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► **To cite this version:**

| Rose-Myrllie Joseph. Tying the Apron (English version). *Alaso*, 2021, 1 (1), pp.20-27. hal-03760059

HAL Id: hal-03760059

<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-03760059>

Submitted on 14 Nov 2023

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TYING THE APRON

Rose-Myrllie JOSEPH

TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY JO BLOUNT

Alaso No 1. Rezistans. 2021. Pages 20-27.

Many women from rural environments migrate to cities where they become domestic workers. Whether referred to as servants or maids, these women go to work for families where they carry out a wide range of duties: cooking, cleaning, ironing, running errands, procuring water, caring for the family's dependents as well as anyone in good health who needs a helping hand or who prefers not to demean themselves by doing certain tasks. The work performed by these women makes it possible for city-dwelling women to devote themselves to better-paid activities or even to travel abroad. In turn, these women become domestic workers themselves, allowing women in major countries to engage in more profitable work and move toward greater gender equality. This all forms a chain illustrating the way in which higher-valued work relies on domestic work. It reveals that men's lives depend on the work carried out by women, that women's progress is built on the backs of those most impoverished and that, across borders, small and large countries participate together in the exploitation of the most disadvantaged women.

Working in other people's homes engenders unique relationships, in addition to the meager pay, long days (or even weeks in the case of live-in workers), and the arduous and devalued nature of the work. Working for a "lady", as we love to say in Haiti, means submitting oneself to the authority of another woman trying to manage the frustrations that stem from her own subaltern status. Even if she is a boss, she remains a woman in a sexist society. And while she may be the domestic worker's direct antagonist, who blames, insults, disrespects, and hits her (yes, sometimes maids are beaten!), that is because the domestic and familial responsibilities all fall on her. Women who have the means to do so transfer this heavy domestic burden onto other, less privileged women. When legal loopholes create a general free-for-all, this transfer can be absolute. Thus with a bit of money, one can afford domestic help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week—very convenient in this country where even the middle class does not have access to running water and electricity. We could talk at length about the impact this lack of infrastructure has on domestic tasks, from food conserving to ironing (which, I admit, is entirely optional).

How then are domestic workers treated in this context? They denounce the verbal violence, insults, degrading words, yelling and condescending looks that try to make them feel they are worthless. This constitutes the most unbearable aspect of the work. These workers prefer the smiles, the acknowledgments, the occasional “how are you?” and the left-over food, medicine, and hand-me-downs, even if they know that such gestures only underscore their subordinate position. They like when others value their work, this art of embellishing and scouring with next to nothing—only their two hands that replace so many machines and products. In France, Haitian domestic workers describe being treated like vacuum cleaners. And what about in Haiti? Broom-women broken down by life. Bokit-women bearing the entire weight of other families without even counting their own burdens as mothers, daughters, wives, aunts. Naked women as well, since they are at times sexually exploited by the men of these households. Bichèt-women, who sometimes quit their jobs to become their own boss, working as street vendors under the hot sun, trying to earn a few gourdes on a sidewalk. However, this business falls apart when hard times hit (illness of a relative, school fees, rent...) and these women return under the control of a family. Such is the endless back-and-forth between the street and the apron.

Living, surviving, crying without tears, hoping without hope—these women learned to endure all this from a young age because, often, they were sent to live with a female relative or former neighbor who moved to town or to a big city. There they learned what mama couldn't teach them: the ins and outs of mayonnaise, ceramics, electric irons or even make-up. They were also supposed to learn to read and write, however all that is frivolous for poor urban families who only survive by exploiting poor rural families. Perhaps the auntie they go to live with is a servant who ensures through force that the restavèk looks after her home while she herself takes care of other people's families. Thus it is often said that the poorest families treat their workers the worst, in the same way that the devil's wife is crueler than the devil (*Lougawou fanm pi mal pase lougawou gason*). But if we are being honest, it is especially important to acknowledge that at the maid's house, there is even less to eat for the restavèk. When resources dry up, the eldest daughter is used to make ends meet. She may complain of being treated as a servant by her mother (the fathers are as invisible as the bosses of the employing families), who prevents her 15-year-old daughter from returning to school (“Who will look after your two-year-old sister and baby?”). Poor mother! Poor daughter! Poor women from poor neighborhoods in poor little countries! And I do not digress, because if this girl does not end up with a man who will give her a second child before leaving her, she will also have to go work for a lady in order to earn a little money doing in other people's houses what she did for free in her

mother's home. These domestic servants of Port-au-Prince appear to be younger and younger. Mothers have certainly fought for better futures for their daughters, but since sexual and reproductive rights are not guaranteed, these girls, highly vulnerable to the risks of pregnancy, become maids themselves. Poverty reproduces itself. As does servitude.

One could also highlight the case of female workers in institutional settings (cleaning women in office buildings, for example) or male employees (caretakers, gason lakou), point out moments of kindness described by female and male workers or, on the contrary, insist further on the horrors. Instead, I will conclude by underlining the State's responsibility in this relationship of servitude where everything falls within the employers' direction, contingent on their good or bad faith and socioeconomic condition. A law, then a decree or executive order, emphasizing that this type of work exists without treating it like just any activity, what does it change? As the years pass, everything changes and yet nothing changes. The more it changes, the less it changes. And yet, something must change!

Rose-Myrlie Joseph

2021