

The West Indian Domestic Scheme in Canada

By

FRANCES HENRY

George Lamming, in an article describing the West Indian domestics writes: "Thursday was over. The half day had died slowly around them. Now it was time to go back to the lonely comfort of those suburban homes, and the sexless agony that each felt, but none could decently protest. They were women without men."¹ In these poignant words, he describes the loneliness and plight of the West Indian domestics who migrate under the scheme initiated by the Canadian Government in 1955. Since then a total of 2,250 women have entered Canada on a quota of 280 per year. Each island is allocated a specific number per year. Jamaica sends 104 and the rest come in smaller numbers from the Windwards, Leewards, Trinidad, Barbados and Guyana. The Ministry of Labour in each island selects the women, puts them through a two-week indoctrination course and sees that they fulfil immigration requirements. They must be between 18-35, single, have at least a grade 8 education, and be able to pass the medical examination. Final applicants are interviewed by a team of Canadian immigration officials who visit the islands once a year specifically for this purpose. On arrival in Canada, the women are granted landed immigrant status and are placed in a home for a period of one year. The majority of them are in Montreal and Toronto. The women must work as domestics for one year although they are free to change the homes they have been placed in if they find them unsatisfactory. After one year they are free to pursue other careers or continue their education and training. They may also send for close members of their families and fiancés provided that they marry within thirty days after the men's arrival. Canada's immigration policy is open to the charge of implicit colour discrimination and in any case, immigration is difficult for untrained and unskilled people.² Thus, the scheme affords about the only opportunity for such young women (and their families) to enter Canada on a permanent basis. The scheme also serves to fill the need for domestic labour in the major cities of Canada.

Aside from magazine articles such as the one quoted before, little is known about this group of special immigrants.³ Hearsay and rumour stress the alienation and loneliness of these women and their difficulties in assimilat-

¹MacLean's Magazine, November 4th, 1961, p. 54.

²M. McMahon, "Hard Look at Immigration," Montreal Star, February 17, 1967.

³West Indian voluntary associations have been studied. See D. Handelman, "West Indian Associations in Montreal", unpublished M. A. Thesis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, McGill, 1964.

ing to the new Canadian scene.⁴ Stories of racial discrimination and hostility are widespread. Their difficulties are supposedly compounded because of the small number of West Indians and other Negroes in Canada and their spatial dispersion in the large cities of Canada. In 1965, a pilot study of West Indian domestics was initiated at McGill under my supervision. A West Indian nurse, with training in sociology, interviewed 61 women who had come to Canada on the scheme. An interview guide was used but interviewing was often unstructured and conversational. The interviewer in most cases, was able to establish close rapport with the women. Sampling procedures were not followed because the women were scattered throughout the city and not formally listed or registered anywhere. The interviewer selected the sample on the basis of the women she knew and contacts she was able to make among them. The sample came from all areas of the West Indies. Most of the women had been in Canada from one year to five years and three had been here for more than five years. Other characteristics are noted below:

AGE		MARITAL STATUS		CHILDREN	WORK		
-30	+30	M	S		In Homes	Other Jobs	House-wives
(No.) 42	19	13	48	20	18	40	3

Of the women who had children here, ten were married, whereas the remaining ten were unmarried and had had illegitimate children here. Of those with children, half and mainly the unwed mothers, had sent their children home to the West Indies. Those who had other jobs worked as nursing assistants, clerical workers, hospital workers, chars, factory operators and one as a teacher.

During the interview, the migrants were questioned carefully on their social class standing in the West Indies. One of the most striking findings to emerge from this study relates to the class level of the women and provides a clue to the understanding of some of their difficulties here. On the basis of their own and siblings' education, friends' education and occupation and fathers' occupation, it is clear that they can be assigned to lower middle and in some cases to middle middle-class standing in the West Indian stratification scheme.⁵ (In a sense the scheme is selective in that an educational standard must be met, but, even so, many of the successful applicants have achieved a higher educational standing.) Two-fifths of the sample had received matriculation or high school leaving diplomas and over half had had some secondary education. One third had had some additional technical or commercial training. These figures are duplicated in regard to siblings' education and 6 per cent of brothers had university training, 40 per cent secondary school. (Many of the younger brothers had not completed

⁴A similar scheme has been initiated in the United States.

⁵See Lloyd Braithwaite, "Social Stratification in Trinidad", *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 2, October 1953 and M. G. Smith, *Stratification in Grenada*, University of California Press, 1966.

their education.) In terms of fathers' occupation, 70 per cent worked in such capacities as skilled craftsmen, technicians, professionals and civil servants. Of the women who had worked prior to migrating, most were clerks, typists, teaching assistants and nurses' aides. Their closest friends at home engaged in similar occupations with an emphasis on nursing and office jobs. Only 12 per cent of those previously employed worked as domestics at home. At least eight of the women had had domestics working for them in their own family homes. In addition, the parents of 76 per cent of the women were legally married, 15 per cent came from a casual relationship, and 4 per cent from a stable household union. This may also be taken as a middle-class indicator in view of the widespread prevalence of non-legal and casual unions among the lower class. Given this social class-standing at home, the incentives to migrate must have been strong and it is clear that the scheme was used primarily as a means of migration.

Eisenstadt assumes that frustration with the original social environment and its lack of mobility channels provides the major incentive towards migration.⁶ Our findings indicate, however, that boredom and the desire to get away also seemed to be major motivating factors. Many of the girls who had come from primarily urban backgrounds saw no future in the West Indies. Their middle-class backgrounds had also exposed them to cosmopolitan values which strengthened the desire to migrate. Reasons for migration were as follows:-

To better myself, advance, study	28%
Desire to travel, see another country	28%
Desire to get away from home conditions	13%
Simply wanted a change	15%
Desire to join relatives, friends	10%
Miscellaneous other reasons	10%

	104% (duplicate answers)

As one informant put it, "there's a lot of glamour attached to going abroad and I was tired of the same old thing".

Once in Canada, the migrants find it necessary to re-socialize into a new social environment. This involves a shrinkage in the field of social participation, severing themselves from former social roles and from the group life to which they had been accustomed. Most of the women migrated alone, along with others from the same islands whom they may or may not have known at home. Almost all were totally unprepared for life in Canada and many were overtly disappointed. From school, some reading and hearsay, the women had learned something about climate, a certain amount of geography and little else. They had heard about the scheme mainly through ad-

⁶S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Absorption of Immigrants*, Glencoe, Ill., 1955, Ch. I.

vertisements but one-third already had friends or relatives who had migrated on the scheme. Many had built up glorified expectations visualizing a country of great wealth, where work and life would be easier and where it would be simple to advance financially. They were unprepared for their working conditions in the home as domestics and in subsequent jobs where punctuality and hard work were expected. They were also unprepared for the length of time involved in further studies and training for other jobs. Over half of the sample expressed disappointment in the Canadian people with whom they came in contact, finding them unfriendly, ignorant and prejudiced.

The process of successful re-socialization or absorption is dependent upon several factors. In the first instance, the receiving society must provide immigrants with the means of learning a new culture or at least present an atmosphere of acceptance. In Canada, this is difficult because the national culture, if it exists, is hard to define. In Montreal, French-English pluralism further complicates the scene. In addition, the migrants come in such inconsequential numbers that the retention of their own values in sub-cultural systems does not prove tenable in an environment in which there are few West Indians. Similarly, the small Negro population in Montreal is composed of long-time residents, many of American descent, who have been fairly successful in terms of at least superficial assimilation. The domestics find no group with which to identify, their numbers are insufficient to create any in-group within themselves and the society to which they come is, in the very least, little concerned with their absorption. Secondly, their own motivations in terms of willingness to identify with the new society cannot be taken for granted. Although most come to better themselves, 72 per cent have indicated that they plan to return to the West Indies sometime in the future. They do not see Canada as a place of permanent residence and although one-third had already sent for their family members, even this is seen as a means of further study or advancement for these family members rather than the idea to set up a permanent family home in Canada. Of the group, the married women with children here prove an exception. Although they state vague plans about a return home, once they and their husbands are integrated into the occupational structure, their wish to reside here permanently is strengthened. None of these young couples had gone so far as to purchase a home.

Related to the unwillingness to become "Canadian" as it were, are the problems faced by the migrants in regard to racial discrimination. Over two-thirds said that they had personally experienced discrimination at one time or another. Most experiences had to do with finding jobs (after their tenure as domestics), and housing. At least half had minor problems on the job, on buses, in being waited on in stores and restaurants. Job discrimination was most frequently claimed. One respondent said, "When I arrived for the interview, I was told the job was already filled". Another said that the manager had told her, "The other girls in the office wouldn't like it". Another was

told on arriving for an interview as a saleslady in a Westmount shop: "I'm sorry but in Westmount, I couldn't have a coloured saleslady." In looking for an apartment, one girl was bluntly told by a landlady: "We don't rent to you people." One girl said that even when she was employed as a domestic, her five-year-old charge told her, "I don't like you because you're black." (This presumably reflects parental attitudes.)

The women who had been in Canada for five years or more, who had left domestic work and had successfully held office and nursing jobs, tended to minimize racial prejudice. A typical spokesman for this group said: "If you work hard, they leave you alone and you can get on with the job." Once having achieved some of their desired goals, prejudice and discrimination were considerably played down. Stories of discrimination are extremely widespread amongst the women and even those who personally had not experienced difficulties were able to tell stories of friends who had. There is also widespread distrust of Canadian people. When asked whether Canadians accept West Indians on meeting them as they do other Canadians, 93 per cent said no. There was agreement that Montrealers tried to create the impression that they regarded a West Indian like any other person, but that this "acceptance" was only superficial. Some women said that the reaction of Canadians was not overtly hostile but definitely strained. For example: "They try to put you at ease but they never let you forget you're coloured. First thing they tell you is, 'I have another coloured friend and she is very nice'. They don't expect coloured persons to speak well or express themselves in any way. They expect them to be uncouth and backward." Another respondent confessed that "I have my bristles up whenever I meet a Canadian and analyze everything they say." Friendship patterns are strongly related to distrust of Canadians and although two-thirds of the girls had Canadian friends or acquaintances, their three closest friends were all from the West Indies and of these, most were from the same island. The majority of friendships had been formed at home.

In the face of outgroup hostility and non-acceptance, the small group of migrants find it advantageous to band together, and commonalty of cultural background, occupation and interests, strengthens migrant group solidarity. An exclusive ingroup community is, however, difficult to create since the numbers involved are small and the scheme itself is a deterrent to the development of such a community.

Immediately on arrival, the women are assigned to live and work in individual homes. Not only are they spatially separated from their West Indian friends, but they have little opportunity to develop or maintain intensive contacts, since their domestic work allows very few free hours. Regular and long working hours, plus the extensive travel necessary to visit each other, curtails a social life that most of the women had been used to at home. Judging from a comparison of spare time activities before and after migration, the women lead a far more solitary life here than at home.

In the West Indies, the most popular spare time activities were attending dances, parties and sports; here they are mainly visiting friends and shopping expeditions to the downtown stores. Where previously 64 per cent of the women participated in clubs and girls' associations, sports clubs and church groups, now three quarters have no club membership whatsoever. Church membership and church attendance have also notably decreased. One way of maintaining contact with friends is through the telephone, and phoning with no other purpose but to say "Hello" is an almost daily occurrence. In addition, migration as single women rather than in family groups makes a community type organization virtually impossible.

The scheme is also a deterrent to assimilation in the wider society. Few of the women had been exposed to domestic work before, and as noted previously many were of higher social status than is normally associated with domestic service. They joined the scheme because it was the only means of coming to Canada. This means that in the transition phase of migration, the majority of the migrants experience *downward* social mobility.⁷ In Canada, the status of maid is among the lowest of female occupations and wages are relatively low. (Scheme salaries range from \$25-\$45 per week plus room and board.) After the term of a year is concluded, the women find that their past experience working as domestics is a stigma in terms of prospective employment. It becomes difficult to find a better job because of employer antipathy against hiring maids. The women tend to lie and deny that they had migrated on the scheme and they attempt to hide this even from acquaintances they meet after their domestic tenure is finished. (There was some difficulty, in fact, in finding respondents because those who had been here for some time were loath to admit to migration on the scheme.) One woman was told by an employer that he didn't want domestic types in his office. The difficulty in finding better jobs, partially created by the scheme, means that many women remain in domestic service beyond the minimum commitment.

Although educational achievements were above average in the context of West Indian society, they are not competitive with Canadian standards. The majority of migrants are now employed in low-paying, semi-skilled types of jobs. These jobs are a step up from that of domestic, but further training is necessary for any real advancement. Of the 18 women in the sample still working as domestics, 12 are planning a nursing career; the others are thinking in terms of secretarial work, dress-designing and hairdressing. Of the remaining 43, 9 planned to study while 8 were actually taking courses for various jobs. In addition, 10 had already completed courses so that the **total of women who were planning to study or had completed a course amounted to 18 or slightly under one-third of the sample.**

Their downward social mobility is reflected in yet another fashion.

⁷In Trinidad a popular Calypso recently had to do with the scheme and was entitled: "Civil Servants Becoming Domestic".

Amongst West Indian students one hears a great deal of hostility expressed against the domestics, and certain student associations are said to discourage domestics from membership and social functions. Students who desire upward mobility themselves are loath to associate themselves with the domestics because they never associate with domestics at home. This reflects the rigid stratification barriers in many West Indian societies. The university student perceives himself to be socially well above the status of the domestic and his own status insecurity in the new environment also leads to hostility against the domestic. It is interesting to note that these status disparities are not as exacting amongst students from the smaller islands. The Jamaican association was said to discriminate against domestics and the newly-formed Trinidad and Tobago association found it necessary formally to offer membership to domestics, and this was the subject of much public discussion at the organizational meetings of the association. The St. Vincent and St. Lucia associations have, however, from their inception been receptive to domestic members and, in fact, see themselves as rendering a social service to lonely domestics from the small islands. On the whole, however, there is minimal contact between the students and the domestics and although 80 per cent say they have met students, few attend their parties or social functions. The migrants also contend, with some justification, that West Indian men — who are primarily students — do not date them but prefer Canadian girls. Judging from casual inspection of student functions, this criticism appears justified. West Indian male students prefer Canadian girls not only because of the supposed inferiority of the domestics but Canadian girls are said to expect less than West Indian women. This form of neglect is also voiced by West Indian female students who are also virtually cut off from social engagements with the boys. As far as the domestics are concerned, this means that their social life with the opposite sex is virtually nil. The few girls in the sample who have boy friends are those who have come from home and a few admit to going out with Canadian men. Thus by virtue of their domestic status (or former domestic status) the migrants' social life is limited to shopping expeditions with girl friends or visits to each other's homes.

In the course of the acculturation process resulting from migration and contact, almost all of the women agreed that they and their West Indian acquaintances had changed in some way to bridge the gap between the two societies. These changes at the level of personality and attitudes were seen as important ones and often negatively evaluated. The changes were seen as "becoming Canadianized, imitating Canadian ways, becoming independent, emotionless, bitter, hard, tough, aggressive and bold". Living in Canada necessitated these changes and they are seen as reactions against the prejudiced treatment and hard conditions experienced in Canada. They also see themselves becoming "stand-offish, less friendly, less shy, more mature and serious, and more ambitious". They rapidly take on what are

perceived to be Canadian values, e.g., the tendency to become materialistic, money-conscious, less religious, more independent and to have lower standards of morality, especially relating to sexual behaviour. These values were not seen as desirable in themselves but were necessary to adopt in order to "get on" in Canadian society. Closely associated with these new values was the fact that primary groups such as the family are missing and the values of the new society have to be substituted for the old. In terms of advice and counsel, the migrants find that they have only friends, and occasionally their minister, to turn to and most frequently, advice is not sought. The migrants frequently accuse their female friends and acquaintances of becoming stand-offish and unfriendly, but the men (mainly students) are seen as changing even more dramatically. Not only were they accused of maintaining and indeed, strengthening the stratification barriers, but they are charged with becoming egotistical, pompous and self-centred. As one respondent put it feelingly: "They really get worse, all puffed out. A West Indian man is a scarce product and they get high and mighty."

The women are frequently appalled at what they see of Canadian life. Due to the particular job the women do, i.e., that of domestic in the home, they are more exposed to those Canadian values which relate to home, family life and the upbringing of children. Their perceptions of Canadian life and Canadian people in fact spring from contact primarily with upper middle-class families. There are some important differences between West Indian and Canadian family life and much of the domestic's difficulty in adjusting to their jobs has to do with these differences. For example, they perceive "laxness" in child-rearing practices with respect to discipline and parent-child relations. What one in this cultural context would call independence training and self reliance is seen negatively by the migrants as lack of respect, too much freedom, spoiling and too rapid maturation. Many girls have changed their jobs because they could not get along with the children in the family. West Indian child-rearing emphasizes household training and chores, docility, obedience and respect for parents. Many of the migrants thought Canadian children were "monsters, wild and undisciplined, with no respect for their parents". On the other hand, the migrants approved of the closer integration of the husband-father role in the family in that men help with household chores, and co-operate in the children's upbringing. By contrast, West Indian fathers (if they are present in the home) tend to leave these matters entirely to the women. The migrants strongly approved of the economic security provided by the father even in cases where a divorced woman received maintenance for the upkeep of home and family. This pattern is in strong contrast to particularly lower-class West Indian family life in which the father is often a transient provider. Although there was disapproval of the woman-dominated household, the domestics agreed on the need for unity, co-operation and common

activities between husband and wife. Love and discipline are seen as important ideals in family life which they found lacking or less emphasized in the Canadian homes. Similarly the close family ties which bind an individual for life in the West Indies were seen as lacking here. Some of the domestics spoke with great disapproval about the neglect of aged parents in the Canadian family, contrasting this with their own families where the aged are always cared for.

Similarly their perceptions of Canadian ethnic differences are based on their experience with families. They tend to see the English Canadian as cold and unfriendly whereas the French are regarded as warmer and more accepting. The Jews are seen as materialistic but also far more accepting to coloured persons. The migrants repeat the assertion made by other coloured immigrants elsewhere that Jews tend to be more sympathetic to Negroes.

On the whole then, the magazine articles which refer to the loneliness and alienation of the domestics tend to be only slightly exaggerated. The migrants do experience intense difficulties brought about by the acculturation situation and the inability to belong to or create a West Indian community in Canada. Racial discrimination, the lengthy period of education required for further job training, the downward mobility experienced by being a domestic and other factors create a difficult situation. Despite their difficulties here, however, 40 per cent of the sample said they would migrate again on the scheme because of the opportunities it affords. For these women, the scheme is seen as a means of escape from their own boredom at home and as a means of self-advancement.