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# 'Sister-Madam': family members navigating hiring of relatives as domestic workers in Nkowankowa, Limpopo

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic work constitutes a large sector, with more than a million women working as domestic workers. In South Africa, it is a norm that whites employ black women as domestic servants, but with the demise of apartheid, there has been an increase in the employment of domestic workers in black families. However, hiring family members as domestic workers in black families is an under-researched area. Drawing from the authors dissertation, this article examines family domestic work – whereby family members hire their relatives as domestic workers – in rural Limpopo. The study mobilises a qualitative approach to comprehend the experiences of hiring kin as domestic workers. Findings illustrate that family domestic work is an act of reciprocal care amongst family members. Relatives hire their kin to help with domestic duties and enabling family members to provide for their families. The relationship between 'sister-maids' and 'sister-madams' is intertwined, which leads to the difficulty of balancing formal employment and family relations. Thus, family domestic work symbolises a capitalised reciprocal caring within black families in post-apartheid South Africa, as helping involves paying each other. The article does not generalise on family domestic work, but contributes to the body of knowledge about domestic work within black families.

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Domestic work; black families; relatives; reciprocal caring; sister-madam; rural areas

## 1. Introduction

Domestic work is rooted in the period of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, whereby women worked for non-related and non-black employers as servants (Ally, 2009; Cock, 1989). Nonetheless, the end of the apartheid system in South Africa facilitated the rise of domestic work in black families. According to Seekings and Natrass (2016), the increase in black employers in the domestic work sector is linked to the empowerment of black middle-class families in South Africa. Notably, the hiring of domestic workers within black families is prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa, where relatives are employed as domestic workers (Bayane, 2019; Carroll, 2004; Dilata, 2010; Maqubela, 2016). Although domestic work within black families is established, the experiences of black women hiring relatives as domestic workers in rural areas are understudied. Thus, this study

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investigates family domestic work whereby family members hire relatives as domestic workers in a rural area located in Limpopo, South Africa. Family domestic work is prevalent in rural areas, where both non-relatives and relatives support each other through hiring kin as domestic workers and working relatives get assisted with household duties such as cleaning (Maqubela, 2016).

There are multiple reasons for the dominance of black women within the domestic work sector in South Africa, including the inability to find employment owing to limited education. Tolla (2013) suggests that black women working as domestic workers have only primary education, which limits their access to other employment opportunities. Additionally, black women opt for domestic work in order to provide for their families and children. Phillips (2011) concurs that women become domestic workers to support their children. Meanwhile, the common reasons of hiring domestic workers are to assist with household duties. Maqubela (2016) asserts that working women are faced with double burden of household duties and work; hence, domestic workers are hired to take care of domestic responsibilities. Although there are common reasons for domestic working, little research focuses on comprehending domestic work within black families – particularly employers' reason for hiring their kin as domestic workers.

The nature and conditions of work within the domestic work sector in South Africa are thereof deemed precarious. Standing (2011) asserts that precarious work is associated with uncertainty, risks and limited access to employee benefits. Similarly, the literature on domestic work suggests that domestic workers are exposed to exploitation and risks such as verbal, sexual abuse and job uncertainty (Magwaza, 2008; Tolla, 2013; Zungu, 2009). Ally (2009) and Grossman (2004) further argue that poor working conditions such as low wages and long hours of work are common in the domestic work sector. This has been normalised in the sector, because domestic work is considered informal (Tolla, 2013) and, therefore, not regulated (Cock, 1989). According to Maqubela (2016), domestic work remains undervalued because of its link to unproductive work. Although the Department of Labour formalised the domestic work sector by promulgating applicable labour laws and regulations to ensure fair labour practices, such as the implementation of contractual employment and minimum wages, the sector is still typified by poor working conditions and a disregard for the law and relevant regulations (Department of Labour, 2017). Given the persistence of poor working conditions among non-related employers and domestic workers, this raises questions about and an interest in the relationship and working conditions in a setting where a family member is employed as domestic worker and vice versa. Then I was intrigued by how relationships and working conditions such as compensation and hours are negotiated in family domestic work, because of having and knowing a relative working as a domestic worker for family members. The article was guided by the primary research question: How do black women hiring relatives as domestic workers navigate work and family relations in family domestic work in Nkowitz, Limpopo? To answer the research question, I explored the experiences of black women hiring relatives as domestic workers and investigated how work–family relations are negotiated in family domestic work.

## 2. Literature review: reciprocal care or exploitation?

A domestic worker is an individual who is employed in a private household to fulfil duties such as cleaning, cooking, ironing and taking care of children or the elderly, and remunerated accordingly (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2011). Being a domestic worker, therefore, involves assisting with domestic duties during the absence of employers. However, the definition of a domestic worker is unclear in the setting of family domestic work or domestic work in black families, because, as Dilata (2010) and Maqubela (2016) suggest, domestic work in black families involves hiring family and friends. Thus, it raises a question of whether family and friends are formally employed nor called employees (Bayane, 2019), because help without remuneration in black families is common, though the lack of remuneration is augmented through reciprocal care amongst family members (Bozalek, 1999; Mosoetsa, 2011).

Since the seminal work of Cock (1989), domestic work has gained scholarly attention in South Africa, with most studies helping to give insight into the evolution of the domestic work sector, transitions into a sector dominated by black women, and the challenges experienced (Ally, 2009; Cock, 1989; Fish, 2006; Ginsburg, 2000; Grant, 1997; King, 2007). The domestic work sector in South Africa is traced back to colonialism and remnants of the practices of apartheid, in that was dominated by non-related black women working as domestic workers. According to Cock (1989), domestic work during the colonial and apartheid eras in South Africa, it was associated with challenges such as poor working conditions. Cock (1989) further stipulates that various challenges within the domestic work sector were facilitated by the sector not being regulated by the Department of Labour. However, the end of apartheid has resulted in a process of regulating the domestic work sector in South Africa (Ally, 2009).

The regulation of the domestic work sector occurred through the implementation of regulations and rules to address aspects such as a minimum wage, employment contracts between domestic workers and their employers and working conditions (Ally, 2009; Department of Labour, 2017). In post-apartheid South Africa, the domestic work sector is regulated specifically by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA; Act 75 of 1997) and Sectoral Determination 7 (Ally, 2009), which emphasises the protection of domestic workers' rights and seeks to balance the relationship between domestic workers and their employers (Ally, 2009; Magwaza, 2008; Mbatha, 2003). Although the domestic work sector is regulated, studies continue to report exploitation and oppression of domestic workers, and this has been observed in black families as well (Dilata, 2010; Magwaza, 2008; Zungu, 2009).

In his study, Tolla (2013) suggests that domestic workers in rural areas are exposed to poor work relationships and work conditions. Research illustrates that domestic workers in rural areas lack access to information related to labour laws; hence, exploitation is inevitable (Grossman, 2004). Similarly, Maqubela (2016) conducted a study on domestic workers in black families in rural areas, and the study suggests that domestic workers are working under exploitative conditions such as long hours and low paid wages. Likewise, exploitation is prevalent in urban areas, but domestic workers there have access to support systems such as unions (Ally, 2009), while Tolla (2013) argues that domestic workers in rural areas resort to silence to deal with exploitative working conditions in the domestic work sector. The domestic work sector remains exploitative with hierarchies

between employers and employees, despite the efforts to balance powers through regulation (Maqubela, 2016).

According to Bozalek (1999), reciprocal care was a common practice among black families during apartheid. Family members such as aunts and grandparents offered their help with taking care of the children, in the absence of their parents, and such caring was exercised without remuneration. Mosoetsa (2011) also indicates that, even in post-apartheid South Africa, families continue to show reciprocal care through sharing resources for economic survival. In her study, Mosoetsa (2011) suggests that, among black families, it is the norm for family members to offer help to each other, especially in times of need, such as when someone is unemployed. Similarly, Therborn (2004) has observed that black families are characterised by including extended members such as uncles, aunts and cousins; hence, reciprocal caring and sharing of resources is the norm.

Reciprocal caring in black families was transformed during the colonial and apartheid era in South Africa, wherein the introduction of capitalism led to a reorganisation of the family structure and social relations (Murray, 1981; Smit, 2001; Mokomane et al., 2019). This was facilitated by the discovery of gold in the mid-nineteenth century, which required cheap migrant labour, and both men and women left their rural homes to work in the city, meanwhile extended family members assumed the caring responsibility (Amoateng & Ritcher, 2007; Cock, 1989; May, 1990). In this paper, family domestic work symbolises the impact of capitalism on family relations, because black families are normally characterised by family members helping each other. However, in post-apartheid South Africa, members of the family are 'hired' as domestic workers (Bayane, 2019; Carroll, 2004; Dilata, 2010; Wanner, 2013). Such a relationship, and the involvement of money, challenges the existing literature on reciprocal care in black families in South Africa.

### 3. Methodology and methods

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study, which aimed to better comprehend the perceptions and experiences of individuals participating in family domestic work by hiring relatives as domestic workers. The qualitative approach enabled me to engage with participants to gain in-depth understanding of their experience of hiring relatives as domestic workers (Bless et al., 2014; Creswell, 2009; Sarantakos, 2005). Thus, I began with building a relationship with the identified participants through informal talks about their life, work demands and the need for domestic workers, but I was given consent to record. This helped both participants and myself with trusting each other (*rapport*), and participants could therefore share in-detail their experiences of hiring relatives as domestic workers. As Creswell (2009) alludes that qualitative research approach allows for capturing and understanding human actions, events and meanings attached to acts in-detail through interacting with the identified participants.

The location of the study is Nkowankowa located under Greater Tzaneen Local Municipality in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Nkowankowa is a township in Mopani District Municipality divided into section A, B, C and D, and it is surrounded by rural areas such as Dan Village, Petanenge Village and many more. Thus, I choose Nkowankowa as the suitable site because I reside in a nearby village whereby through observation

learnt that family members employed in professional even non-professional jobs tend to hire relatives as domestic workers to help with domestic duties in the house. This was further confirmed by the fact that I have a relative who is employed as a domestic worker by a family member at Nkowankowa. Furthermore, the area consists of households which are dominated by women employed in professional jobs such as teaching and nursing (StatsSA, 2011). As such, these women hire domestic workers as substitutes to assist with domestic duties in their absence (Maqubela, 2016). Therefore, Nkowankowa was a suitable site to investigate family domestic work and comprehend the experiences of those who hire relatives as domestic workers.

Participants of the study are black women hiring relatives as domestic workers in Nkowankowa. The selection of participants was guided by a snowball sampling technique, whereby I knew a family – black woman that hired their relative (my cousin) as a domestic worker in Nkowankowa. The snowball sampling allowed the identified participants to refer me to potential participants matching the characteristics of the study (Bless et al., 2014). To qualify for the study, participants had to be a black woman residing in Nkowankowa and hire relatives as domestic workers. I went into the field to recruit participants of the study through the identified family matching the study's characteristics, which suggested and referred me to others. Advantageously, being from a nearby area made it easy to scout for participants who fitted the required characteristics for the study. However, other participants I approached rejected to participate in the study due to the sensitivity of the matter; this is the most response I got 'there are unresolved family issues, so I cannot talk about family members'. I then continued to look for other participants until saturation of the study was researched.

At the end of field work, 10 black women participating in family domestic work through working for relatives and hiring of kin as domestic workers were interviewed for the MA dissertation. However, this paper seeks to investigate and comprehend the experiences of family members 'sister-madams' hiring their kin as domestic workers, hence I only refer to rich and in-depth accounts of five black women hiring relatives. The number of participants accounts enabled me to analyse the experiences of family members hiring their relatives as domestic workers. Thus, the five black women who employed their relatives worked as teachers were above the age of 30, and earned more than R15,000 (about US\$1000) per month. Pseudonyms are used for all participants as per their request, and to protect their privacy and maintain anonymity.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to gain their experiences of hiring relatives as domestic workers (Bless et al., 2014). Prior to interviews, identified participants were given information letter and consent forms to sign. All participants signed consent to voluntarily participate (including being recorded) in the study, and interviews were conducted in their homes due to being convenient for them. Interviews with participants were conducted over the period of two months due to the difficulty of getting participants. I then called the interviewed participants to help with finding others to interview. Interview meetings were organised by calling participants to set up meetings, and each interview lasted between 50 and 60 min. All interviews were conducted in participants' home language – Xitsonga as they were comfortable with, and I agreed because of being fluent with Xitsonga. Moreover, interviews were recorded, and I used a field notebook to capture participants' experiences and my reflections. Importantly, an interview guide which consist of open-ended questions was utilised to ground the

interview session. Henceforth, semi-structured interviews enable me to gain and prove for rich accounts of hiring relatives as domestic workers.

Thematic content analysis was utilised to analyse data for this study, and this allowed for presenting findings in themes and subthemes (Alhojailan, 2012). I analysed data using the suggested steps of transcribing and translating, coding and interpretation (Rosenthal, 2016). I firstly transcribed all the interviews verbatim, from Xitsonga into English using recordings and field notes to ensure that participants' views and intended meanings were captured. Bailey (2008) highlights that transcribing interviews into English limits the original meanings captured in languages which interviews are conducted. Hence, I listened attentively to the recordings, read and reread all the notes to ensure that the transcript captures everything as it was shared.

I therefore moved into coding which is the second step of thematic analysis. Rosenthal (2016) argues that coding involves the researcher read and rereading transcripts to identify recurring ideas and themes. Thus, I read all the transcripts to identify recurring themes, and used colour-coding technique to differentiate themes and subthemes. Interpretation is the final step of thematic analysis adopted, and Rosenthal (2016) indicates that the researcher makes sense of the identified themes and subthemes and addresses the goals and objectives of the study. In this step, I read and interpreted all the identified themes and subthemes to address the primary question and objectives of the study.

Reflexivity was maintained by keeping an audit trail and documenting the researchers experience during the project, and it assisted with keeping evidence of all the changes made during the study. As Payne and Payne (2004) and Van Staple (2014) suggest, reflexivity in a qualitative study requires constant reflection on beliefs, values and attitudes and how they may have an impact on the research study. I constantly reflected on my position as a researcher, which had an impact on data collection process. In the beginning of data collection, some participants were not comfortable with interview sessions because of how I formally conducted myself as a researcher. Thus, I changed into informal introductions and conduct (initiated talks about life and work) but adhering to ethics of giving them information letter, consent forms and follow the interview guide. After that, participants began sharing rich experiences of family domestic work – hiring of relatives. This further assisted with analysing stage, because I listened and reread transcripts and notes to ensure that there are no biases in report writing. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Institution A, and participants were furnished with an information letter and consent forms to sign before participating in the study.

## **4. Findings: 'It is always in my mind that I am employing a family member'**

### ***4.1 Reciprocal care: hiring relatives as domestic workers***

The findings presented in themes are drawn from a rich and in-detail accounts of five black women (Maria, Ruth, Sarah, Rose and Cynthia) participating in family domestic work – hiring relatives as domestic workers in Nkowankowa. Domestic work constitutes a largest sector with marginalised women working as domestic workers for survival in South Africa. Meanwhile, the common reason of hiring domestic workers is to receive help with household responsibilities. Domestic work is a modern-day strategy for



working women, whereby domestic workers are their substitutes and assist with domestic duties. However, hiring of relatives as domestic workers in family domestic work is reciprocal care whereby kin are given jobs to provide for children, while sister-madams receives help with domestic duties. Maria is working as a teacher and narrates the reason of hiring her sister as a domestic worker:

She was unemployed, and I was helping her with a job to provide for her family, because she was looking for a job in other houses, while I did not have a helper as well. I decided to hire her, because I have children who are still going to school, so having a domestic worker helps ... knowing that they are safe and other duties in the home are taken care of.

The narration by Maria suggests hiring of kin as reciprocal caring within black families, as she hired and empowered her sister to provide for family. Additionally, hiring of relatives goes beyond assisting with an income: Maria received assistance with household duties and caring for children in her absence. Thus, Maria's narrative indicates the predominance of reciprocal caring in family domestic work, because it is beyond just receiving help with domestic duties but includes helping relatives to survive. This practice symbolises a custom adopted in black families in order to survive, where family members help each other.

Reciprocal caring in black families is further illustrated by Maria, who comments:

She is my sister, I called her and asked her to come and work for me, because she was staying at home, basically unemployed. So, I gave her a job to provide for her family.

For Maria, having her sister as a domestic worker is care, because hiring is not formal, but relatives are informally called to come for work. Maria further shows that employing a relative is not only to receive help with domestic duties but involves helping a family member with a job to provide for family and children. This is echoed by Rose that hiring relatives is based on caring for family members. Rose, an employed teacher and widow, hired her sister as a domestic worker:

So, I had three children and two passed on. My children would help me look after and clean the house and other things but since they passed on, I could not do it on my own. But importantly, she is my sister and did not have a job, hence I decided to hire her. Furthermore, the domestic worker (non-related) I had before could not do her job, so I thought of hiring my sister is better.

Rose narrates that hiring of her sister involved many things: to receive help with domestic duties, no trust for non-related domestic workers but above all helping her sister with a job. For both Rose and Maria, hiring of relatives does only include receiving help with domestic duties, but it is importantly reciprocal caring as their sisters are given jobs to provide for families. The practice of reciprocal caring in black families is similar to the custom adopted during apartheid, whereby aunts and uncles assumed roles of helping with children and household duties in absence of parents. However, reciprocal care also exists in post-apartheid South African black families through sharing resources, especially during difficult times. Hence, sister-madams including Maria and Rose share sentiments of hiring relatives as an act of reciprocal caring amongst family members and for relatives to provide for children and families.

Family domestic work is prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa and based on reciprocal caring amongst family members. This is because family members help each other with



one being given a job to provide for children, while sister-madams receive help with domestic duties in the home. However, the caring in family domestic work goes hand in hand with one paying the other, in the process of helping one another. For instance, Ruth is employed as a teacher and has hired her sister as a domestic worker. Below, she reflects on remuneration, emphasising that family domestic work is not formal but an expression of reciprocal caring. On being asked whether she is paying her sister enough, she responded:

It is fair, because this is not a formal work, but sisters just helping each other to survive. So, she can buy a few things for her children and eat as well.

The picture that Ruth gives of the relationship between her and sister shows that the family domestic work is an expression of reciprocal caring but it involves monetary compensation. Unlike Rose, Ruth stipulates that hiring her sister does not constitute a formal employer–employee relationship because the familial side is dominant. Thus, the narratives by Maria, Rose, Ruth and with other two sister-madams who share sentiments with hiring relatives demonstrate that family domestic work – employing kin is an act of reciprocal care and helping each other. However, reciprocal care and helping each other in family domestic work shows the extension of capitalist principles as family members pay one another even when help is extended.

Although hiring of relatives as domestic workers is strongly influenced by reciprocal care, it perpetuates exploitation in the name of family relationship. In family domestic work, exploitation occurs through informal decisions and negotiation of work conditions such as registering domestic workers for benefits – Unemployment insurance fund (UIF). Cynthia employed her sister as a domestic worker and echoes Ruth’s position that their sisters are not formally employed and see no need to register them for any employee benefits. When asked on whether her sister is registered for UIF and why, she comments:

No, we are family members helping each other to survive through me paying her, while she helps with domestic duties. Thus, I do not see any work relationship because we are family.

Cynthia explains that family domestic work is informal; hence, there is no need to consider formal or labour laws for domestic workers. She narrates that her sister is helping her as much as she receives assistance with an income to survive; therefore, there is no formal relationship. Even though family members are helping each other with domestic duties and income for survival, relatives are occupying formal domestic work. Hence, it is significant to be covered for employee benefits, as per Sectoral Determination 7, which stipulated that all domestic workers should be furnished with an employment contract and registered for benefits such as UIF. Thus, family domestic work is exploitative through family relations, as all the sister-madams share a position on negotiating work conditions and rules from a family position, which a similar exploitation in a non-related domestic worker–employer relationship.

#### ***4.2 Negotiation of work–family relations: ‘She is my sister, not a worker’***

In general, the working conditions for domestic workers are considered to be poor and not aligned to the call for decent work by the ILO, because domestic work is characterised by low wages, long hours and frequent unfair dismissals. However, the Department of

Labour has regulated the sector by introducing the BCEA Sectoral Determination 7, to assist and minimise exploitation of domestic workers. Sectoral Determination 7 regulates domestic workers working conditions such as formal employment contract between domestic workers and employers, minimum wages and hours of work. Despite the regulation of the domestic work sector, the employment relations between employers and domestic workers remain a challenge. However, the findings demonstrate that ‘sister-madams’ have a close relationship with their ‘sister-maids’. The concessions in familial domestic work are conveyed through how the ‘sister-madams’ view their ‘sister-maids’; in other words, the nature of their familial relationship. Ruth hired her sister as domestic worker, and considers her more as a sister than an employee. As she puts it:

She is my sister, not a worker. Technically, she is a worker, but I do not want my children to disrespect her, because she is their aunt. So, our family relationship is stronger than the work relations.

Ruth illustrates how she considers her ‘sister-maid’ to be a family member more than a worker. She acknowledges their work relationship, although in their interactions, the familial connection is regarded as more important. This is illustrated by her insistence that her children respect her sister, ‘as she is their aunt’. In this instance, respect is bound to be preserved because it is a norm in black families, thus Ruth’s children have to respect their aunt who is automatically their mother because of the sisterly relationship between Ruth and the sister. Respect for ‘sister-madams’ and familial relations in family domestic work is central. This explains the insistence by ‘sister-madams’ that their children regard their ‘sister-maids’ as mothers or aunts. However, ‘sister-madams’ negotiate these relationships with their ‘sister-maids’ in a familial context. Although Maria treats her sister as a relative, not a worker, she tries to be an employer. But it does not always work, because of the strong family bond between them. Maria describes her struggle with the role of employer thus:

I strongly take her [sister] as someone I am related to more than a worker. Although sometimes I exercise my power as an employer, but it [is] always in my mind that I am a family-member, who is looking out for the other. So, it is a problem, as I said, sometimes it is just impossible for me to be an employer to her, as she is my sister.

Unlike Ruth, Maria stresses the difficulty of being an employer to her sister. She unsuccessfully tried to affirm her employer role, because of their stronger family relationship. Ruth and Maria indicate how their respective relationships with their sisters have been renegotiated, given the familial context. The latter requires the ‘sister-madams’ to respect their relatives working as domestic workers and they have to teach their children to do the same. The negotiation of these relations complicates the working conditions and relations in the familial domestic work setting, because of negotiation and manoeuvring around being a relative and employer. Cynthia narrates that her sister did not sign a contract of employment:

I thought, as she is my sister there was no need, because I was never going to treat bad nor need a contract to specify laws between myself and her because we both agreed on what she has to do and that I do not want any problems.

Cynthia echoes Maria on the difficulty of navigating between being an employer and relative. She highlights that there was no formal contract of employment between her

and sister-maid because of their familial relationship. Thus, familial relations dominate in family domestic work, as Cynthia, Ruth, Maria and other sister-madams shared sentiments of their sisters not signing contracts of employment before working.

## 5. Discussion: family domestic work as reciprocal care

Domestic work is the largest sector of the labour market, with more than a million women working as domestic workers worldwide. Meanwhile, the common reason of hiring domestic workers is to receive help with domestic duties in the home (Grossman, 2004; Maqu-bela, 2016). In the South African community, there has been an increase of domestic work in black families, which involves hiring of close friends and family as domestic workers (Bayane, 2019; Carroll, 2004; Dilata, 2010). This raises questions of whether close and family are formal domestic workers and navigation of work and family relationship. Although, the domestic work sector involves exploitation of domestic workers by employers in terms of hierarchy in the relationship between employers and domestic workers, and precarious work conditions (Tolla, 2013). Standing (2011) asserts that precarious employment is associated with uncertainty, risks and limited access to employee benefits. On contrary, family domestic work – hiring of relatives as domestic workers is an act of reciprocal caring between family members, whereby kin are helped to survive, and sister-madams receive help with domestic duties in the home. However, reciprocal caring – having a sister as a domestic worker involves negotiating employer–employer relationship and working conditions because family domestic work is predominantly based on familial relations.

Hiring of relatives as domestic workers is based on family members helping each other to survive whereby those who employ relatives receive assistance with domestic duties in the home. Meanwhile, relatives are empowered to provide for their families and children through being hired as domestic workers by family members. Thus, family domestic work is a survival strategy adopted in South African black families and communities, as Mosoetsa (2011) concurs that in tough times, family members help each other through sharing resources and food for survival. However, this is dissimilar to non-related domestic work, as employer–employee do not share the same sentiment of helping each other to survive through paying and receiving help with household duties. This is demonstrated by dynamics of class, power and hierarchy between non-related employers and domestic workers, which lead to work dilemmas and exploitation (Dilata, 2010; Magwaza, 2008; Tolla, 2013; Zungu, 2009). Therefore, family domestic work demonstrates that adoption of familial and reciprocal principles can balance the concurrent dilemma of employer–employee relationship, as even non-related domestic workers and employers will comprehend the importance of reciprocal care and helping one another for survival.

Although family domestic work is reciprocal care, but it concurrently consists of dynamics in negotiating and navigating formal work and family relationship. Family members hiring their kin find it difficult to be employers, because there is a lack of employer–employee relationship. The dominance of familial relations is demonstrated through informal hiring ‘called her to work’ and negotiation of working conditions such as contract of employment and registering for domestic worker benefits – UIF. Similarly, to non-related domestic work (Tolla, 2013; Magwaza, 2008; Zungu, 2009), family domestic work perpetuates exploitation of domestic workers in the name of family.

This is because family domestic workers fulfil duties which are stipulated for formal domestic workers as per the ILO (2011) definition of a domestic worker – an individual employed in a private household to fulfil duties such as cleaning, cooking, ironing and taking care of children, and for remuneration. Henceforth, it is significant to adhere domestic workers labour laws regulating the working conditions such as employment contract, minimum wages, hours of work and registered to access benefits such as pension fund and UIF (Ally, 2009; Department of Labour, 2017).

The findings thereof indicate that domestic work can adopt family domestic work principles of reciprocal caring, which can minimise the dynamics of employer–employer relationships even in non-related domestic work setting (Bayane, 2019). As in family domestic work, both sister-madams and sister-maids understand that hiring of relatives and working for family members is based on caring and helping each other to survive. Thus, domestic work in post-apartheid South African community is more than a job, but a platform for marginalised women and the working class to help one another.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

Domestic work remains the largest source of employment in South Africa. Since the end of apartheid, black families have also employed domestic workers. Family domestic work is prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa but remains an understudied area. The paper illustrates that family domestic work symbolises reciprocal caring in black South African families. The findings suggest that hiring relatives as domestic workers illustrates caring for family members by employing and helping them to provide for their families, while ‘sister-madams’ also receive help with domestic duties by hiring their relatives as domestic workers. However, the family domestic work relationship can be challenging, as the findings demonstrate that ‘sister-madams’ have to negotiate and find a balance between their roles as relatives and as formal employers, because their familial relations are at the centre of the relationship. The paper is broadly suggesting humane principles in the domestic work sector, as the relationship in family domestic work is characterised by caring for each other. Furthermore, the study illustrates the impact of capitalism on black families, as reciprocal caring after apartheid involves monetary compensation for caring activities.

### **6.1 Recommendations**

This study does not generalise about family domestic work; rather, it is a foundation for further research of domestic work in black families in post-apartheid South Africa. Future researchers can also employ both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain greater insight into family domestic work, as the study was limited to small sample (but rich accounts) of participants in rural areas.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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