



What Washerwomen Would Say on a Webinar

By Kwamchetsi Makokha



As the signature tune for the 9 o'clock evening news floats on the airwaves, Elizabeth Mbatha wearily pushes open the door to her house in Kangemi.

She has just walked 22 kilometres across the city from Moi International Sports Centre in Kasarani where she completed her day-long court-ordered community service to sweep the streets because she could not raise the Sh200 fine for “failing to observe social distancing rules” and not properly wearing a mask in public.

Police from Kileleshwa station in Nairobi enforcing public health measures in response to the coronavirus pandemic, had arrested Mbatha and a dozen other women the previous day at the spot where they habitually sit, sometimes all day, waiting for someone to hire them for a day's cleaning work.

In this COVID-19 season, webinars have become the middle class replacement for workshops, but on July 15, a different variety of this urban phenomenon occurred as itinerant washerwomen from Nairobi spoke about coping amid the crisis.

On a normal day, Mbatha walks a five-kilometre round-trip from her house to Kileleshwa to wait for work cleaning houses and washing clothes. Often, police order the women who sit waiting along residential streets back to their homes where they have nothing with which to feed their children.

“We face innumerable problems. If you leave your child in the care of a neighbour, she will want Sh100 at the end of the day”, Mbatha said.

Cleaning and laundry work has contracted as employees in the formal sector—grappling with pay cuts and disappearing jobs—stay home and take on the household chores. Live-in domestic staff have been laid off because of fears of COVID-19 infection, and also because households are surviving on reduced incomes.

Some employers called their former domestic staff and asked them not to come to work: Don’t call us, we’ll call you once the crisis is over.

Former live-in domestic workers have now joined day labourers like Mbatha in the search for work.

For some 50 women at each of the 40 waiting spots dotted across the wealthier parts of Nairobi, it is not so much a search for work as it is a game of wait-and-see. According to the Centre for Livelihood Advancement, up to 2,000 women sit in the open around Nairobi waiting for someone to offer them cleaning work, and so far, CFLA has registered 500 of them. Police regularly drive by and order the women to disperse to their homes as part of enforcing anti-crowding regulations. “Do not bring corona to the roadside”, the police bark at the women. “Stay at home until COVID-19 is over”.

Work is irregular, and when it comes, the load is heavy because employers who previously hired once a week are now taking in washerwomen just once or twice a month. It is a headlong dive into the unknown.

Mbatha, a mother of two children, says her husband is on furlough from his contract work in construction. She took the job because sometimes her husband would return home after a day out without finding any work. She has been washing and cleaning for three years.

“Living with an unemployed husband can be very stressful because when you enquire what you will feed the children, fighting can break out—sometimes even in front of the children”, she adds.

Depressed household incomes have forced many people with precarious occupations like Elizabeth Mueni—also a washerwoman—to move houses. “I used to pay Sh3,000 for rent every month but I had to move to a cheaper house. Even here, I had to negotiate to pay the Sh1,800 in instalments”, she adds.

Washerwomen start walking out of Kawangware, Kibera and other informal settlements adjacent to the middle class residential ones early in the morning. They stake out supermarkets, and sometimes road junctions, waiting for people looking for a day’s domestic help.

Employers who offer one-day jobs for Sh500 are of all varieties: homemakers seeking a helping hand with large catering; men who live alone; or people nursing patients and other household members with special needs.

The criteria used to select a washerwoman is capricious: some want plain looks while others are looking for neatness, some seek mature-looking older women while others call up those they have hired before.

“Employers are not the same”, says Rosemary Ambeyi, a widowed mother of five who works as a day-wage washerwoman. “Some [employers] invite the women into their personal spaces so that they can exploit them”, she adds.

Ambeyi has used this work to put two of her children through secondary school and is still educating

another three.

“The challenge we have is assuming they want you to work”, she continues. “Once you get to the house, some start to make inappropriate advances, and you get into a fight—meaning you are not able to work. If you do not finish work, your pay is docked”.

The problems in the domestic work sector have persisted for over 12 years, says Mary Kambo, the programme manager for labour and corporate accountability at the Kenya Human Rights Commission. “Domestic staff work in isolation and their social connections are threatened. Raising your voice when you are alone could mean the loss of livelihood”.

Last year, an Africa Labour, Research and Education Institute study estimated that there were some two million people employed in [domestic work in Kenya](#). Although domestic work is not properly documented, the sector is quite significant and plays an important role in driving the country’s economic growth and development.

Nannies, caretakers, cooks, gardeners, cleaners, drivers, and security guards among others, perform important work that makes it possible for professionals and people in business or other occupations to go to their jobs away from home. “The value of domestic work has, however, not been properly recognised”, says Kambo, adding that labour laws in the country have proved to be insufficient in dealing with the issues affecting domestic workers.

Working behind closed doors in gated communities, places domestic workers in personal spaces where they are vulnerable to abuse and harassment without any recourse because the laws of trespass make it difficult for labour officers or rights defenders to check what goes on in homes.

“The employee deals with one employer in a private space. When there is a dispute, it is difficult because they are alone. This type of work threatens the worker’s social connection. They do not know each other’s experience, and so cannot receive community assistance and support”, says Kambo.

For itinerant domestic workers like the washerwomen, the perils are double those experienced by live-in staff.

“You can be summoned and instructed to work from outside the house, working long hours until late”, says Mbatha. “The houses we work in are not the same. There are some places that are okay, and others are so hard but you cannot even speak about it. If you speak out, you will jeopardise future work”.

Staking out for work is a dicey game of chance. There are no toilets, and in the event of rain, there is no shelter from the elements. From their stakeouts, many washerwomen often have no way of estimating the amount of work they are signing up for and so cannot charge appropriately for it. They end up working long hours with no food. They can only leave when all the work is done, and sometimes it is too late to walk home.

“No one knows or recognises us . . . All we want is to be recognised so that we are not harassed and can raise our children from there”.

As the country moves to adopt home-based care for the rising number of COVID-19 patients, itinerant domestic workers will likely play a critical role in supporting families to cope. They have to protect themselves in environments where there might not be water or hand sanitisers.

Although the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied

mobilises and speaks for workers in domestic service, those who undertake itinerant day-wage labour without the protection of contracts remain undefended.

Kenya has yet to accede to the convention on decent work for domestic workers. The convention requires member states to ensure the effective promotion and protection of human rights for all domestic workers, and to respect, promote and realise the fundamental principles and rights at work, such as freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining. States are also required to eliminate all forms of forced or compulsory labour, child labour, and discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Attempts at organising domestic work usually run into strong headwinds. People seeking live-in work in the domestic service register in private bureaus where they are required to pay up to Sh500 and asked to wait for a call, which often never comes. Live-in work has long hours—staff are the first to rise and the last to bed, often eating food of low quality. Those in itinerant labour fare worse.

Unlike motorcycle riders—who are largely male, have mobilised into self-help groups and cultivated a saving culture—washerwomen are not organised and do not go beyond making collective savings. Without enough to live on, meeting and organising becomes that much more difficult. On days when work is scarce, washerwomen borrow money from one another to cross into a new day hoping for better luck.

Beatrice Lucas, a washerwoman living in the Gatina area of Kawangware in Nairobi, says none of the relief assistance meant for people impacted by COVID-19 measures has reached her. Washerwomen have missed out on official emergency relief and assistance because local administrators like location chiefs often map urban dwellings under their jurisdiction when the women are out looking for work.

“You can go a week without assistance or work. Food is handed out to the chief for distribution but the names of beneficiaries are never made public”, she adds.

Community activist Ruth Mumbi, who recently led a protest by washerwomen in the Eastleigh area of Nairobi when they were locked out of work by the lockdown, says the government’s COVID-19 bailouts are focusing on big companies, with Sh2 billion going to the hospitality industry, yet the women who do this work are also in the hospitality industry but they have received nothing.

Kambo argues that the COVID-19 emergency response should broaden its definition of vulnerable populations to embrace daily wage domestic workers beyond the usual categories of the aged, orphans, and people with preexisting health conditions.

There is an urgent need to formalise the domestic workers sector, especially daily wage earners. “We need space set aside for us to meet, register and plan our programmes”, says Ambeyi, adding that women have a variety of skills that can be monetised, such as car washing, which they perform as part of their daily labour.

Mary Wambui, who has done laundry work in Upper Hill for years, wants permanent sheds established with washing machines, and a linkage with motorcycle riders to collect laundry and drop it off after it has been cleaned and pressed, thus reducing personal contact and the opportunity for abuse. House cleaning can also be undertaken commercially, together with car washing.

Many government agencies are unaware of the rights violations in the domestic service sector because of poor documentation, leaving victims with no voice. Kambo reiterates that labour laws do not differentiate workers—domestic, office, plantation and the rest. Domestic workers are different and unique, deserving a separate categorisation. A special regulation is required to accommodate

the domestic worker because this is the one person who cannot unionise.

And because washerwomen serve fellow workers, they should receive treatment free of charge and have their health insurance and social security protection paid for by the state.

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