

## 9. Women Fieldworkers' Collaborative Research: On the History of House-Girls in Vanuatu

Margaret Rodman, Leisara Kalotiti and Numalin Mahana

This chapter describes a unique, collaborative project with contributions from twenty-one indigenous and four expatriate women. It led to a book, called *House-Girls Remember* that was launched in spirit at the Port Vila Conference in November 2006, and published in 2007. At the conference the three of us collaborated in anecdotally presenting material from our research. Here, in a more formal way, we offer some excerpts from our respective sections of the book, edited and summarised to reflect what we talked about at the conference. Margaret Rodman spoke about, and has revised here, material she co-authored with Daniela Kraemer, Lissant Bolton, and Jean Tarisesei. While the conference presentation was in Bislama, this chapter, like our book, is in English with text boxes in Bislama.

### Margaret Rodman

While women's history is a popular topic globally, Pacific Island women have had few opportunities to conduct research and publish in this field. A 2001 workshop in Port Vila on the history of house-girls in Vanuatu provided such an opportunity. The goal of our workshop was to record the recollections of indigenous women who had lived and worked as house-girls during the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, before Vanuatu gained independence in 1980.<sup>1</sup> This was a special workshop for selected women fieldworkers with an interest in moving beyond training workshops to conduct historical research. Lissant Bolton and Jean Tarisesei convened the workshop for which I had obtained funding as part of a larger study of gender and race in Vanuatu's settler history.<sup>2</sup> The results of this collaborative research project were so interesting and important for ni-Vanuatu and other Pacific islanders that we decided to publish them as a co-edited book.

In addition to our contributions as editors, the resulting book includes workshop reports by eleven ni-Vanuatu women fieldworkers and ten others

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1 For historical context regarding the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides see MacClancy (1981) and Bresnihan and Woodward (2002).

2 For financial support of this project, we are grateful to York University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

who spoke about their personal experiences as house-girls.<sup>3</sup> A York student, Daniela Kraemer, contributed the results of her research with Port Vila-area house-girls in 2001, and co-edited the book. Jean Mitchell contributed a piece on a Vietnamese orphan who became a house-girl.

Employers of house-girls discussed in our workshop included English or French government officials, missionaries, and settlers (planters, traders, and small business people). Most of the employers were considered to be white (mainly English- or French-speaking), but the women identified some employers in Bislama as *Sinwa*, which literally means Chinese (from the French *chinois*), but includes Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians. The cost of labour was low enough that virtually every expatriate had the option of hiring a house-girl in the colonial period. Domestic workers were essential to maintaining even a fairly simple expatriate lifestyle. The climate, the kind of housing employers lived in, and the lifestyle to which they aspired required constant defence, waged with brooms and buckets, against ants, rats, cockroaches, mosquitoes, spider webs and mud.

A few house-girls worked for ni-Vanuatu women who lived with white men, and one in our workshop worked for a white woman married to a ni-Vanuatu man, but all had western lifestyles. Today, many house-girls work for ni-Vanuatu couples (see Ch. 9), but before independence this was rare. The workshop recorded one such experience from the early days of the independence movement in 1970, as Leisara Kalotiti describes in the next section.

## Working for a leader of the independence movement

### Leisara Kalotiti

I was born on 17 May 1956. I finished school in 1969 and I wasn't doing anything in particular. In 1970, Peter Taurokoto (from Lelepa Island off North Efate) was transferred to Santo as Assistant Education Officer. He was married to Nelly (from Tongoa) and they had one daughter at that time. So I went to work for them as their house-girl. That's what they called me. I was afraid on the flight to Santo; it was the first time I had been on a plane. I knew nothing about being

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3 The fieldworkers participating in the workshop were: Numalin Mahana (Tanna), Mailie Michael (Tanna), Lena Kalmat (Pango), Leisara Kalotiti (North Efate), Lesaruru Tamearu (North Efate), Sinlemas Kalo (North Efate), Lewia Charlie (Tongoa), Lucy Moses (Ambrym), Tanni Frazer (Malakula), Siaban Denison (Pentecost), Kate Ruth (Banks). The former house-girls were: Edna Albert (Pango), Eva Kaltapan (Pango), Netty Joseph (North Efate), Lonnnette Tasale (North Efate), Lepakoa Dick (Tongoa), Rachel (Ambrym), Estelle (Malakula), Robin Ken (Malakula), Françoise Molwai (Pentecost), Jocelyn Kibi (Banks).

a house-girl. I didn't know how to use an electric iron or anything like that. Nelly showed me how to use the settings on the iron—steam, cotton, delicate. Nelly taught at Sarakata Primary School. They lived in the British Paddock (headquarters for the British District Agency, Northern District) on the edge of town.

I still remember that on 26 March, Donald Kalpokas, who was teaching at Hog Harbour, went with Peter to Malo Island to hold a discussion about the government taking over the education system. They wanted to know what the Malo people thought about this and they found out! The Malo people were so angry about this news that they refused to feed Donald and Peter. After that, the two men stayed up very late talking. That's when they decided to form a Cultural Association (that led to the formation of the Vanua'aku Pati). The District Agent asked them to come to his house, not his office, and he loaned them a truck. They drove to the Rarua family's place to talk more about their plans. They concluded that all land should come back to ni-Vanuatu, and they decided to press for independence.

So I worked as a house-girl for a man who was part of the beginning of the independence movement. I looked after the firstborn, Nancy (who became a nurse) and then I looked after the second daughter, Amy (who became the first ni-Vanuatu woman to train as an airplane pilot). My salary was \$12 Australian every two weeks. Peter and Nelly opened a savings account for me. After I married I stopped working for them, but they would give me gifts of sugar when they saw me in town. They were kind to me.

*Having trained as a house-girl with the Taurokota family, in 1972 Leisara went to work for an Australian pastor in Paton Memorial Church named John Casey, a man she remembers for his kindness.*

## Working for kindly Pastor Casey

Leisara Kalotiti

When my father, who was an elder, went to a Presbyterian meeting, Pastor Casey told my father that he wanted a house-girl. So my father came back to our island, and told me to think about whether I wanted to work for Pastor Casey, or not. I thought that he would be all right, and that if he didn't find another house-girl, I would be happy to go and work for him.

I worked for Pastor Casey for one year. Pastor Casey had five children, two boys and three girls. The two boys lived in Australia, and the two girls lived in the

New Hebrides, as Vanuatu was called before. They gave me a room, and so I slept in the house with them. They ate in the morning, and in the afternoon, and we shared the food. Whatever they ate, I also ate.



**Figure 9.1. Women fieldworkers at the conference in 2006, including Leisara Kalotiti (far right) who contributed to House-Girls Remember**

(John Taylor, photographer)

You all know what we black people eat, but the white people, some of the white people's food we don't know. So sometimes when the food came to the table, I would look at the food; I wouldn't know what it was, and I would be frightened. Some of their food I knew but I remember one food that I didn't know. It came in a tin, the mushroom I think. When we wanted to eat, I felt like I was going to throw up. I tasted a little, that's all. But I tried it anyway because my boss said that I had to eat, that if I didn't eat I'd be hungry. And so I ate.

I didn't think about going home on the weekends. Only one time did I go home on the weekend. I slept with them in the house, and I saw that their ways were good. The food that we ate, we shared it together. So I didn't really think about going home. I only went home one time. The time that I did go, I came back Sunday afternoon, because Monday I had to start work again. So I didn't go back to the island too much, just one time that's all.

I was glad to work for them. The *misis* and the master, their ways were good. They paid me \$5 Australian every two weeks. I swept the house, I washed the plates, I cleaned around outside, I washed the bathroom and the toilet. Sometimes the *misis* would send me to the market to buy vegetables. Sometimes the *misis* would make a list for me to go down to the store to go shopping. I would go and make the shopping at the Burns Philp, now it's called the General Store, it's close to the market house. So that's the place where I would go to make the shopping.

Their ways were good, and their children were also kind to me. Whenever they would come back from school they would bring back some chocolate. And when I finished doing one thing, they would sing out to me, 'Stop your work and come and we'll eat some biscuits or some chocolate.'

I was happy to be with them. The pastor took care of me. He knew that being on the island was different, that life was different. That when you come to town, life is different, town is different. When I stayed with them in Vila, he took care of me. He would tell me that if I wanted to go out I would have to tell them where I was going and when I would come back to the house.

I worked for them for one year then I went back to my island. I was married in 1977. My husband was a teacher who lived on Tanna. So we went to Tanna, and stayed there until I was about to give birth for a second time in 1982. That year, we all came back to Efate for the Christmas holidays. When we were back I went by the hospital. Pastor Casey saw me in town, and said to me, 'You know where we live, that we're at the Paton Memorial Church, so why did you wander around town like this, and you didn't come and say hello to us in the house where we all ate together?' That is what he said to me. I was frightened. He said, 'Next time you go to the hospital, you have to come to the house.'

So when I went to their house, he and the *misis* said we had to go to the office. And when we went to the office, they put a sewing machine on the table and told me that they were giving the machine to me. It's a second-hand machine from an Australian man. An Australian man brought it with him and left it at the church office. That man had paid for it, but they gave it to me for free. I took it. I used it on Tanna, I still use it today. Once it had a small problem, but I managed to fix it. So I still use it today.

In January, I went to the hospital to give birth to my baby. Pastor Casey was there visiting a friend of his. He saw me at the hospital. At the hospital, the food is not what you and I black people like to eat. So the time when he came, he passed by and saw me. He asked me what time I had come to the hospital. I told him that I had come yesterday. He looked at the plate of food that they had given me. It was on the little cupboard that they give you at the hospital to put

your things inside. My plate had two bananas that weren't ripe at all, and this soup. He came and said, 'Leisara, is this your food?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'How is it possible for a woman to give birth to a baby when all they give her to eat are unripe bananas?' He told me that he wasn't happy with the food they had given me, that I shouldn't eat it, that when they come in I should tell them to take the food away. He said that he was going to tell his wife to prepare some food and he would bring it. So I didn't eat the hospital food. He went to his house. The *misis* prepared some food for me, and he brought it in a container. Later he brought me some fruit, some apples, pears and oranges. He came and gave it all to me. That day was Saturday. In the afternoon I started feeling some small pain. At about midnight I gave birth to my baby.

On Sunday morning, he came and visited me. He came by, and he said that he had gone to the ward, and he had asked the nurse. So he had found out that I had given birth to twins, two boys, but that one was alive, and one was dead. When he came in, he was sorry that I had lost one of the twins. He came and prayed. And he gave me some encouraging talk. When he went back to his house, he told the *misis* that Leisara gave birth to twins, but sadly, only one lived.

So, in my opinion, this master, his ways were good. He was very good. I remember he told me to call him 'papa', and her 'mama'. Our friendship was very good. Our relationship was strong. I liked them, and they too liked me.

## Collaborative research in practice

Margaret Rodman

The history of house-girls project has methodological significance for anthropological fieldwork. Part of our intent was to produce a book that: 1. shows how unwritten histories of women's experiences can be documented in Pacific Island contexts; 2. demonstrates ways in which indigenous women can write their own histories of gendered experience in colonial contexts; and 3. suggests what collaborative roles indigenous and expatriate anthropologists can play in this process. Indigenous fieldworkers are central to this collaboration, yet foreign scholars are not excluded. In sum, the collaborative approach demonstrates possibilities for redefining post-colonial research in Pacific anthropology and beyond. Leisara Kalotiti clearly contributed to achieving these goals, as did Numalin Mahana, a fieldworker from Tanna, who used the metaphor of a house to put into words the sense of shared involvement with a project bigger than any one of us:

[This research] is like a house which has a treasure inside—you have to open the doors to see this treasure. I don't know if the metaphor makes sense, but it is as if you have to open a door or a window, and when you do you see instructions telling you where to go. You open another door, and then you see an arrow pointing in the direction you should follow next. What interests me so much about fieldworker research, is that the more research you do, the more you find that the work is without end, it goes on and on.

Numalin went on to comment on the diversity of kinds of white people who employed house-girls:

The topic of this workshop, house-girls, seems to me to be an especially large one, because if you classify white people, then you have traders of many nationalities, there are many kinds of missionaries, there are the nuns, the hospital matrons. These people don't do the same work; there are doctors, district agents, teachers, many different professions. I'm talking here from the perspective from my island: there were many different kinds of people who worked on Tanna, which was a centre like Santo, Malakula and Vila. That is why I think this is no small subject.

She offered recollections from her Tanna childhood when she lived with her grandmother who was a house-girl for a missionary family and later with an aunt who worked for a trader. Numalin was curious about the white people and a keen though covert observer of their customs and culture.

## **Studying white people's ways as a Tanna girl**

Numalin Mahana

When I lived with my grandmother, I was able to see how she worked for the missionary. She worked, but I just played. I went to watch her do her master's ironing. The missionary did the washing, but the washing was done in a kind of washing machine. I can't describe the machine now, my memory isn't clear, but I remember a big iron thing, when it was turned on all the clothes flew around in it. All of us used to hide so we could watch it—me and all the village children. When we heard the truck coming we used to run away, we'd hide. Or if the missionary turned up, we would take off and hide. Eventually we discovered that the missionary was kind and wasn't going to chase us, and then we began to feel free to come out of our hiding places.

When a child was sick or one of us fell down, we used to go and ask for medicine, because when the missionaries came—I don't know if this was true in other

places too—when they came, they were well-equipped, they had medicines. In those days there was no hospital, they treated people in the village. So they worked as doctors too. Anybody who was sick used to go to them; we always used to go to them.

At the time I'm talking about I wasn't yet going to school, the bigger children went to school. I used to follow them, I used to go and watch. Sometimes I used to watch the trucks. Two or three trucks would come, with lots of white people inside. We would go and hide and look through the window, or through the holes, to see what the white people were doing. Our parents told us about the war, how in the past men had fought and raced around. When we looked at the white men like this we were trying to find out what they would do. Would they bring guns, or would they bring tinned fish or tinned meat or something else? We couldn't communicate with them. It was hard to talk. Eventually the missionaries learnt our language and talked to us, and then we went closer to them, we mixed together and played.

They gave rice and tinned meat to my grandmother, and she cooked it in a special style. She would boil the rice and then turn the tinned meat into it and stir it, mixing it together. I don't know if you're familiar with this style of cooking or not, but that was the kind they made. When they shared out the food, many of us there lined up for it. They didn't share it out on plates, they served it on newspapers that they had finished reading. My grandmother would put a small helping on some newspaper, and pass it to us. We felt pretty pleased that we'd done better than other children by getting to eat some of the missionaries' leftovers.

That's about as much as I remember. Once I started going to school I learned that they were missionaries and that we must respect them. So I stopped going to their house, and I didn't eat their food any more. I kept away. I kept away because I knew that it was important to be respectful towards them. So that's the first experience I remember.

My second experience was when I stayed with an aunt of mine who also worked for a white man. He was a businessman, an Australian. He came by himself, without a wife, and he made his station near our village. Someone in our family gave him the land and he built a house on it. He called his house Newcastle. I imagine that is the name of the place in Australia that he came from. He built a big house, a store, a cinema and a copra shed.

As far as food goes, I never knew what food the Master ate. He wasn't the sort of person whose place was easy to go near. Sometimes we used to go and collect tins or plastic from his rubbish heap. Some of us who remember things as they were, remember crawling carefully. When the house-girl threw out the rubbish,

we would go and get things for ourselves. We would get newspaper, tins, and bring them back. If we heard the door slam we'd say, 'Oh! The master will shoot us now!', and then we'd race for our lives. We really were frightened that he would shoot us.

Their rubbish dump was on the path to the sea, so it was close by. I would creep to it. The Master's house was a little bit away from it. So when we saw them throwing rubbish away and walking away, we would come from the other side and pick up the rubbish. We might see a tin, and keep it as a good container for collecting water. Some of our mothers didn't actually tell us not to do this, and I never heard my grandmother speak about it, but I felt that they disapproved. So I would hide these things initially, so that she wouldn't see them straight away. I'd hide things and then I'd bring them out gradually. I thought if I brought them out immediately she'd know I'd been to the rubbish heap. So I made a point of hiding them. But I wanted to look at the newspaper, so I'd take it.

The tins, tins that held fruit and tins that held fish, we would bring back. They were very useful for us children. We'd break them, and make small trucks, or we'd tie ropes to them and make them into shoes to walk about with. You might call it rubbish, but when we took these things and transformed them they became great toys for us.

## Concluding themes

### Margaret Rodman

Themes underlying stories that the fieldworkers and other women told resonate with the experiences of domestic workers around the world. Some of these themes include:

### Work

Fieldworkers and former house-girls talked about 'work' as a colonial concept, in effect a new way of ordering space and time. The idea of working hours, starting at 7:30 a.m., breaking at midday, then resuming work from 1:30 or 2 p.m. until late afternoon, was strongly associated with the world of expatriates' churches, schools and workplaces, and was a major adjustment for women used to more flexible rhythms of village life.

Washing clothes was a dominant topic in the workshop reports. Boiling, bluing, starching, and ironing were tasks described in detail. The clothes themselves were often different to what the house-girls wore at home; the fabrics, styles and

ways of washing and ironing them were of interest to the workshop participants. Food and cooking also received a lot of attention. In particular, clothing and food stood out as markers of cultural difference. The fact that one former house-girl had a collection of saucepans in her bamboo house as an old woman was taken as a sign that she had worked for white families.

We noted the short periods for which women worked as house-girls. For many, working as a house-girl was a transitional occupation between school or childhood and marriage. Working for a few months or less was not uncommon. Some women, as fieldworker Tanni Frazer put it, refused to consider working as house-girls because they would not be any man's 'slave'. Many others left employment when the *Misis* shouted at them, or the pay was too low, or the equipment they had to use was too baffling, or because they wanted to do something else. In the pre-independence world where subsistence agriculture remained an ever present option—something less available to current urban ni-Vanuatu—working for wages was not a necessity and house-girls could generally go back to their village and garden.



**Figure 9.2. Tanni Frazer, Netty Joseph, and Francoise Molwai at the house-girls' workshop in 2001**

Lady Patricia Garvey, photographer)

## Money

Every workshop report mentioned money. If the presenter didn't say how much a house-girl was paid, it would be one of the first questions asked. Much discussion ensued about the relative purchasing power of money. While two pounds in the 1950s did not sound like much, the women agreed that two pounds once bought a lot of goods. Occasionally, a woman said the money she was paid was irrelevant. For others, the lack of money in their household prevented them from continuing their education and led them to seek employment as house-girls. The 'bad old days' before independence when wages were low and colonial employers could be arrogant and even racist, were sometimes seen as the 'good old days' because money went so much further and employers provided payment in kind—especially, housing, food, and transport.

## Communication

Some employers were fluent in Bislama and a few whites born in the islands were native speakers of a local language; others, notably some missionaries on Malakula, waited until they had learned the local language to hire house-girls. But many employers knew little Bislama when they first hired house-girls and, especially in recollections from before World War II, the house-girls sometimes had limited knowledge of Bislama. Workshop reports included some very funny stories about miscommunication, about joking behaviour that played with language, as well as some skilful imitations of English, French and Chinese employers' speech and body language.

Vanuatu's linguistic diversity as well as its geography—many islands with rugged volcanic terrain—have made communication throughout the group problematic. While this posed, and still poses, difficulties for administrators and for the economy, communication gaps could work to the advantage of women who wanted to escape from an intolerable, local situation. One story in our book tells of an Ambae woman seeking refuge on a settler's ship in the early 1900s. The woman was unhappily married to a chief with ten wives, and seemed—although we will never know for sure—to prefer life working on the Whitford's Islet of Pakea in the Banks Islands. As the fieldworker reported, such women were glad to know that when they ran away they were unlikely to be found. 'People in those days did not know how to speak Bislama or English. And when a woman went away on a ship, the men were afraid to call out or to ask after her because they were afraid of the white men. It was like that. They couldn't do anything about it.'

## Perceptions of women

Received wisdom in Vanuatu suggests that men were the ones who travelled and that women did not move much outside their own areas. Movement to a husband's village at marriage might be the only move a woman made. Yet the workshop showed how those who worked as house-girls moved a lot, even in the colonial period. Some paddled from one island to another to go to work, as one workshop participant did when she was still a child. Others moved to Santo or Vila towns. Some house-girls left their home island to follow a relocating employer, as Jean Tarisesei described in her workshop presentation about Tongoan house-girls who moved with Stan and Olive Breusch to Ambae.

Much of the house-girls' movement was not simply from one physical location to another but into white spaces that were out of bounds for other ni-Vanuatu. In their employers' homes, house-girls had a chance to acquire their own perceptions of the women for whom they worked. They developed notions of domesticity, of how women from other cultures (notably French, English/Australian, Chinese/Vietnamese) prepared food, cleaned house, washed clothes, sewed, and how they cared for infants and children. These activities provided much to talk about in the workshop, as participants explored the practices of everyday life in colonial times, some of which continue to influence the way island women live their lives today.

## Relationships

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the topic of the workshop, relationships with expatriates were central to participants' reports. Male employers worked, that much seemed clear, but what the *Misis* did was often mysterious to the former house-girls. In other research, Margaret Rodman recorded many stories from white women about the hard work they did on plantations, but the stories that came out in the workshop often concerned female employers who had the time to be very critical of their house-girls and who seemed less kind than male employers. Why this is so bears reflection. Possibly male employers had less to do with house-girls and being more remote, as Robin Ken's story in the book suggests, could afford to seem more soft-hearted than the *Misis*? Male employers, too, were always possible sexual partners, even if that possibility was only theoretical, and this may have coloured house-girls' assessments of them as at once more frightening and more attractive than their wives.

Even ni-Vanuatu women came off worse than men as employers. Ni-Vanuatu women who were settlers' mistresses, as stories from Ambrym and Malakula suggest, seem to have asked more work of house-girls—including vegetable gardening, for example—than expatriate employers, even though some of the mistresses in question started out as house-girls themselves.

In one story in the book, a ni-Vanuatu man is reported as being angry that his wife has (forced) sex with the Master, but there is little he can do about it. Few ni-Vanuatu men appear in these stories to defend their women or to get angry at them, though in contemporary life jealousy is a major spark for domestic violence. While some ni-Vanuatu women married or lived in long-term relationships with their employers, others found themselves on their own and pregnant. Much of the talk about sex with employers was expressed in the workshop as talk about babies, such as the many illegitimate children whom various expatriate men (including black American soldiers) were alleged to have fathered in the islands.

Several reports spoke of deep affection for the children in the house-girls' care. Leisara Kalotiti reported a former house-girl, Leimala, as saying, 'I was fourteen years old and I looked after [the Chinese employer's] children like they were my children. I was happy to look after them. I bathed them in the afternoon, I changed them. And they too, they liked me.' Many reported that grown children kept in touch with the house-girls who had helped to raise them, sent them letters and presents, and looked them up when they visited Vanuatu. A few house-girls had visited former employers' children overseas.

## House-girls do not denigrate paid domestic work

One of our most intriguing research findings is that ni-Vanuatu women themselves do not denigrate paid domestic work. On the contrary, they value washing, cleaning, and looking after other people's children. While expatriate employers, ni-Vanuatu employers and members of the general community seem to denigrate paid domestic work and paid domestic workers, most of the past and present house-girls told us that paid domestic employment is important and useful work. This finding is in contrast to that of anthropologist Judith Rollins, who has suggested that 'paid domestic work is universally despised and those who do it universally dehumanized' (1985: 58).

Despite their employers' denigration of paid domestic workers and paid domestic work, most ni-Vanuatu house-girls seem to have a strong and resilient sense of self, and are able to retain a sense of dignity and self-respect even in exploitative working conditions. Historically and in the present, it is not paid domestic work or housework that house-girls find problematic, rather it is the conditions under which house-girls work that they find difficult.

Many house-girls expressed an awareness that their employers' perceived sense of difference affects the way they and their work are treated. They recognise that the greater their employers' perceptions of difference, the more negative their employers' interactions are likely to be with their house-girls, and the poorer the conditions within which they will have to work. The most successful

relationships, those in which the house-girl enjoyed her work and felt like she was one of the family, were those in which differences were transcended through curiosity (e.g., cuisines or languages), 'love' or generosity of spirit, and mutual respect.

## What do house-girls want? Respect

Given this context, it is interesting that what house-girls want from their employers is not equality. The house-girls in the workshop and in Daniela Kraemer's research on contemporary house-girls accept the fact that because they are employees they will never be equal players in their interaction with their employers. Historically, even a house-girl who became a settler's wife remained aware of the inequalities in her relationship. She ate and slept separately. Today, many house-girls still accept the central role inequality plays to the functioning of paid domestic service. They realise that equality in their workplace would actually destroy the industry in its present form. And while some social activists might celebrate the elimination of paid domestic service because it perpetuates the devaluation and denigration of women, ni-Vanuatu paid domestic workers themselves argue that such work gives them an opportunity for financial and social freedom that they might not otherwise have.

Similarly, house-girls in Vanuatu seem not to be concerned with narrowing or de-emphasising race, class and/or cultural differences between themselves and their employers. In the workshop, the expatriates expressed discomfort with the ni-Vanuatu participants' insistence on referring to themselves as Black and to the expatriates as White; why not use ni-Vanuatu and expat instead? But such objections elicited shrugs from the ni-Vanuatu women and no change in terminology. The ni-Vanuatu participants saw no reason to deny that racial differences are labelled in their ordinary speech. That did not mean, however, that they or the women in their reports felt all whites were alike. House-girls framed their employers' different behaviours or different mannerisms, not in terms of race, class or cultural identity, but in terms of character or what they thought of their employer as a person.

The central issue for house-girls, then, is not one of inequality/equality, nor one of 'difference'; rather, it is an issue of respect. What house-girls want, and what house-girls need, is for employers to respect their feelings and their dignity as human beings. This is evident in every chapter in this book. House-girls in the past and today often find themselves belittled, demeaned, berated, taken advantage of and ignored. Although physical violence against employees was more tolerated, and probably more common, in the colonial period, it occurs even today.

Indeed, the need for respect is one shared by paid domestic workers all around the world. As Bonnie Dill suggests about paid domestic workers in the United States, 'making the job good meant managing the employer-employee relationship, so as to maintain their self-respect. [Paid domestic workers] insisted upon some level of acknowledgement of their humanity, [and] actively fought against their employer's efforts to demean, control, or objectify them' (1988: 50).



**Figure 9.3. Two unidentified house-girls from the 1950s**

Certainly, in Vanuatu, part of the reason for insufficient respect, is that house-girls and employers are involved in a complex relationship of understanding and misunderstanding. Arguably, communication was better in the colonial period when house-girls had frequent interactions with their employers, often living on the premises. House-girls knew where they stood within the exploitative practices of colonialism. Stories in our book show that they knew when to hide in the closet and when to expect gifts of chocolate. However paternalistic, colonial employers' relations with their resident house-girls had more possibilities for sociable connection than relations with urban daily domestic workers. Today, although house-girls and employers intersect in the physical realm—house-girls work in the space in which employers live—house-girls and employers often spend little time talking to each other and do not intersect in terms of understanding and communication. Such a situation invariably results in tension. Very little is being done to try and bridge the miscommunication and misunderstanding between house-girls and employers.

We hope that our work will remind employers of the importance of respectful understanding and communication in order to bridge cultural differences. Misunderstandings and miscommunications can make for funny stories, but too often they make the house-girl-employer relationship fraught with tension. A key to better house-girl-employer relations is improved understanding and communication; without this, neither house-girls nor employers feel they are being respected and treated right.

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