

Reflections on Researching Domestic Workers in Lagos, Nigeria

LSE's Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed discusses the practical challenges and dilemmas faced in researching domestic workers in Lagos, Nigeria as presented at a recent LSE Africa seminar.

Domestic work is a highly-discussed aspect of daily life in Nigeria, yet there is protectiveness about disclosing information surrounding the details of the employment. How then do you go about *accessing, selecting, interviewing and interacting* with domestic workers?



A market in Lagos where many domestic workers do the shopping for their employers

I am from Nigeria, so going back to Lagos to do fieldwork did present some immediate advantages. I did not need time to find my way around and I understood if participants used slang or used cultural references during interviews. However, doing research in one's own city is not without its challenges. While it is not possible to explore all the issues raised during the presentation, I will highlight a few of them.

My research is an account of the lives of male and female domestic workers in Lagos, Nigeria. It looks at the forms of control they experience in their daily interactions with their employers, as well as the multiple ways they respond to such control. This qualitative study involved eight months of fieldwork from November 2011 to July 2012 in Lagos, during which a total of 79 interviews were conducted.^[1]

In this research I used a snowball-sampling technique to access domestic workers.

I identified several different "snowballs" (relatives, friends, domestic workers) who were then asked to name an acquaintance who might be interested in participating in my study. Each new participant was then asked to recommend someone they knew.

The domestic workers whom I initially approached immediately saw me as part of the employing class, and either dismissed me (fearing that I would pass on their revelations to their employers leading to loss of their jobs) or enthusiastically welcomed me assuming I, or my family, was seeking to hire them or offer some assistance. Workers gave a mixture of unexpected reactions, ranging from outright disdain and unwillingness to participate once finding out that no compensation or referrals for jobs were on offer, to showing no interest or being overly cautious

even after agreeing to be interviewed. Others initially reacted to me in a deferential manner that signified the kinds of power relations operating in their work places. While older domestic workers referred to me as “sister”, younger ones called me as “Ma” or “Aunty”. These different responses were shaped in part by my own social positioning. Being young, single, middle-class and internationally educated, my identity generated layers of tensions that made the fieldwork extremely complicated.

Once I got over the hurdle of *accessing* participants another challenge was *securing* interviews. As most domestic workers live with their employers, the living situation of domestic workers added a complicated dimension to accessing them and securing a safe and comfortable space to hold interviews. My primary focus was ensuring that the workers would feel free to discuss the nature of their work situation in an open environment. For domestic workers, and particularly women who lived-in, there were numerous obstacles to meeting and conducting confidential interviews which proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of my research. My methods of accessing and interviewing domestic workers, especially live-ins, necessitated creativity. Meeting workers when they were sent on errands was one method. Interviews were also held at times that were convenient for the domestic workers (e.g. days off), and always in a location of their choice (e.g. public spaces, outside spaces in the employers’ home) so as not to interfere with their work and to ensure as much as possible their freedom to respond truthfully.

Once a location had been secured, *engaging* the workers was difficult. Initially, some of the workers were sceptical about their stories being recorded. This was due to, as previously mentioned, fear of losing their jobs. It was only after hesitation, plying me with many questions, my reassuring them of their privacy, and stressing that the information would be treated as completely confidential that they then gave their oral consent to participate. In many cases, even after reassurance, workers did not want to be tape-recorded. I took notes in these situations. Anonymity, confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms were guaranteed to avoid risk of identification. Participants were also made aware that they had the choice to refuse to answer sensitive questions or terminate the interview at any time.

As briefly explored here, a researcher’s interactions with participants are informed by personal backgrounds, expectations, and lived experiences. The discussion following the seminar brought up many issues including the “messiness” of research and how to overcome some of the inherent inequalities presented. One of the suggestions was for me to have worked as a domestic worker. Would the power differentials have been reduced if I became a domestic worker during the course of my research?

[1] This involved narrative interviews with 63 domestic workers, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 employers, as well as a small number of interviews (4) with people who were directly or indirectly involved with domestic work in Nigeria.

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