# Chapter 9
# The Role of House Helps in Work–Family Balance of Women Employed in the Formal Sector in Kenya

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## Introduction

As in many other sub-Saharan African countries, transition to modern industrial economy has been slow in Kenya. About 67.7 % of the country's 38.6 million people (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2009) live in rural areas. Of the 32.3 % Kenyans that live in towns and cities, more than a quarter live in the country's capital, Nairobi (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2009). Although much of the population is still rural, recent decades have witnessed an increasing trend toward rural–urban migration due to declining land productivity and shrinking incomes from agriculture. Women make a significant proportion of this rural–urban migration stream, a trend that can be partly attributed to the increasing levels of education among females in the country.

As women increasingly move to cities, the majority of them end up taking employment in the informal sector because of prevalent unemployment in Kenya. According to Atieno (2010), Kenyan women constitute only 29 % of formal employment sector, where about 70 % are employed in low income jobs. By the same token, the informal sector absorbs most of the women who take jobs as casual laborers often in traditional female occupations.

To add on, poverty and the growing necessity for women to earn incomes are other factors pushing women into the labour market (Atieno 2010). For example, as in many other African countries, the increasing number of female-headed households in Kenya suggests that many women carry the sole responsibility as economic providers and caregivers for their children (Mokomane 2012). There is also anecdotal evidence that some men want spouses who participate in some income-generating activity to increase family incomes. This marks a departure from earlier decades when men preferred to marry women who simply stayed at home to take care of household chores.

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Thus, unlike 20 years ago, Kenyan women working in both formal and informal sectors now have to grapple with work and family demands, and face several challenges in trying to reconcile them. Indeed, a number of Kenyan scholars have identified work–family conflict as a major factor that inhibits women's potential in many areas of their life including ascendancy to positions of leadership in business and politics. Suda (2002), for example, examined gender disparities in the Kenyan market with the aim of identifying causes of poverty and ways to reduce this poverty. The study identified heavy domestic work load along with low education, lack of access to resources, limited skills, as well as cultural factors and perceptions as some of the factors that cause gender disparities in the Kenyan market.

In the same vein, an examination of social and cultural barriers that hinder Kenyan women's aspiration to leadership positions by Kiamba (2008) identified family and work–family conflict, coupled with culture and cultural expectations as major factors. Mangatu (2010) similarly ranked work–family conflict as the major factor out of nine reasons that affect women in leadership positions in Kenyan banks. Mangatu noted that although the banking industry had fairly equal number of male and female employees, only two women were chief executive officers in 45 commercial banks in Kenya. Mangatu attributed this partly to the "glass ceiling[1]" effect in their career advancement. A study on women's participation in educational leadership undertaken among female primary school teachers in Nairobi and Thika municipalities (Ombati 2003) found that while women constitute 59 % of teachers in municipal schools they were under-represented in school leadership: 42 % were deputy teachers and 45 % were head teachers. The failure to adequately reconcile the demands of work and family was cited as one of the reasons that affected women advancement to leadership positions in the education sector.

An important coping strategy for workers facing work–family conflict has, for a long time, been the extended family whereby the wide range of relatives is called upon to assist with childcare and other household responsibilities. For example, working women who cannot afford to employ a house help or to enroll their children in private daycare centers often take the children to stay with grandparents in rural areas. Furthermore, the widespread practice of co-residing with younger siblings and other relatives who often come to urban areas to seek higher education and/or employment opportunities provides working women with a source of social support for care and households responsibilities. However, with the ever increasing cost of living in urban areas, many families are no longer able to accommodate extended family members for long periods. Co-residence with relatives is thus becoming more or less a temporary measure.

Against this background the employment of domestic workers or "house helps" has emerged as an important coping strategy. It is estimated, for example, that half

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[1] This has been described as "the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements" (United States Department of Labor 1995, 4).

of households in Nairobi employ house helps (Family Health International 2009). While this is also the case in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example, Chap. 3 in this book for Zimbabwe), the few sub-Saharan Africa studies on these domestic workers have tended to be one-sided, looking at the *labor* implications of employing young girls, and the maltreatment of these workers by their employers. Thus, to contribute to the closure of this research gap, this chapter explores the benefits and limitations of using house helps, and proposes plausible solutions that could alleviate the limitations and/or enhance the benefits of these types of assistance.

## Why Families Seek External Help in Housework and Childcare

The inflexible work schedules that are characteristic of the urban formal sector in Kenya and, indeed in much of sub-Saharan Africa, forces many workers to employ house helps as a strategy to balance work and family demands. In this section, I use my own experiences as a working wife and mother, as well as my observations to discuss some of the benefits and limitations of this strategy.

### *Benefits*

As discussed earlier, the majority of working women in Kenya are engaged in the informal sector. Not withstanding the poor productivity, poor economic security, high levels of poverty, and poor access to social security among workers in this sector, (Mokomane 2009), its relatively flexible hours means that the women working in it do not have major challenges in relation to combining work and family roles. Indeed, research from other African countries such as Angola (Ceita 1999 cited by González and Grinspun 2001), Zambia (JUDAI and Associates 2005), and Zimbabwe (Marcucci 2001) found that it is because of the flexible hours that women working in the countries' informal sector are able to efficiently fulfill their household and childcare responsibilities.

Work–family conflict, therefore, tends to be higher in the urban formal sector where working hours typically start from 08:00 to 17:00, Monday to Friday (weekends and public holidays are normally "off-days"). Many jobs in this sector are also shift-based with a typical shift lasting between six and eight hours in duration. Therefore, while many women prefer jobs in the formal sector because of the better working conditions and remuneration, they often find it difficult to organize work around their free time because of the fixed working hours. In essence, one is either at work the full day or for a great part of the day or night.

In Kenya, the demands posed by work and family domains also tend to differ depending on whether one works in a small town, in a peri-urban area, or a big city. For instance, my first job in the country was as a teacher in a high school in a peri-urban area, in the outskirts of a small town. The school had 14 staff members; 7 women, and 7 men. Mostly, the seven women had at least one child under the age of three. The women generally preferred a house help to other forms of arrangement such as childcare or daycare services because the child could be raised within the home environment. Thus, most of the women were adamant that the domestic worker should not be a total stranger but be a close relative or, at the very least, someone from the same ethnic group. Therefore, given that the school was located in an area populated by a different ethnic group from that of most teachers, many of them sought domestic workers from their villages. Overall, the teachers with young children only took them to daycare and other childcare arrangements as an ad-hoc measure while they looked for a house help or her replacement (if she left suddenly, without giving notice—which was a common). Although I had no children and did not need a house help per se, I also stayed with my sister who helped me with housework chores.

My second job was at a private university in Zimbabwe. At this time, I had a young baby, and the Zimbabwean breastfeeding policy allowed women to break early from work daily, to breastfeed until the baby was 6 months old. Additionally, the timetable at the university was fairly flexible especially in the mornings and evenings. I, nonetheless, preferred a house help who came in 6 days a weeks to help with childcare. This was also the case among the several international staff employed by the university. Like the natives, they also depended a lot on house helps—either as "day workers" (who came in for a few days a week) or as "stay-in" house helps—for childcare and other domestic chores.

Later, when I went back home to Kenya—by then having two young children—I got a job with yet another private university in Nairobi. The dynamics of the city are such that many workers leave very early for work and return home late at night as traffic jams are a daily phenomenon. Because of the transport challenges in Nairobi, it was very hard for me to be able to prepare my young children in the morning for the school bus that picked them up at 07:30 am. In addition, someone had to meet the children when the bus dropped them off at 16:40 pm. To this end, I preferred a house help to daycare services. House helps also often supervise children as they do their homework since parents arrive late from work. They also act as security agents during the day to protect their employers' houses and properties.

## Limitations

The foregoing section illustrates how house helps are a sheer necessity in many of Africa's big cities and towns. However, relying significantly on these workers has its own limitations. To the extent that they are tasked with some of the most

sensitive responsibilities in any household (such as looking after very young children and household goods), and that many of them are in fact strangers to their employers, if the employment relationship sours they can—as anecdotal evidence suggests—harm the children or collude with criminals to rob the employers of their valuable belongings. Furthermore, to the extent that mothers are seen as the best sources of high quality childcare (Duncan et al. 2004), over-reliance on house helps and daycare is often blamed for delegating the role of parents to others; for decreasing interaction between children and their parents; and for delinquency among children.

Another limitation of hiring house helps is that the tasks of the working mother are assigned to another (often relatively poorer) woman. This has been shown to reinforce the gender, racial, and class lines (Williams 2000). In the United States, for example, most of the people who work as house helps or nannies are poor women, mostly women of color, who work for predominantly white privileged women of the upper middle and upper classes. Williams blames this pattern for causing conflict between the working class and the middle class as women who cannot afford nannies or daycare centers end up staying at home to take care of their children while those who can afford manage to pursue careers and other income-generating activities. In sub-Saharan Africa, this system can, in the same vein, reinforce existing gender and class lines because it is the upper class middle income families employing those from low income brackets.

The work of house helps is also generally undervalued (Tracy 2008) and attracts low wages. Most of the pay and work conditions depend largely on the relationship between the employer and the house help. Indeed, it is common for house helps to simply quit a job without any notice, whatsoever, when they become unhappy about their work arrangement. In fact, many house helps use the quit strategy to manage their work and/or to negotiate better conditions or pay. This leaves the employer insecure and vulnerable because they never know when the house help may be leaving them (Tracy 2008).

It is also noteworthy that most sub-Saharan countries, including Kenya, are signatories of International Labour Organization and hence are mandated to enforce minimum wage legislation. However, if such legislation is fully enforced, it will make the use of domestic workers possible a preserve of the well-off. It may also worsen unemployment among domestic workers as many people may not be able to afford them (Kariuki 2011). Indeed, a new government legislation passed in 2011 to enforce minimum wages for domestic workers in Kenya was met with mixed reactions from the Kenyan population (Muiruri 2011); many families that currently employ domestic workers wondered whether they would be able to afford them in the first place, with many facing litigations over unpaid statutory fees (Karambu 2011). Others speculated that new housework and childcare arrangements may now emerge to fill the gap once provided by the house helps, and that some women may have to remain at home with their children until they attain school age (Juma 2011).

## *Plausible Solutions*

In discussion, there are several options that can be explored to either reduce over-reliance of house helps or improve their utilization so as to enhance work–family balance among working women in Kenya. These include community-initiated solutions; employer-initiated solutions; family-initiated solutions; as well as the improvement of communication between employers and house helps.

### Community-Initiated Solutions

Community-initiated solutions are childcare arrangements in the form of daycare centers similar to those set up by women in Senegal, Ghana, and Ethiopia in the 1990s (Mehra et al. 1992). In Senegal, the rural daycare centers were seasonal and used mostly during the rice planting season. In Ethiopia, the women started the "Melka Oba" which was a cooperative society that catered for children aged between 45 days and 6 years. In the Ghanaian capital of Accra, women in retail business set up the "Accra Market Women's Association" to care for their young children (Mehra et al. 1992). While these community programmes eventually required additional financial assistance from other sources to be sustainable, they proved to be very reliable, in that they were near where the mothers worked or lived, and operated throughout the day to match the mothers' work schedules. Although these specific centers provided for only a few children, it is possible to replicate the concept in other regions and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, given that childcare has traditionally been viewed as a collective role in African households, these community models can be particularly useful for women working in the informal sector with minimum assistance from the government and donor agencies.

### Employer-Initiated Solutions

Employer-initiated models are arrangements where organizations have family-friendly policies designed specifically to minimize the conflict between work and family or home demands. The employer may allow flexible work schedules and/or built day care centers within or close to the place of work. In Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, the adoption of family-friendly policies is left entirely to individual organizations to implement. In other countries like the United Kingdom it is enforced by employment legislation that enables caregivers of young children, disabled persons, and elderly parents to have flexible work hours. In Japan, the legislation mandates parental leave, shorter weekly working hours and flexible work schedules as a way to increase women's participation in the formal sector (Beauregard and Henry 2009).

The utilization of these policies, however, tends to depend on direct supervisors who are in a position to make a decision on the use of the policies, and to determine the fit between the employee needs and organization needs (Beauregard and Henry 2009). Studies in the United States, for example, have shown that managers who have directly benefitted from family-friendly policies are more likely to endorse them in their own organizations than those who have not benefitted from such policies. For instance, executives who have had stay-at-home wives were less likely to endorse family-friendly policies than those who have had working wives (Tracy and Rivera 2010). Nonetheless, employer-initiated solutions are worthy of consideration in sub-Saharan Africa where they are yet to be developed.

## Family-Initiated Solutions

Family-initiated solutions include arrangements where couples scale back on work commitments at different times to provide for the family and children, and for each other's career progression (Becker and Moen 1999). A study of middle income couples in upstate New York showed that some couples came with their own work–family balance arrangements, while some employed scaling-back strategies. The latter entail one spouse having a "job" and the other a "career", and both accepting the resulting limitations and tradeoffs (Becker and Moen 1999). This is often the case when the couples have young children: one spouse would do a part-time job and the other engages in a career that requires more time.

The strategy could also entail putting limits on the type of jobs, couples would take for the sake of the family. For example, one spouse or partner would turn down jobs or promotions that required relocation or a lot of traveling so as to create time for the family. Sometimes, when one partner or spouse had established himself or herself in their career, they would then spend more time with the family, and the other would put in more hours at work to catch up (Becker and Moen 1999). By doing this, both partners managed to have time for their families and career.

While this idea could also be applied also in sub-Saharan Africa there are several potential limitations. For example, as discussed earlier most formal jobs in the sub-continent typically have fixed reporting and departure time, and most lack any type of flexibility. Workers, who are able to work flexible time, are to a large extent, those in self-employment or in the informal sector. However, while any partner who is self-employed is in a position to invest more time for the family, women are more likely than men to scale their hours or to do the informal jobs and create time for the family. This is largely due to cultural stereotypes that dictate that housework and childcare are the responsibilities of the woman.

**Improved Communication Between House Helps and Their Employers**

Given the generally poor implementation of labour laws in many sub-Saharan African countries, if an employer is unhappy with a house help, they can dismiss the helper immediately without notice. Similarly, if the house help is unhappy with the terms of work, they may leave their jobs with literally no notice to the employer. Thus, one of the keys to successful relationships between house helps and their employers is the nature of communication between the two. Scholarship from the field of organizational communication suggests that effective communication between the employee and the employer is necessary in order to develop a productive working relationship. The way employers and their families communicate and treating domestic workers are very critical. A lack of good communication often leads to misunderstandings and conflict. This is largely, why some employers rarely retain the same domestic worker or house help for more than six months, while others manage to retain the same house help for more than three years.

There are several useful theoretical frameworks for understanding the important communication process in negotiating employer—house help relationships. One is Martin Buber's concept of 'I-Thou' dialog (Buber and Smith 2000); through which Buber encouraged human communication to be centered on "I-Thou" relationship rather than "I-It" relationship. The latter treats the other person as an object of manipulation while "I-Thou" looks at the whole person who is unique and should be accepted unconditionally. Buber also emphasized the concept of the interpersonal dialogue. It has also been argued that the interpersonal communication between two parties could be enhanced if the parties are willing to listen and enter into meaningful relationships that are genuine, respectful, and with empathic understanding (Broome 2009). Applying these notions, employer and domestic worker need to both treat each other with dignity and be willing to cultivate a meaningful working relationship.

Another useful framework is provided by Shell (2006), who encourages both parties to see the world from the other person's point of view and also consider how the interests and goals of the other party would further one's own goals. Similarly Fisher et al. (2011), encourage negotiating parties in an employment deal not to negotiate from their positions of power but rather to identify the interests and concerns of the other party. Since the employer is in a position of power, vis-à-vis the employee, then they have to identify the genuine interests of their workers, especially their pay package.

## Summary and Recommendations

Using Kenya as a case study, this chapter explored some of the key challenges faced by working women who have childcare responsibilities in sub-Saharan Africa. The need for domestic workers or house helps, as well as the benefits and

limitations of this coping strategy were also explored. The chapter further discussed the potential solutions—including improved communication between house helps and their employers—that can assist women to efficiently reconcile their family and family demands.

Based on the overall discussion, the key conclusion is that there is a need to address the challenges of work–family conflict as a topical policy issue in the same way as, say, climate change or HIV/AIDS is tackled in order to create awareness and sensitize people in sub-Saharan Africa. As Tracy (2008) asserts, work–family issues need to be addressed as societal or national issue, and not as a "women's issue".

It is imperative, however, that policies to enhance work-life balance in sub Saharan Africa are congruent with African culture and are not wholesale adoption of policies from the West. Thus, to the extent that much of the literature that informs such policies is located in the West, there is a need to undertake African-based research to inform the development of context-specific policies in the continent. Among the key research questions that are worthy of study are the following:

- Understanding—against the background of rapid urbanization, rising levels of female literacy and women participation in the formal employment sector—the emerging work–family challenges in sub-Saharan Africa by comparing contemporary issues with those of prior decades, as well as those in developed countries.
- Establishing the extent to which the high proportion of women in the informal sector can be explained by the challenges they face in combining work and domestic roles and exploring ways to reverse this trajectory.
- Establishing the attitudes of executives who are the gatekeepers of organizational policies including work–family policies and determining if they are aware of, or need to be sensitized on, the importance of these and other related policies.
- Investigating the effects of family-friendly policies (or the lack thereof) on the wellbeing of women and workers in general, and the productivity of institutions and organizations in sub Saharan Africa.
- Understanding how sub-Saharan Africa is responding to pressure from international institutions and organizations to formalize domestic workers remuneration arrangements. Will domestic workers be abandoned with consequent collapse of informal house help arrangements, in preference of more formal alternative professional childcare arrangements?
- Establishing the reasons why, despite Sub-Saharan Africa being a collectivistic society, very few community-initiated childcare arrangements have been established.
- Determine if there are differences in work performance and communication between house helps who have their own children and those who do not have any children.

- Comparing work–family balance challenges of (i) wage-employed versus self-employed females and (ii) women working in rural and in urban areas.

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