identify initial themes. The main research objectives guided initial identification of key themes. These themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the transcripts to ensure consistency. The final stage of analysis involved naming and defining themes that were retained after review as well as writing of the findings.

Trustworthiness

We followed guidelines suggested by Shenton (2004) to ensure credibility of the study findings. In order to increase familiarity between the participants and researchers, the first author made several visits to the identified participants, sometimes spending a considerable amount of time with each participant. This facilitated rapport building and made the participants confident to discuss their work experiences. Several debriefing sessions were

held between the first author and second author to discuss issues emerging from the interviews to direct subsequent interviews. The recording and detailed transcription of participants' responses ensured that no information was lost. All the authors were involved in analyzing the data, which ensured that no particular author's views dominated in interpretation of participants' responses.

Findings

Five main themes that provided insight into how domestic workers experience their work were identified based on the key objectives of the study. These include employment motivations, work demands and resources, psychological experiences, coping strategies, and aspirations. In this section, we present detailed descriptions of these themes, illustrated with relevant narratives from participants. The case study presented near the end of the article summarizes some of the key experiences of domestic workers in this study.

Employment motivations

This theme mainly draws on participants' narratives on what drove them into their jobs as domestic workers. Most of the participants were largely driven by existential needs: monetary gains and escape from family hardship. For a number of participants ($n = 10$), monetary benefits served as the primary motivation for being domestic workers, as illustrated by the following extracts:

Previously, I was working with a private school for GH¢100.00 (\$17.00) monthly salary. It got to a time, the number of pupils started decreasing and the proprietor decided to decrease our salary. I heard of this job where you are entitled to bargain with the employer in terms of the salary. I preferred this job because I can tell the employer how much I want to be paid and get accommodation and food as well (Participant 12, male, aged 22).

I didn't have any job so that's why I took this job. I don't like this job but I only wanted to get money. ... I wanted to get money to rent a place, start selling food and learn a trade. I love interior and exterior decoration and sewing (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

Most of the participants had migrated from outside Accra in search of employment opportunities. As seen in the preceding quotes, although some seemed to dislike serving as domestic workers, they accepted the job because of the benefits associated with it. Beside the salary they earn, some seemed to be attracted by other benefits such as food and accommodation. Others viewed domestic work as providing an escape route from being unemployed and offering prospects of setting up their own businesses or

continuing their education with the savings they would make from their salary.

Additionally, for some participants, taking the job as a domestic worker was a means to escape family hardship. These participants considered taking up their current jobs due to financial difficulties in their families. Their present job not only allowed them to escape the poor financial situation in their families, but also enabled to ease the burden. The following extracts illustrate such motivations:

We are six children in my family. I accepted the job offer so that it can ease the burden on my mother (Participant 3, female, aged 20).

I come from a very poor background. Back home things are not really favorable. My uncle told my mother that a lady at Weija needed someone to stay with so that is why I am here (Participant 4, female, aged 18).

Work demands and resources

Participants described their terms of employment, remuneration, living conditions, and job duties. Participants' narratives under this theme were summarized under four sub-themes: precariousness and exploitation, concerns with living conditions, demanding job duties, and employer-employee relationships.

Precariousness and exploitation

Participants' narratives point to circumstances that depict the precarious nature of their job and make them vulnerable to exploitation. Almost all the participants mentioned that they had no formal written contracts with their employers. Arrangements regarding their employment were done orally mostly through a mediator or a third party (often a relative), as illustrated in the following quotes:

There is no formal arrangement. She initially told me she had someone working for her, so I should come and help the person but the other lady left, and I had to take over without any renegotiation (Participant 5, male, aged 18).

Actually, an agent linked me to my employer. The agent made me fill a form with a guarantor that is all.... The agent and the employer interviewed me... She asked me how much salary I'll take at the end of the month and I told her (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

Some participants indicated that the absence of a written contract with their employers exposed them to exploitation, as their job demands were increased without corresponding changes in salaries. The absence of a written contract also meant that the participants were unable to renegotiate the terms of their employment. For example:

They pay me but they didn't really describe the job for me to know how much I would charge [prior to taking the job]. The job keeps increasing. GH¢300.00 (\$50.00) per month is not the minimum wage for a laborer. She didn't tell me I'll be washing but she added it. I can't ask them to increase the salary too (Participant 6, male, aged 26).

Remuneration for the participants varied from cash payment to some barter forms of compensation such as schooling or vocational training in exchange of service. A few participants opened up about their wages, which averaged about GH¢300.00 (\$50.00) monthly. For those whose arrangements involved indirect compensations, some had started skill acquisition training, while others have to wait for some months or years as agreed to start their apprenticeship or schooling.

I am working with them for 5 years. They promised to help me learn a trade and open a shop for me after serving them for that period (Participant 1, male, aged 23).

Concerns with living conditions

All the participants were "live-in" domestic workers and were accommodated by their employers. Some of the participants were pleased with their living conditions. Food was also readily available to some participants whereas some had to find their own food. For example, a participant said:

I have a room to myself with a bed and my own television. As for eating, I eat what we plan on the menu (laughs). I eat more than them. When I am sick I cater for my bills. Well, as for being hurt, I'll say no. I have never been hurt before (Participant 9, female, aged 37).

However, some participants expressed discontent about their living conditions. Although they acknowledged the accommodation provided by their employers, they thought their living conditions were deplorable. Some indicated that they slept in storerooms and garages and on tattered mattresses. For instance, a participant who was unhappy with his living conditions said:

I have a bed (student mattress) with no pillow, fan or television. It (the mattress) has really decreased in size. When you lie on it, you get body pains. ... There's nothing she will do about it. That's how I came to meet it. I buy mosquito spray every two weeks. They don't have any problem if I buy it myself. To them, they are paying me for my services so they don't expect me to rely on them (Participant 12, male, aged 22).

Demanding job duties

Most of the participants described their job duties as very hectic. Some narrated ordeals of having to perform numerous and endless tasks throughout the week. For some participants, the demanding nature of their jobs meant they had little sleep and rarely had time to engage in other activities that

could be beneficial to their lives. A few participants indicated that although they are given one day off work every week, it fails to compensate for all the stressful days as their job duties keep changing and demands keep increasing:

When I wake up in the morning, I go to the basement, which has a movie theatre and a gym, I sweep, dust and mop. There's a little bathroom there, which I sweep, scrub, mop and dust as well. There is a guest room, which I clean on Saturdays, after which I clean around the swimming pool. Then I clean the entire compound (two plots of land). On Saturdays I scrub the white staircase. On Thursdays after they discharge the waste, I scrub the bins. On that same day, I bathe the dog. On other days in the morning, I am expected to walk the dog around the neighborhood. After all these jobs in the morning, I am expected to finish by 6:30 am and go into the main house to clean. They have a 12-year-old son whom I am expected to entertain and keep company (Participant 12, male, aged 22).

Employee-employer relationship

Some participants described their relationship with their employers as cordial. These participants mentioned that they were treated not just as “employees” but also as part of their employers’ families. To these participants, such cordial relationships made them feel valued and felt confident being around their employers.

My relationship with them is good.... They even take care of me more than my biological mother did. They are not living with me as if I am a stranger or just a worker.... Ever since I started hustling at age 15, I have never met anyone like this (employer). They are extraordinary and very good (Participant 6, male, aged 26).

For other participants, the relationship with their employer was tense and they neither considered themselves as part of the employers’ families nor were treated as such. They rarely had any opportunities for personal communication with their employers, as all forms of communications were strictly in relation to their jobs:

We don't chat unless there is a complaint or we are cooking.... Sometimes she's cheerful and other days she's not. Whenever I see her, my heart beats. It's hard to please her. When she's not at home I am happy... She always makes me feel low (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

The nature of the relationship between the participants and their employers also influenced how often they were allowed to visit their families or receive family visits. Some of the participants indicated that although they had mobile phones with which they could communicate with family and friends, they did not have space or time to communicate with them. For instance, one said:

I have a phone. I can't talk or pick calls in their presence. They see it to be disrespectful (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

Psychological experiences

Distress and dissatisfaction

Participants shared varied experiences that influenced their general psychological state as well as attitudes toward their jobs and employers. Verbal abuse was very prominent in most participants' narratives. A number of participants mentioned that they were yelled at and insulted by their employers at the slightest provocation. A participant shared her experiences as follows:

She can insult me the way she wants. ... 'Lazy, stupid, do you know the money we spend on you' and stuff like that. She doesn't even call me by my name even though she knows it. It's not nice at all (Participant 3, female, aged 20).

Another participant said:

I'm insulted every day, even by the children. They insult me: 'you are mad'; 'your face like a goat', etc. She once told me I smell, but I didn't care; I kept quiet. They are very authoritarian. When they say something, they expect you to do the exact thing even if it can't be done (Participant 12, male, aged 22).

Some participants admitted that their experiences on the job had adverse impact on their psychological well-being. There were expressions of sadness, worry and feelings of worthlessness and dehumanization resulting from the ill treatment the participants had to endure from their employers. One participant said: "*... I get worried anytime they shout at me. I ask myself 'when will this end?' ... It's just sad*" (Participant 5, male, aged 18). Another participant narrated how she felt depressed, worried, and unappreciated because of how she is treated:

What she sometimes tells me worries me to the extent I wish I could just leave. I get depressed. I think of why she doesn't appreciate anything I do. It is very sad. She insults me and I still work for her. You have to be strong hearted to do this job (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

For another two participants, the feeling was that of sadness and dehumanization due to frequent verbal abuses and inconsiderate demands from their employers. For instance, one said:

She insults me a lot. I can get angry but who cares? ... I used to cry. She has threatened to beat me on several occasions. Sometimes I feel she doesn't regard me as human because the instructions she gives me are too much and I get confused then she starts shouting and cursing (Participant 4, female, aged 18).

About half of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their salaries and living conditions, the nature of relationship with their employers, and how their employers treated them. For these participants, frequent experiences of verbal abuse were a major reason for their dislike for their job. A few of the participants attributed their dislike for their job to excessive

demands as well as poor salaries associated with the job. Some participants expressed a sense of psychological contract breach, as their employers failed to fulfill prior (mostly verbal) terms of engagement. When asked about what he likes about his job, one participant (Participant 1, male, aged 23) responded rhetorically: “*This work, what can you like about it?*” He added: “*I don’t like it but it is the beginning of life.*” The extent of dissatisfaction reflected in some participants’ thoughts to quit their jobs if they had viable alternatives. For instance, one participant said:

Hmm. As for this job, I’m not satisfied with it because of the challenges. Sometimes it gets to the point where I want to go home (Participant 12, male, aged 22).

Benefits and contentment

Despite the varied experiences of hardship, a number of participants thought that their jobs as domestic workers had enabled them to acquire skills they might otherwise not have acquired. Some participants said they had learned to prepare different kinds of meals while others felt their jobs had taught them to pay greater attention to detail due to the strictness of their employers. One participant attributed her improved ability to speak and write English to her job: “*I have learned to speak good English and write well*” (Participant 9, female, aged 37). Another participant said:

I have become more disciplined. My attention to details has increased. I used to be careless and didn’t pay attention to detail. Now I don’t like to make mistakes because if I do, they will shout at me (Participant 5, male, aged 18).

The above quote suggests that though the participant dislikes how his employers treat him, especially when he makes mistakes on the job, he acknowledges how their attitude toward him had made him a better person by becoming more disciplined. From participants’ narratives, it also became apparent that being in their jobs had helped some of them build some resilience to difficult situations, while some said their perceptions of and attitudes toward others had changed for the better. Narrating how her employer’s positive attitudes toward her had changed how she used to think about wealthy people, one participant said:

The woman is good. . . . The way she is good maybe others are not like that. I have had a different perception about rich people. That is what has changed about me (Participant 14, male, aged 20).

Another participant said:

When you do this kind of job it helps you to stay anywhere. It makes you brave...you become strong...you can survive anything...you’ll just learn how to cope (Participant 13, male, aged 36).

While some participants were dissatisfied with their job, as explained earlier, others were generally satisfied. Participants who expressed satisfaction with their jobs mostly attributed their positive attitudes to the cordial nature of their relationships with their employers, the positive treatment they received on the job, and the various fringe benefits associated with the job. One male participant believed that his present job was God's way of making him prosperous. He expressed contentment with and gratitude to his employers, as captured in the following extract:

What makes me happy is that they treat me very well. ... Nothing has happened for me to dislike this job. I just get worried that at my age I should be doing my own work. But whatever happens it is good. It is God's way; maybe through this I will get help from somewhere (Participant 6, male, aged 26).

Coping strategies

Participants in the study indicated they employed diverse strategies in coping especially with the experiences of abuse and distress in their jobs as domestic workers. Specifically, participants coped by regulating their emotions, rationalizing their experiences, relying on religious faith, and pretending.

Regulating emotions

Many of the participants relied on emotional self-regulation by controlling their emotions and thoughts. For instance, one participant said:

I get angry when she insults me. When it happens that way, I don't talk to her until my heart is at peace (Participant 3, female, aged 20).

To this participant, the emotional self-regulation strategy not only allows her to recover from her experiences but also helps her avoid escalating the frosty relationship she has with her employer. Other participants explained that by suppressing their emotions, they are able to endure the challenges in their job to achieve their objectives for taking the job (e.g., to save money, to acquire skills, or further their education):

I pray about it and console myself that it won't be forever. I will have my own job. I want to help myself so that my siblings won't go through what I went through. I am not happy in this house because I am not comfortable from the way I am treated but I need them so I have to endure (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

Rationalization

A few participants coped with the challenges on the job by rationalizing their experiences. For instance, one participant viewed the difficulties he

encounters in his job as “necessary evil” to prepare him for future endeavors. He said:

There is a saying that ‘little by little the crab will climb up’. So I’ll pass through; my future will be great. If you don’t go through some experiences in the world, you won’t be wise when you make it (Participant 1, male, aged 23).

Religious coping

Religious coping also featured in participants’ narratives about their coping strategies. Some participants indicated that they often prayed to God to intervene in their situations as they lacked the power to change their conditions at work. They indicated that relying on God gave them the hope that their negative situations may only be temporary:

I always pray. It is not everything that is physical; some things are spiritual. Someone might want to help you but his or her mind can change at any time. So I pray to God to touch their hearts (Participant 7, female, aged 26).

Pretense

Interestingly, some participants indicated that they coped by faking their emotions or simply accepting their experiences as normal part of their job. They explained that this strategy enabled them to avoid thinking about their experiences or reacting to them. For instance, one participant said:

I have noticed that is how they are most of the time; they insult me at the least thing I do. I have taken it to be normal, so I accept that this is the way they are (Participant 3, female, aged 20).

Another participant said:

Be stupid for them. That’s the only way you can live with them.... Even though I don’t like her [employer], I always have to smile. You won’t let her know you don’t like her (Participant 12, male, aged 22).

Aspirations

In addition to asking about their motivations and experiences on the job, we asked about participants’ aspirations and expectations about the future. Participants seemed very optimistic about their future and eagerly looked forward to it. Some of them aspired to further their education because they saw education as a means to escape their present ordeals.

I don’t see myself staying with them. I will further my education and get a different job (Participant 5, male, aged 18).

Other participants showed interest in establishing their own businesses after accumulating some startup capital. Many of the participants wished to

be their own bosses and take control of their lives rather than being controlled:

I learnt carpentry at school and I know everything about it. Five years from now, I pray that God should help me do something on my own. The reason why I am here is to get money and open my shop (Participant 6, male, aged 26).

A few participants aspired to get married and start a family. This aspiration was common among older participants, who also appeared to have less interest in furthering their education:

In the next 5 years, I want to be married with my own house and children. Tables turn; anything can happen. I'll do my own business and get a shop, so I can help my family (Participant 11, female, aged 30).

Discussion

In this study, we explored the work-related lived experiences of domestic workers in Accra. We found participants' motivation for engaging in domestic work to be mostly related to existential needs: earning income and escaping from family hardship. Engaging in domestic work enabled participants to meet basic needs such as food and shelter and to raise business capital. Working as a domestic worker also provided an escape route from family hardship. Most of the participants in the study had migrated from rural communities outside Accra. It has been shown in previous research that lack of employment opportunities and its consequent hardship in rural communities are major reasons underpinning rural-urban migration (Awumbila et al., 2017b). For many individuals who migrate to urban settings, informal sector jobs such as domestic work provide a relatively easy avenue for employment. Our findings thus, corroborate past research in Ghana suggesting that rural-urban migration coupled with unemployment have made a lot of young men and women feature in domestic labor (e.g., Adom-Asamoah et al., 2016; Awumbila et al., 2017b; Tsikata, 2009).

The study highlighted job precariousness and unfavorable conditions of employment as major sources of work demands among domestic workers in the Ghanaian context. Consistent with other studies in Ghana (Adom-Asamoah et al., 2016; Awumbila et al., 2017a; Tsikata, 2009), contractual arrangements between domestic workers and their employers were mainly verbal, with remuneration varying from cash payments to skill acquisition. Given that oral agreements may not be binding or enforceable, many domestic workers are vulnerable to exploitation through unfair abrogation or breach of contract. Indeed, Tsikata (2009) asserts that oral agreement is a precursor to exploitation and fragility of domestic work agreements. In

addition, although domestic workers in the study resided in the same household with their employers, living conditions for several of them were generally poor. Similar findings suggesting poor living conditions, social isolation, and reduced autonomy and personal control of time among domestic workers have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2019; Mkandawire-Valhmu, 2010). In line with previous research (e.g., Erdoğan & Toksöz, 2013), domestic workers also reported excessive workloads and long working hours with little rest. According to the JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), excessive job demands and long working hours could increase job stress and result in mental exhaustion.

Experiences of verbal abuse, in the form of insults, curses and being shouted upon, were common sources of emotional demands among domestic workers in the study. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that domestic workers experience varying forms of abuse and harassment on the job (Lau et al., 2009). It has been suggested that exploitation and abuse occur as a result of differential power relations between domestic workers and their employers, with domestic workers viewed by their employers as subordinate or even inferior (Gorbán & Tizziani, 2014). In line with previous studies (Lau et al., 2009; Malhotra et al., 2012; Malhotra et al., 2013), verbal abuse underpinned participants' experiences of distress in the form of worry, sadness, and feelings of dehumanization. Such feelings are precursors to psychological or mental health problems. Consistent with the JD-R theory, these findings underscore the deleterious impact of job stressors such as emotional abuse on employee well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The quality of relationship between domestic workers and their employers was identified as a source of demand and resource for domestic workers. Domestic workers in the present study constructed their relationships with their employers based on the nature of treatment they received from them. Domestic workers who were poorly treated tended to have uneasy relationships with their employers. Such tense employer-employee relationships seem to orchestrate low employee voice and induce social isolation among domestic workers. This trend is also seen in a previous study in China (Groves & Lui, 2012) in which domestic workers had to keep a social distance with the employer for the sake of formality. In contrast, domestic workers who received better treatment reported having good relationships with their employers and tended to consider themselves as part of the employer's family. Such cordial employer-employee relationships may provide a voice to domestic workers in terms of expressing their concerns to employers. Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi (2019) noted that a cordial relationship between domestic workers and their employers "can

generate a sense ... of being ‘one of the family’—which is an important determinant of job satisfaction and can relieve the sense of isolation and segregation generated by this type of work” (p. 2545). As a form of resource, positive relationship between domestic workers and their employers may have motivational potential by fostering work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This finding resonates with extant research that highlights the importance of employer-employee relationships in shaping employees’ job attitudes and other job outcomes (e.g., Amoah, Annor, & Asumeng, 2021; Ford, Olsen, Khojasteh, Ware, & Urick, 2019).

Additionally, the study suggests that the nature of employment conditions associated with domestic work constitutes an important element of domestic workers’ job attitudes. In line with previous research (e.g., Hebson, Rubery, & Grimshaw, 2015), conditions such as low wages, poor treatment, long working hours, and heavy workloads underpinned domestic workers’ job dissatisfaction, which resulted in turnover cognitions. It is important to note, however, that narratives of a few participants in the study suggest that in some instances job demands may have beneficial influence on domestic workers. Such experiences reflect the notion that certain work demands (i.e., challenge job demands) may present employees with opportunities for personal growth (Crawford et al., 2010). In contrast to dissatisfaction, job satisfaction seems to be linked to availability of both tangible benefits such as food and shelter and intangible benefits such as skill acquisition, changes in perspective, and exposure to new situations. This finding corroborates recent studies suggesting that domestic workers derive satisfaction from their job when they are given fair employment conditions (e.g., Bai et al., 2013; Baldassar et al., 2017; Iecovich, 2011). This finding further demonstrates the importance of job resources in facilitating positive job attitudes and organizational outcomes, as suggested by Bakker and Demerouti (2007).

The present study also found that emotional self-regulation served as a major personal resource for domestic workers in dealing with the challenges associated with their jobs. The dominant strategy involved demonstration of self-control particularly in dealing with verbal abuse. This finding is similar to that of Bosmans et al. (2016), who reported that domestic workers regulate and reduce their emotions as a way of coping. To a lesser extent, emotional-coping strategies such as pretense and faking were employed as strategies to avoid escalating emotional demands on the job. These strategies, which are known to be maladaptive, may have adverse impact on the well-being of domestic workers in the long-term (Bosmans et al., 2016). In particular, reliance on pretense suggests that domestic workers may experience emotional labor, which has been found to have adverse impact on mental health (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Another strategy employed was spiritual coping. Having a relationship with God or

nature has been shown to help individuals to cope with problems, especially health-related issues such as depression (Asare-Doku, Osafo, & Akotia, 2017).

Despite the challenges associated with their jobs, domestic workers expressed varying aspirations about the future. All the participants aspired to have a better job, own a business, further their education, acquire skills, or get married. Although participants needed their current job to survive, they also hoped for a better future. This trend was found in a previous study in Ghana (Adom-Asamoah et al., 2016) in which domestic workers expressed their desire to learn a trade, get married, have a formal education, and own a business. This implies that domestic workers consider their jobs as temporary and not sustainable in the future. Thus, aspirations about the future may serve as sources of optimism and hope for domestic workers, which could have a positive impact on their well-being.

The present study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, all the participants in the study were live-in domestic workers. Thus, their experiences may not be applicable to live-out domestic workers. Additionally, the study was conducted in relatively high-income communities in Accra and was based on a small sample. Thus, generalization of the findings should be done with caution. Indeed, it is important to note that, as is typical of qualitative research, we did not aim at generalizing our findings, though we anticipate that aspects of the findings may find applicability in other localities within the country. Furthermore, although the qualitative approach enabled in-depth explorations of domestic workers' experiences, it was impossible to directly link domestic workers' job-related experiences with their overall psychological well-being. Thus, large-scale quantitative studies would make it possible to determine the pervasiveness of the experiences reported in the present study and their influence on psychological well-being of domestic workers. Finally, although our study has underscored the utility of the JD-R theory to explaining aspects of domestic workers' jobs and their well-being, a large-scale quantitative study testing the key assumptions of the theory within the domestic work context would constitute a significant addition to literature in work and organizational psychology.

In spite of the aforementioned limitations, the study contributes to literature on domestic workers by demonstrating how aspects of domestic workers' jobs enhance or undermine their well-being. The study extends previous research in the Ghanaian context that focused predominantly on describing the employment conditions of domestic workers. The findings in this study also hold some practical implications for policy and intervention. An important implication is that the work situations of domestic workers in Ghana expose them to abuse, high stress levels, and

exploitation. Considering that these factors are consistently linked to common mental health disorders and psychological distress, the findings suggest that psychological distress may be prevalent among this section of the workforce. This suggests the need to provide psychosocial services to domestic workers who may be in situations that make them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Domestic workers should also be encouraged to report experiences of abuse and exploitation to relevant state agencies for assistance.

Furthermore, the findings suggest the importance of personal resources such as emotional self-regulation in dealing with the challenges associated with domestic work. Thus, institutions focused on providing support services to domestic workers could equip them on how to employ such resources in coping with experiences on the job. Our findings also suggest that provision of fair conditions by employers engenders positive attitudes and behaviors from domestic workers. Likewise, there is evidence from previous studies that domestic workers may retaliate adverse treatment by displacing their emotions on “safer” targets such as their employers’ children (Awumbila et al., 2017a). Thus, it behooves individuals and households that engage the services of domestic workers to ensure fairness in their employment relationship and adopt practices that safeguard the well-being of domestic workers.

Additionally, the nature of the domestic work contracts observed in the study calls for enforcement of regulations governing employment of domestic workers. In Ghana, the recently enacted law (L.I. 2408) that seeks to regulate the domestic work sector addresses the deficits of domestic employment identified in this study. However, a major hurdle in protecting the employment rights of domestic workers relates to obliging households and domestic workers to comply with employment regulations. Minimizing the informality that characterizes the recruitment of domestic workers may be a fruitful start toward improving the regulation of domestic employment. Moreover, given that domestic work typically occurs in private households, mechanisms that encourage self-enforcement of regulations by employers may contribute toward ensuring adherence to employment regulations (Suleman, 2015).

Conclusion

The study provides insights into motivations, work demands and resources, psychological experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of domestic workers in the Ghanaian context. Our findings suggest that domestic work remains an important source of employment, as it provides an opportunity to many young adults to meet critical existential needs. Varying forms of

demands such as abuse and exploitation typify domestic workers' work experiences, which undermine their psychological well-being. In spite of the adverse work experiences reported in the study, domestic workers may experience satisfaction from benefits associated with their work. As the conditions that have given rise to expansion in the domestic work sector persist, this study's findings underscore the need for stakeholders to work toward improving the employment conditions of domestic workers and enhance their psychological well-being.

Case study

Efua (Participant 3) is 20 years old and one of six children in her family. She migrated from Cape Coast in the Central Region to Accra with the help of her Aunt, who facilitated her domestic work employment arrangement. She is supposed to serve her employer for a period (unknown to her) in exchange of skill acquisition, an offer she accepted to ease the burden on her mother. In addition to her duties as a domestic worker, she works as an apprentice in a hair salon. She has a busy work schedule, working from 5 am to 9pm daily with one day off each week. She describes her working conditions as acceptable and seems to have a cordial relationship with her employer. However, she indicates that her employer does not have patience for her and insults her at the least provocation. Though she is hurt by the frequent emotional abuse, she has learned to cope by regulating her emotions. She hopes that her employer will help her to set up her own salon after her apprenticeship.

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