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**(IN)VISIBLE YOUNG FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS: 'LITTLE DOMESTICS' IN
WEST AFRICA**

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN'S WORK

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Introduction

12th June 2004 – 3rd World Day Against Child Labour:

"10 million children working as servants. The biggest employer of young girls across the world is domestic labour [...] Children who are domestic workers are currently the most vulnerable group of workers in the world" (statement from the ILO)

"Efforts against child labour often overlook domestic workers [...] Millions of girls are trapped in poorly paid jobs as domestic servants." (statement from UNICEF)

It is perhaps surprising that the attention given to child employment in domestic situations is a relatively new thing. Although child labour and child exploitation is now central to the work of specialist international bodies (ILO, UNICEF) and the relevant NGOs and the subject is also stirring increasing interest among social science researchers and has received media attention, domestic work among children remains an unrecognised and even neglected issue. Over the last fifteen years, however, there has been increased involvement of NGOs and international bodies. Their work – in a context where public attention and institutional policy focus primarily on the 'worst forms of child labour' and specifically on the situation for girls¹ – and media attention has shed new light on the "10 million children working as dogsbodies" (*Libération* [national French newspaper], 11/06/2004) in the public consciousness and in development programmes. In June 2004 a report entitled *Helping hands or shackled lives? Understanding child domestic labour and responses to it*, published by the ILO, was to formalise this recent recognition of domestic work as part of the general 'child labour' issue.

Globally the scale of children employed as domestic workers has now been uncovered – and whereas it was invisible, it has suddenly become a 'society problem' in many southern countries. As such, this issue indisputably calls for action. Also, given the serious nature of certain situations, it should be condemned as a moral scandal. This, however, is not the role of the researcher. There is no need to justify that the priority for action lies with situations of slavery, trafficking or debt servitude. However, we cannot assume that these extreme situations relate to the majority of 'young female domestic workers' in West Africa, although observations do confirm that the majority of these girls live and work in very difficult conditions.

¹ See the ILO's Convention 182 and Recommendation 190 (June 1999), which focuses on "banning and taking immediate action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour"

In West Africa, the practice of 'young female domestic workers' is a not new thing. Contrary to what we may think, it has not come about due to the recession or Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which have affected the majority of countries in the sub-region since the 1980s. However, this practice has changed and become more complex, particularly due to the economic crisis. The difference lies in the new ways children are put to work, which have developed over the last twenty years.

Despite increased research into domestic employment, we must recognise that there is a lack of in-depth studies available to assess the extent and significance of the issues relating to children in domestic employment. This is necessary to have a greater and more solid understanding of the various different dimensions that could lead to appropriate action to fulfil the specific needs expressed by these very young migrant workers – the majority of whom are girls.

Without claiming to provide a definitive answer to these complex issues, here I will present four sections, which aim to demonstrate not only the scale of the trend but also the diversity of the existing dynamics. The first section relates to the issue of quantifying 'little domestics': until now this has not been possible but knowing their numbers is seen as critical and relates more generally to recognising these young migrant workers and the ways they can be categorised. In order to demonstrate the many different situations that need to be taken into account, the second section lists the main ways that young female domestic workers in the large cities of West Africa are placed and their employment statuses. The third section is based on a biographical example of a young domestic worker in Abidjan and highlights that the employment paths of these young migrants are not linear, but rather the opposite; they often have a succession of different domestic employment positions. Depending on the age of the worker, these changes sometimes reveal a certain level of autonomy and at other times a strong dependency. Finally, the fourth section will examine the contexts and ways in which the parents and young girls themselves try to put strategies in place to make urban migration for employment of 'young female domestic workers' safer.

Sources and methodology

The majority of the data this document is based on comes from studies I have personally undertaken in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in 1999, 2000 and 2001, as part of my doctoral research in Sociology (Jacquemin 2007) – see the table on methodology at the end of this document. I wish

to make clear here that I have not undertaken in-depth studies in other countries of the sub-region. Aside from Abidjan and Côte d'Ivoire, data given from this point relating to West Africa is from:

- * reports on studies and workshops on child domestic labour (and trafficking) (UNICEF, ILO/NGOs) ;
- * journalistic sources (newspapers/TV/radio) and documentaries;
- * 2 brief exploratory studies by the author in Bamako and Dakar, in 2001 and 2009);
- * some scientific articles and Social Science Masters dissertations, which talk to a greater or lesser degree about the practice of young females migrating to become domestic workers in one of the countries in the sub-region;
- * personal conversations with researchers and students writing about this subject.

1. How many young female domestic workers are there?

It remains impossible to give an exact figure on this practice for various reasons, which we will look at briefly. However, from all the observations, three key elements are certain:

- * The number of children and young people, whose main job is domestic work in the majority of large cities in the South, and in West Africa in particular, is undoubtedly very high. According to the ILO-IPEC (2006), more than 200 million children aged between 5 and 17 years are working throughout the world. Among these children, the number of young girls under 16 years employed in domestic work is higher than for any other type of work.

In 2004, for the first time, the ILO gave an estimated number: "10 million children working as dogsbodies [worldwide]". The organisation does not deny that due to the nature of this work this figure is in no way certain and states that this may just be the tip of the iceberg. The purpose was merely to convince people of the scale of this phenomenon.

The ILO's most recent "rapid assessment studies" show around 175,000 children under the age of 18 years employed in domestic service in Central America and around 700,000 in Indonesia; and 54,000 children under the age of 15 years in South Africa. Despite the existence of various studies we do not have any overall estimated figures for West Africa.

- * Although the range of practices does not exclude boys, domestic work (undertaken by both children and adults) remains primarily a female domain, as is the case in West Africa. Work

relations also remain strongly characterised by female to female relationships, as employers who have the main authority over female domestic workers are primarily women (but of course, there are also men in this role). However, there are no quantitative statistics on this.

* These young female workers are mainly internal, transborder, subregional or transcontinental migrants. In West Africa, it appears that the majority of 'young female domestic workers' are internal or transborder migrants.

Recent studies undertaken in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ghana, Benin and Togo (see bibliography) show that in all the major cities in West Africa, there are currently 'little domestics' coming from *all* the internal regions of that country and to a lesser extent, girls and young women from all over the sub-region. So one must challenge the alleged 'regional specialties' of this activity: in Abidjan, not all female domestic workers come from the Bondoukou region or the Baule area; in Ouagadougou, it is not exclusively girls from the Sourou province who are involved in this activity, and Sereer girls do not currently dominate domestic service in Dakar, etc. There are certainly dominant trends, which correlate with contextual factors and regional determining issues, but the modern day reality is that the practice of young female domestic workers is more widespread and more complicated than 'specific ethnic groups' as it is sometimes portrayed.

The Abidjan context

In 2000, ICCB² estimated (without revealing its sources) that there were 30,000 young female domestic workers in Abidjan. The media in Côte d'Ivoire circulated this figure, which I personally believe is an under-estimation.

Despite the lack of precise numerical data on the practice of 'little domestics', all the studies document that there is a very high number of these workers in the Ivorian economic capital. In a city where only the wealthiest people employ adult domestic help (known as '*grandes bonnes*' ('adult maids') and '*boy*'), it is actually young girls and adolescents that undertake the majority of domestic work for the working and middle classes. This large urban workforce made up of young Ivorian migrants from rural areas has clear and longstanding repercussions on the demography of Abidjan. In fact, the high number of girls coming to Abidjan can be seen through

² The International Catholic Child Bureau is an international NGO based in Geneva.

the age pyramid of the city's population: girls aged 10 to 19 are markedly over-represented compared to boys of the same age and other female age groups (Table 1). The ethnological and anthropological studies on the relocation and fosterage of children have made this demographic anomaly clear: it shows that the high number of female minors in Abidjan results from the mass immigration of young girls coming from the extended rural family to work as house-helps or maids for urban kin (Etienne 1979, Antoine and Herry 1982, Antoine & Guillaume 1986).

Table 1 – Male:female ratio in the age groups 5-24 years in Abidjan since 1955

Year	5-9 yrs	10-14 yrs	15-19 yrs	20-24 yrs
1955	100.4	110.6	107.9	125.3
1975	90.7	76.3	86.8	141
1978	-	69.1	71.6	-
1988	94	76	71.5	97
1998	95.9	79.1	71.6	98.9

Sources: Abidjan 1955 census
 General population census in Côte d'Ivoire, 1975
 Multi-round demographic survey. City of Abidjan (E.P.R.), 1978
 General population census in Côte d'Ivoire and Habitat census in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 1988
 General population census in Côte d'Ivoire and Habitat census in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 1998.

The "overpopulation" of female minors in Abidjan was first seen during a period of economic growth (1970s) and has prolonged ever since. The last census (1998) confirmed this increasing demographic trend. However, the classic theory of family solidarity does not suffice to explain this continued phenomenon during a period of economic recession, which has affected Côte d'Ivoire

since the early 1980s. On the contrary, many studies have shown that family solidarity has weakened; they show an increase in people "returning to the village" and particularly a decrease in the migratory flow of fostered children sent to Abidjan as a "crisis acts" (Vidal and Le Pape 1986, Beauchemin 2002).

As budgets tighten how can we explain all these young 'domestic helps' being kept on in Abidjan homes? The theory that it is due to an increase in child trafficking in the sub-region cannot go all the way to explaining this trend. The situation in Abidjan demonstrates the central *economic* function of girls and young women working in this way in a context where there is a low level of industrialisation and serious economic crisis – which has led to high levels of exploitation among these girls. However, 25 years ago a wage system was established for young female domestic workers, which was a major development that gave market value to this work, and thus a price to girls undertaking the work. This also had a direct effect on accounting for these young female workers, which returns us to the difficult question of how many 'little domestics' there are.

A question that remains unanswered

The level of child domestic labour is difficult to assess thoroughly due to the 'hidden' nature of the work in private homes. However, aside from the 'hidden' aspect of the issue, there is a central need to define the practice to establish precise estimates of the number of young female domestic workers. In other words; which types of 'little domestics' are taken into account when counting them officially?

I am not going to enter into the general debate around recognising the economic nature of domestic work (Chadeau and Fouquet 1981, Barrère-Maurisson *et al.* 1984, Vandelac *et al.* 1985, Charmes 1996, Waring 1996). I will simply note that counting domestic work (as an economic activity) simply when it is undertaken "for another person in exchange for payment" or for someone who is not "a family member" is both too vague and too precise if we really want to quantify the scale of child domestic labour.

"Domestic labour": a useful census category. However, it is overlooked.

By comparing the reports on two studies undertaken in Abidjan, one in 1978 and the other in 1992, we can confirm not only that domestic work is habitually classed as 'not working', but also that they demonstrate the need to identify this work differently in order to have a clearer

understanding of the work situation amongst young people, and young women in particular. In fact, in 1992 another category was added to the four used previously (see table 2), i.e. 'domestic work', which included housewives and domestic helps. This was a very important development as this new category accounted for 14% of girls aged 5 to 15 years and 38% of girls aged 15 to 19 years (compared to 0.5% and 1.5% for the same age groups among boys), whereas previously these young female domestic workers would have been classed as 'not working'. However, although the category of 'domestic work' could have been useful to make this activity visible and estimate its extent, it was not incorporated in later studies. The 1998 Côte d'Ivoire census maintained the category 'housework' as one of the eight activities for residents aged 6 years and older. However, it is unlikely that a 9-year-old girl, or even a 19-year-old single female, who are considered dependants (i.e. not a head of household) would be registered under 'housework' even if they undertook household chores on a full time basis that were essential to the running of the house; despite all the labour they provide, they are classed as 'not working'.

Table 2 – Division of 'young people' by activity according to gender and age in 1978 and 1992

Abidjan

	5-14 yrs		15-19 yrs		
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
1978	Paid work	0	2	2	1
	Other work	2	3	1	6
	In school	6	4	4	2
	Not working	7	7	4	2
		3	4	1	6
		1	8	8	0
		1	1	1	1
		0	0	0	0
		0	0	0	0
		%	%	%	%
1992	Paid work	0	3	4	1
	Other work	5			5
	In school	2	2	2	1
	Domestic work	7	6	5	2

Not working	7	1	4	6
	0	1	1	3
	,5	4	,5	8
	20	20	18,5	8
100%	100%	100%	100%	

Other work (1978, 1992): trainee, family help.

Domestic work (1992): persona registered as a housewife or house-help

Not working (1978): the 1978 census did not differentiate between people who 'not working' and people undertaking domestic (or household) work. People classed as 'not working' in 1978 can therefore be compared to the sum of 'domestic work' and 'not working' in 1992.

Sources: *Enquête démographique à passages répétés. Agglomération d'Abidjan (1978)*

Enquête prioritaire sur les dimensions sociales de l'ajustement structurel. Abidjan, 1992

From M. Le Pape (1997).

Despite ILO attempts (2004a, 2007) to clarify the definitions of child domestic labour, we can see that there are still gaps in terms of taking into account children undertaking domestic work within the (extended) family, which is an issue in West Africa in particular where the most common family structure in urban settings is not that of a nuclear family. Empirical evidence shows two trends that make realistic estimates of the number of young female domestic workers impossible:

- * domestic work is not recognised as an economic activity;
- * it is not accepted that working for the family is a workplace or that this family work could lead to exploitation (Jacquemin 2006).

Some examples:

According to a recent "National Survey on Child Labour"(Ghana Statistical Service, 2003), only 1% of children at work in Ghana are 'child domestic workers', while 88% of children at work are classed as 'unpaid family workers'. We can reasonably assume that the vast majority of these are young domestic workers and as a result have not been classed as such (Tsikata, forthcoming).

Two very recent national survey reports on child labour (Côte d'Ivoire 2005, May 2007), which were supervised by ILO-IPEC, were also not able to draw a more accurate understanding of the number of young female house-helpers at work in these countries: partly due to the United Nations System of National Accounts (SCN, 1993) being adopted – which does not account for unpaid domestic labour. And also due to the ambiguity around the categories 'household or domestic activities' and 'domestic service'. The report states that in Mali 26,000 girls aged 15 to 17 years work as paid domestic help, the majority being in Bamako. However, we learn nothing about young girls who have not been declared as wage earners, whether they are older or younger than 15 years, and yet there are certainly a considerable number of them.

Whether the quantitative focus is on workers in the most unbearable situations (which clearly should be condemned) or simply on 'paid' young female domestic workers, there is risk of gathering statistics that give a simplified and simplistic social representation of child domestic work. This vision tends to homogenise and conceal the current diverse range of determining factors and actual practices of 'little domestics' being put to work.

We can also be certain, from looking at recent studies, that the number of young female domestic workers in urban areas in West Africa is increasing, due to:

- * an increase in demand for young and cheap labour (Jacquemin 2007);
- * diversifying forms of supply available in young female domestic workers (*Ibid.*); and last but not least,
- * a greater desire for autonomy among young girls in rural areas away from their village families and customary rules (Lesclingand 2004a).

2. Diversity in the forms of placement and employment statuses

The categories 'child domestic worker', 'young female domestic workers', and 'little domestics' are not at all homogenous. Firstly, we must make clear that even the notion of *domestic tasks* does not sufficiently describe the contribution that these young female workers make to the economy of urban households: many of them contribute indirectly to their 'employer's' income generating activities and there are others that contribute directly. The majority of young female workers undertake a variety of tasks, which are imposed on them. This is not only due to the wide range of tasks they are asked to undertake but more generally due to the very direct link between

the domestic sphere and the world of trade, which characterises all of the informal activities undertaken by females (adults and children), which have become central to the survival strategies of urban households in West Africa (Locoh 1993, Vidal 1985, Pilon *et al.* 1997, Jacquemin 2007).

This is where a typology of child domestic labour based on the nature of the tasks undertaken has its limitations (see LIDHO 1995, Veil 1998). Basing the analysis on employment methods, activities undertaken and the social relationship of the work offers greater understanding of the many different dimensions of the little domestics trend. In fact, today the different types of social relationships govern how these girls are placed and used in West Africa and they lead to many different practices, which show how the phenomenon of young female domestic workers changes in times of recession.

The typology and descriptions below are primarily based on the situation in Abidjan. Where possible I have provided comparisons with situations observed in other countries of the sub-region.

In the studies I have undertaken in Côte d'Ivoire, I have used 3 criteria to define young domestic workers:

- * a child that *primarily* carries out domestic activities and/or trade *on a daily basis*
- * under the guardianship of an adult *other* than one of their two biological parents;
- * in terms of age, I opted for a sociological and generational definition of childhood in black Africa today (Verlet 1996): in my research, the generation "under structural adjustment" corresponded empirically to individuals under the age of 20.

Three employment models

The chronology of the long recession that has affected Africa and Abidjan since the end of the 1970s lies behind the development of new types of child and youth domestic employment. Before the years of recession, the majority of this workforce was made up of young girls coming from the rural extended family who had decided or accepted to send them to the city to a close or distant relative. Integral to the ancient practice of fosterage and to family solidarity, the services of 'little

nieces³ was not paid work but in exchange the 'aunty' in Abidjan had to look after them and see to their training. Yet, from the 1980s, a new type of young female domestic workers appeared in urban households: the 'little niece' was replaced by the 'little maid', who was not known to the family and as a rule was paid based on a monthly salary.

The increased numbers of waged young female domestic workers who are not related and have no ethnic, regional, social or prior friendship with the person employing them is a recent trend. It marks a break in the 'family model' which prevailed previously. However, the 'little nieces' have not disappeared completely. In Abidjan today, as in Bamako, Dakar, Ouagadougou and Accra, different forms of recruitment do coexist, which can be characterised in three ways: the 'little niece'; the 'rented child'; the 'waged little maid'.

* The first model relates to continued traditional practices of the movement of children in West Africa: collective groups of relations in rural areas accepting to entrust their child to their urban relatives as 'little nieces' working for their 'aunties' in the city, where they can be introduced to modern life through learning and sometimes schooling. The context was strong family interrelations where the persons involved knew each other personally and agreed on reciprocal duties, which were understood through both implicit and explicit codes.

The 'little niece' is never paid in cash, she is given lodging, is fed and provided with clothing and is supported in case of illness by their sponsor/guardian, who must also 'provide something' for her when she leaves: a 'suitcase' (for example her trousseau, a sewing machine, or a small contribution to her savings) to support her into adulthood. As a rule, these duties are two-fold in terms of providing for the girl (in kind and in money) and services to the girl's parents, which it is very difficult for the sponsor/guardian to get out of.

The 'little niece' model is entrenched in the symbolism of blood relations and has value due to discourse around family solidarity; but the ideology of kinship risks masking the reality or the value of the work undertaken and also dilutes the dominant relationship. This recruitment model

³ The term 'little niece' here is used as a concept term: it suggests that a close link still exists but it does not systematically set out the exact nature of the relationship: rather than being a niece, it could just as easily be a younger sister, cousin or a friend's daughter of a member of the employer household, or it could simply be a child from the same village.

does not relate to a specific age group: there are 'little nieces' aged 5-6 years up to 20 years but the majority are probably between 10 and 16 years.

The 'little niece' model certainly still exists in the majority of cities in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana or Benin (known as *vidomégon*), but this 'family' model of recruitment through the extended kin group (fosterage) is no longer favoured by urban households. This is because, the labour provided by these young family helps is not free: the reciprocity expected has a considerable financial cost in a period of recession and also has a high symbolic cost. Now many women in Abidjan prefer to employ an unrelated girl that they pay a salary as this is much cheaper at material and symbolic level, rather than using the services of a 'little niece'.

However, it is also because many village parents now refuse to send their daughters off to work in the city according to this model: they know what the effects of the crisis are and that their daughters will work hard with no guarantee that they will be reciprocated. In fact, the 'little apprentice niece' model (sometimes even includes schooling), which is a family ideal that is still mentioned in the majority of discourse, tends now to have been replaced by the 'servant little niece' model: certainly more so now than previously their young age is linked to extortion of work and the system of exchange and socialisation is often undermined. Parents and daughters therefore prefer that girls are paid for their work in money and work with non-relatives.

* The second model appeared in Côte d'Ivoire at the end of the 1970s. It is different from the first model in the sense that the family tie is broken: the girl remains under the guardianship of a relative/sponsor (from close or extended family) that lives in Abidjan, who gets them to the city. But instead of employing the girl herself in the city, she places her with an employer – a non-relative – for a monthly salary, which is paid to the guardian, not to the girl herself. Unlike the first model, the second employment model is paid.

The 'rented child' is distinct in that they receive non-monetary remuneration for their work from their guardian (a 'suitcase') when they return to the village, even though their employer pays for their work each month in money. It is very rare that the 'renting-aunties' spend all of the money received to fill the 'suitcase' of the girls they have placed. They often make a considerable profit through this system, especially if they have 'rented' many girls in the city.

The 'rented child' model usually relates to very young girls aged 7-8 years to 13-14 years. In Côte d'Ivoire I was able to undertake a study to trace the origins of the development of this practice, which led me straight to the Bondoukou region (north-east of the country), which is where the 'renting' channel began thirty years ago. This practice of renting young girls as domestic helps can in certain cases be compared to child trafficking and certainly represents the most obvious and cruel form of exploiting the labour of girls. Despite unanimous criticism, it continues to take place, particularly as it enables the women of Abidjan to find young maids at cheaper rates because they are so young and because of the high levels of poverty in the places they are taken from.

We must note, however, that there are certain situations where the 'renting aunties' (generally nicknamed with euphemism "mums of the maids" by rural parents) take their role of guardian seriously: they ensure a certain level of protection is given to the girls during the time they are working away from home and also that they receive decent remuneration at the end of their time working. In fact, as they place importance on their reputation and on the community's control mechanisms they do not make an unfair profit from their role as intermediary in the placement, however more often than not they do make a profit. Cases of this type have been seen particularly in Burkina Faso, where two studies showed a special type of intermediary: guardians or 'sponsors' (also known as "mums" ("mamas") (Terre des Hommes 2003, Riisoen *et al.* 2004). These people, who live in the city, do not systematically go looking for girls themselves in the rural region they come from, but rather they take in young migrants when they arrive in Ouagadougou with a view to finding them employment as young maids. The guardian's courtyard serves as the place of recruitment, where employers come to recruit the girls. As well as ensuring – for 100 CFA francs per day (in 2003) – the girls are housed and fed until they find an employer (with whom they will then normally stay), these 'sponsors' play an intermediary role in the placement and act as protector for the young migrants. They also benefit from being seen as highly trustworthy by the village communities that the girls come from. The sponsors interviewed claimed to do this for free and claimed not to take from the girls' salaries, but always referred to the existence of other 'sponsors' who are not honest and who make a certain financial profit from this practice. These people are clearly harder to get interviews with.

Although here we cannot really establish whether this is really a 'rental system', we can however note that in Ghana the growing number of intermediaries placing young female domestic workers

has been uncovered. These are (extended) family members, neighbours, friends, or even informal agents ('placers') who act as go-between between the parents and the employers of young female domestic workers; this is indirect i.e. the parents and employers do not know each other (Apt 2005). Tsikata (forthcoming) indicates that this is new phenomenon in Ghana, which is very different from the fosterage, i.e. 'little niece' system: the new element is that parents now agree to send their daughter(s) to work in the city with a non-relative that they do not know, but *through* an intermediary, who is someone that they know to a certain extent. Payment for girls who are placed in this way is often managed by the intermediaries: either they give it directly to the parents or they 'save' it to give to the girls later. No doubt there are some girls who receive their salary directly from their employer, which corresponds to the third model.

* The third model appeared during the 1980s. In this model there are no longer family ties involved in the recruitment process for young female domestic workers. Intermediaries (placement agencies, acquaintances) act in order to create the link between 'employers' and 'little maids', unless the young girls themselves offer their services by going from house to house. Generally the girls are accommodated and fed at the employer's house and the 'little waged servant' receives and manages her monthly cash salary directly. We must note that girls recruited through this model are rarely under the age of 13-14 and often may have attended a few years of primary school.

It is important to note that this 'wage system' is not equivalent to the so-called modern sector of the economy. The salaries are low and are given arbitrarily with no social or legal protection for these young female workers and the contracts (verbal) are very precarious.

Alongside the networks for 'renting' young female domestic workers, the first placement agencies for little maids started appearing in Abidjan at the end of the 1980s, and by 2001 there were more than 50. The rapidly growing number of these informal agencies in urban areas brought about a specific market for child/youth domestic labour, which has its own locations and methods of exchange, rates and competition, ambiguous attempts at regulation, and fluctuations in supply and demand. The model of the 'little waged maid', paid directly, is linked to the emergence of this new market, and its many different structures and reasons for action is linked to a combination of economic, social and cultural factors.

It appears that these placement agencies for little maids are an 'Abidjan speciality': to my knowledge, these agencies - informal for the most part – which are well-established on the streets, do not exist, or there are very few, in other cities in Côte d'Ivoire, or in Bamako, Dakar, Ouagadougou, Cotonou or Lomé, even though the 'waged little maid' model has started to develop there as well. In Ghana these placement agencies were banned by law up to 2003 but since, many (informal and officially agreed) have been established in Accra, which mainly place female domestic workers over the age of 15. This respect for the minimum working age is also generally observed in most of the agencies (informal or otherwise) in Abidjan, following attempts by the NGO ICCB in particular to professionalise the work of these agencies. Of course other people who place the girls have a vested interest in not respecting legal regulations and continue to place young girls, as well as taking their commission from the young workers' salaries, whereas as a rule only the employer should pay this money.

Despite these disparities and the abuse of less scrupulous placement agents, I feel it is inappropriate to criticise the placement agency system as a whole, as the local media (at least the Ivoirian media) and certain local organisations or international NGOs often do. As these placement agencies are operating in the public domain they also allow for external interventions which aim to regulate these practices and to raise awareness of those involved ('placers', employers, little maids) in terms of the rights of young female domestic workers being applied more effectively. As a good example, ICCB has had some success in this sense with placement agencies in Abidjan. The issue remains of placement methods for younger girls (under 15 years), because their work is officially illegal, therefore they are in a more precarious situation.

I have very little in-depth information on this issue but the many different observations (my own and those of other researchers and students) confirm that in Bamako and Dakar at least certain organisations working to defend the rights of young female domestic workers are also playing the role of the placement agency as they serve as the intermediary between the maids and the employers, and commission charges are paid by both parties. It seems that in certain instances the organisations also manage salary payments to the young girls, making themselves once again the intermediary between the employer and the young domestic employees – sometimes they take a sizable chunk of the salary for the organisation. The maids would think therefore that their employer is paying them 10,000 to 15,000 CFA francs per month, whereas they actually

transfer 20,000 to 30,000 CFA to the intermediary organisation, who in turn transfers much less to the young worker. Of course, we may believe that this considerable profit is used to support 'little domestics' who are in difficulty?

A variety of situations exist despite issues that all young female domestic workers have in common

Above all is their availability: a unique working relationship

What 'little domestics' have in common with all domestic workers across the world is that they have entered into an interpersonal work relationship, where submission is created by direct supervision and which is reinforced by the private nature of the work. However, the fact that they are very young, that they live with their employer and the predominant depictions of the family model of starting work at a young age add to the uniqueness of this working relationship. These parameters form a specific form of exploitation. The girls are working with no legal status or legal or social protection and they live each day in a dependant situation, which is linked to their working conditions.

In Abidjan, I noted three common issues among *all* young female domestic workers.

The first is the huge amount of work that they undertake, whatever their age. All observations confirm that they do between 11 and 16 hours of repetitive, often difficult and at times excessive work per day. We must note that in all of the countries the majority of young female domestic workers under the age of 15 years are live-in helpers, so potentially have to be in service 24 hours a day. Only 'waged little maids' regularly have days off: at best, they get two weekends off per month.

The second common issue is that they are permanently out-of-school children. They may have been to primary school for a few years or they may have never been to school. These young girls and adolescents have no possibility of being able to benefit from school level or professional training, especially because they work all day and because the current state of the education system. In Abidjan, only a few of the 'little nieces', who are classed as an 'apprentice' (i.e. they have the full benefit of the reciprocal system, which in principle is inherent to this type of fosterage), are educated: Often they attend school part-time. However, it seems that in other West African countries, Senegal and Ghana in particular, more young female domestic workers

are able to combine domestic employment and school. In this way, 32% of child domestic workers in Accra and Kumasi were in school (ILO, 2004-b): there was no indication of the employment status of these 'little domestic', but it was stated that unsurprisingly these working children attended school less regularly than other children.

Finally, the third thing "little domestics" have in common irrespective of the type of employment is the way in which adults (employers, middlemen of placement, politicians, journalists) refer to the family model. According to this model the youngest females are put to work by the eldest ones. Reference is made specifically to an idyllic vision of the 'little niece' model, which is presented as being exempt from all negative connotations and prejudice (quite the opposite in fact). This discourse formulated by adults is often used to mask exploitation, to deny the value of the work undertaken and to ease the dominant relationship, using well-known paternalistic relationships. Young domestic workers themselves make reference to how they're like a 'family': whether it is felt or claimed, it expresses their needs for affection, protection, education, recreation and respect.

A variety of situations

We must acknowledge the heterogeneity of the conditions for 'little domestics': they are not all 'little slaves'. An analysis of the actual work undertaken and the relations between employers and domestic workers demonstrates a great diversity, but also shows how complex these situations are – with brutal forms of exploitation and extreme verbal, physical or sexual violence at one end of the spectrum and more or less harmonious contractual relationships or relations that reflect the family ideal at the other end.

In order to represent the variety and evolution of these practices, conditions and paths surrounding the three recruitment models, I have identified various different types of young female domestic workers: 'little nieces' may be 'apprentices', 'subjugated' or 'rented'; 'rented children' tend to be 'commoditised' or 'trafficked'; and 'little waged servants' 'paid' or 'overexploited'.

Although it is impossible to generalise, it is important to examine the issues underlying how the young domestic worker is treated in general (verbal and physical treatment, food, living conditions

and time for relaxation) and the type and quality of work they carry out (transfer of knowledge, working conditions and remuneration). These issues are closely connected to the girl's age, her relationship with the 'aunty'/employer or the head of the household, the number of residents in the house, the employer's main activity and also other idiosyncratic factors such as the level of 'kindness' of the boss. Finally, the *employment status* ('little niece', 'rented child', or 'waged little maid') linked to the way in which they were recruited and the type of pay that the girl's work generates, is a distinguishable variable: it determines whether or not the young worker has access to money and it affects directly, or in part, the possibility of leaving, particularly if the conditions are really too hard (Jacquemin 2002).

When envisaging protective policies, it is crucial *not* to draw a parallel between the three recruitment models and particular outcomes for the girls. Given the empirical evidence of variation in the girls' experiences, it is too simplistic to assume that the practices related to domestic help are homogenous. Likewise, it cannot be assumed that one recruitment model results in better working conditions and treatment than the others, or the opposite that one model carries higher risk of exploitation and mistreatment. Of the 'little nieces' and 'rented children' who were placed by a *real* aunt, many examples confirm that the family institution is not necessarily a guarantee of better treatment. Also, in other domains, the media – the European media in particular – is full of various sordid facts showing that the family is not always a place where children are protected.

Since all the combinations and nuances are possible and exist, it is essential that we refrain from representing the 'little nieces' as being less exposed to abuse and to bad treatment than 'waged little maids' who are not relatives, and that they are less badly treated than the 'rented children', or any other generalisation of this kind. Neither the description of the tasks they undertake nor of what takes place each working day or week alone can characterise little domestics as 'little nieces', 'rented children' or 'waged little servants'. However, this distinction does have a considerable effect on their daily lives, on their prospects for the future, on what they do and on the image they have of what they do (Jacquemin 2004).

It is also often the case that a young girl will successively have two or three different statuses of employment throughout her 'career' as a domestic child. Below is a biography which demonstrates this.

3. Employment paths of young female domestic workers

It is rare that a 'little domestic's' trajectory of working in the city follows a linear path. There are considerable variations linked to age, which correlate with a greater capacity to negotiate and to get by. The study that is summarised below was undertaken in Abidjan. Currently, to my knowledge, there is no available data on this issue, which would allow us to compare the employment paths of young female domestic workers in other capital cities in West Africa.

Case study - Assana's story as a typical trajectory

At the time of our interview (2001), Assana was 18 years and had been working in her second position as a 'waged little maid' for five months.

She was born in 1983 in a village in eastern Côte d'Ivoire. She is the twelfth and youngest child and both her parents are farmers. Her parents did not allow her to go to school as they could not afford it and she still wishes she had been able to go. She was seven years old when one of her older sisters, who was living in Abidjan, came to take her to introduce her to city life.

"My sister brought me up. She was all alone in Treichville, so she came to get me. I had started to do some work with mum in the village but it was my sister that taught me how to do things around the house: at the age of eight years I knew how to sweep, wash plates and pots, and she also showed me how to do the laundry. Apart from that I didn't do anything, I was with my sister at home" (Assana, 9 March, 2001)

The young girl stayed with her sister for four years. Her sister was single and had no children and she ran a small scale food business from her house. Assana has good memories of this period and had three friends, who she still saw in 2001. Because she preferred having fun with her friends and she found work tiring Assana refused to do the household chores her sister asked her to do. Her sister tried hitting and insulting her but as this did not get her 'little niece' under control she decided to find her a job as a maid.

"That is how I started work: but it wasn't because my sister didn't have any money; she wanted me to learn how to work because when I was at home I refused to do certain things, well actually lot of things! For example, if she asked me to wash the dishes I would often refuse to and if she asked me to sweep I wouldn't do it! So one day she said that was

it; she was going to send me to someone so I would do some work! That is how I ended up starting work." (*Ibid*).

So at the age of twelve years Assana's sister placed her as a 'rented child' with a woman in the neighbourhood who sent her out to sell iced water in the area from 6.30am to 5.30pm. She was paid 5,000 CFA a month, all of which she gave to her older sister when she went to spend her weekend off at her house once a month. Her boss also employed another young female domestic worker to carry out household chores: so on top of her various street trading tasks she only had to do her own laundry. She stayed in this job for two months until an aunt from her father's side came to her employer's house to take her to her own house to "look after her children".

Her aunt worked as a seamstress at home and lived in the same neighbourhood with her husband (a driver) with their two children (7 and 10 years old), the eldest of whom attended school. Assana was in charge of all the household chores (cleaning, washing the dishes) apart from the laundry, and got the children washed and looked after them, particularly the young girl (who did not go to school). She also helped her aunt to prepare the meals. In accordance with the 'little niece' model, she received no money for this work but her aunt bought her clothes sometimes. After a few months, one of Assana's older sisters (same parents) came to get her and took her straight to a "friend" of hers who was looking for a young street trader.

For two years (1995-1997) Assana worked again as a street trader selling iced water for this woman, who ran a small scale business. This was her main activity: domestic chores and placing the water in bags was carried out by her employer's daughters, two adolescent girls who had dropped out of school. Although she was not a relative the woman employed Assana as a 'little niece': she accommodated, fed and cared for her and replaced her sandals if she needed new ones and gave her dresses her daughters had grown out of and money to pay for her braids (500 to 1000 CFA per month). Assana thought it was perfectly normal that her 'auntie' (employer) did not pay her: "No! She is my sister's friend". After two years, Assana was tired of walking in the sun every day from 6am to 4/5pm selling 100-150 bags of water. She spoke to her sister who had placed her and she agreed to speak to her friend. Assana stopped working for her that month and the day she left the 'auntie' gave her seven sets of good quality wax fabric.

At the age of 14 years, Assana then spent a few months living with this older sister and "helped" her with domestic chores, looked after her youngest child (3 years old) and learnt how to cook.

Once she had taught her youngest sister how to cook, her "older sister" placed Assana as a 'rented child' with an old female trader in the neighbourhood who lived alone with one of her youngest daughters (who was studying at secondary school). As well as undertaking household chores (cleaning, laundry, doing the dishes, shopping and cooking); Assana had to put bags of water and ginger juice together each day, which her employer sold in her shop. She didn't have any weekends off but went to visit her older sisters, who lived very near her place of work, various times a week. Assana gave all of her monthly wages (8,000 CFA francs) to her older sister who had placed her and who used to buy her cloth and plastic sandals. On top of her 'bed and board' the only other thing her employer covered was soap. Even though Assana remembers her as a "very kind woman", she didn't ever give her any presents. After seven months, Assana had to leave again suddenly as the sister who had placed her had to travel inland and she put an end to the contract so that the young girl could return to her house to look after her children and help with the housework in her absence.

When she returned to Abidjan her "older sister" found Assana a new job with another female trader in the neighbourhood. She was a single woman with no children and required only that Assana carry out household chores and stay at her house while she went to work at the market: she paid 8,000 CFA a month to Assana's sister, who bought her some clothes. But the girl, now 15 years old, did not get along with her employer. She could not put up with her criticising her and shouting all the time. Assana told her sister she wanted to leave. At the end of the month once her salary was paid her sister agreed for her to go home to the village to see her mother. Assana spent three months in the village, had some time to relax and helped with housework and work in the fields.

At the end of 1998, she returned to Abidjan to live with the sister who originally brought her to the city in 1990. After a few weeks she placed her in the service of a woman who was a wage earner living alone with her nephew, who was an apprentice mechanic. Assana undertook all the domestic chores – her sister had negotiated a salary of 10,000 CFA francs, which Assana gave to her each month. Apart from paying once for her hair to be plaited, for some ('low heel') shoes and

a set of fabric, which she sewed for her for the Tabaski festival, her sister who placed her refused to pay for things for Assana:

"My sister took the money and didn't buy anything for me. Even when my plastic shoes broke she refused to pay: I had to argue over 200 CFA francs! Even though it was my own money."

Assana was fed up with the system and "tired out" by her employer shouting and always finding something to criticise about her work ("even though I was doing the work well"), after a year and a half she decided, with encouragement from a 'little aunty' who was the same age (17 years) and had worked as a 'waged little maid' for two years, to earn "money for herself". Her sister would hear none of it ("I argued endlessly with my sister") so Assana put a plan together with her 'little aunty' to find (through a neighbour) work as a 'waged little maid', which started the following month in another district of Abidjan. She then explained to her employer that she had to urgently return to the village and got her approval to leave five days before the end of the month, which she did not tell her sister about. She took her monthly salary and went straight to the village to tell her mother about the problem. Four days later her mother sent Assana off to Abidjan alone and assured her that she would speak to her daughter soon and that Assana could now work for herself. A few weeks later, their mother's mediation put an end to the arguments between the two sisters.

In her new job, Assana worked for a couple of low wage earners who lived with their three children (aged 5, 12 and 24 years – two in school and one a student). She negotiated the monthly salary of 15,000 CFA herself. Each day from 5am to 10/10.30pm she carried out household chores, looked after the youngest child when she was not at school, took her to school and carried other chores at the request of members of the household (going to the shop, ironing a shirt for an outing, braiding the child's hair, etc.). She had one weekend off per month, which she spent "with her family" in Treichville, or she met up with her childhood friends or her 'little aunty'. The latter was employed as a maid for a single man; a wage earner who gave her less work for the same money: therefore, Assana felt her job was too tiring and asked her 'little' aunty' to find her another job.

A few months later she left her employer saying she was going to visit her mother, but in fact went with her 'little aunty' to meet her future employer, to whom Assana offered her services for 15,000 CFA francs a month. After a successful one-day trial Assana started her second job as a 'waged little servant', which is where I met her five months later.

"What do I like about it here? It's good and it's not too hard, there is not too much work, and I like it like that. My auntie [employer] is kind to me, for example the other time you came to see her, I had toothache that day and she gave me some tablets and told me to get some rest and she prepared [the meal] herself. She gives me presents too: clothes, and sometimes she gives me 2,000 francs as pocket money [...]. And I am very free too: my little aunty comes to see me and my mother also came here last month, and even my boyfriend can come sometimes - I ask and often auntie doesn't mind. I can go out too and walk a bit. I go and chat to the security man in the building or go to the Adjamé market, I ask her [...]. And at the weekend too. The first day I arrived, I asked for 15,000 francs a month and two weekends off a month from Saturday evening to Sunday evening, but she said I could have every weekend off! But I prefer every two weeks otherwise people in my neighbourhood [Treichville] will say that I am walking around a lot and I wouldn't like that [...]. I'm hoping to stay here as it's really good. I don't have any problems."

(Assana, 20 March 2001).

With the money she earns, this young girl buys herself pretty clothes and 'feminine' accessories: she pays for her own creams and hair braids (soap and toothpaste are provided by her employer) and transport (wôrô-wôrô - collective taxi). She is saving up a bit to buy presents for her mother: when she went to see her in February 2001, Assana gave her some fabric plus 12,000 CFA francs. If she is able to stay with an employer like this one, Assana would like to continue to work as a maid for as long as takes to save up to start a small business selling fabrics and other ladies fashion (shoes, bags, chains); she'd like to stay living in Abidjan.

Assana's living conditions changed a bit with the arrival of a 'lodger' around mid-March 2001. This young single woman rented the room that Assana occupied from her employer: since then Assana had to sleep in the living room or on the balcony and she no longer had a private place to take visitors. This new woman also gave Assana work: cleaning her room, doing her washing, doing small errands in the neighbourhood, serving her meals. Assana was not complaining

however as her employer had asked the new lodger to add 7,500 CFA to her salary. She was waiting as the woman had still not said or given her anything. Assana did not know what profession this woman was in but she was sure of one thing: she was not going to go and sell anything for her.

'Little niece', 'rented child', then 'little niece' again and then 'rented child' before freeing herself and becoming a 'waged little maid': from the age of 7 to 18 years Assana went through the different employment statuses of young female domestic worker. In this way, her situation is exemplary and her story is in no way exceptional: there are lots of other stories of this kind. I presented Assana's story because it was very well documented as the quality of information is linked to exceptional conditions for investigation: as soon as I met her employer, she suggested I interview "her girl" and told me I could come whenever I wanted, even if she was not there. As she had approval from her employer and she was curious in my approach, Assana – who in addition was not always overloaded with work – did not hesitate to agree to take part in the study. Once she realised that I was interested in details and qualitative data she made a real effort to be precise and as time went on she was even enthusiastic about my suggestion to return for a second interview.

Other stories of the lives of 'little domestics' are very similar to Assana's but for various reasons, linked directly to the situational context of the study and the oppressive living and working conditions of the interviewee, they are much less detailed.

The stories of these young female domestic workers show that during their employment (which generally lasts 2 to 5/6 years and the maximum is 10 to 13 years for girls that start very young) they may or may not have various different employment statuses. Very often these girls will in fact have various statuses, which means that following their time working in the city they are able to provide a critical overview – in hindsight at least – into the different forms of recruitment and the associated advantages and disadvantages. Parents in the village often only know the details of their daughters' employment paths afterwards and subsequently some of them attempt to put strategies in place to "give security" to their daughters' future urban migration for work, or at least maximise the chances of them bringing back substantial income of some kind.

4. Parental strategies

Deteriorating conditions

Stories told retrospectively by 'little domestics' show that the status of these young migrant workers has deteriorated. In general in Côte d'Ivoire, village families state that over the last twenty years there has been a significant deterioration in the economic and social issues relating to girls' urban migration. However, as living conditions in many rural areas have changed for the worse, families are forced to send their daughters to the city to work. However, in the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire, for example, it seems that more and more often attempts are being made by parents to limit the negative effects of their daughters' time in the city and they are keeping more young people in the village.

We will look briefly here at the three main areas cited by parents as leading to deteriorating migration conditions for young girls working as little domestics:

- * "Increased distance". In the Bondoukou region parents have noted a decrease in the number of city-village exchanges during their daughter's stay in the city. They receive less news, their daughters' visits to the village have become more unpredictable, and above all there are greater restrictions on payment (in money and in kind).

- * The contents of the "suitcase" that young migrant girls return to the village with is certainly the most significant issue in terms of the 'little niece' and 'rented child' systems being weakened according to the parents in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire. Many girls receive a suitcase that is incredibly light for the 2 to 5 years they have spent working in the city....when they don't return to the village completely empty handed. The 'renting-aunties' from the extended family are criticised in particular for this abuse. Nobody is fooled by the profits they reap from this system of renting young female domestic workers.

- * Girls being mistreated, unwanted pregnancies and AIDS. All villagers have heard terrible stories from within their circle of little domestics who have been badly treated in the city by their employers: appalling living conditions, verbal and physical violence, being deprived of meals, and sexual abuse by men from or around the household. Over the last fifteen years, families from the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire have seen an increase in the number of young migrants returning to the village pregnant. These unwanted pregnancies are often complicated by clandestine attempts to abort the baby, which put the young girls' lives at risk. Finally, many young domestic workers

now return to the village to die of AIDS. There have been many observations showing that a large number of young female migrants are returning from their stay in the city "very ill".

Strategies developed by parents and daughters to make migration for domestic work safer

Increase the departure age and tighten family links with guardians in Abidjan.

Village parents are aware that girls now have the possibility of gaining work that is paid directly in the city: this model of recruitment is now the favoured method, by both parents and daughters. In this way, many villagers wait until their daughters are at least 13-14 years before allowing them to go and work in the city as 'waged little maids'.

Or if they agree for a young girl to go to the city, the parents decide that they will only send their daughters to *close* relatives living in Abidjan. By deciding to tighten the family link between the young migrant and their guardian they feel they are increasing their chances of having a good migratory experience in financial terms and there will be "control" in terms of social and health issues. The idea being that the urban guardian will want to retain a good reputation in the village, so they will not want to stray from their reciprocal family arrangement.

In addition, there have been reports of some cases in Côte d'Ivoire where the parents (usually the mother) decide to accompany their daughter themselves to Abidjan and take them to a relation that in practice becomes their guardian (or sponsor). The purpose of this for the parents is to demonstrate that if necessary they could return to get news of their child themselves and to "control" the conditions of the placement, and above all their pay.

Keeping girls in the village

If their financial situation allows it many village parents refuse to let their daughters leave for the city.

Over the last ten years, the introduction of women's cooperative groups (GVC) that produce food or handicrafts, improved access to microcredit for women, as well as attempts by UNICEF, governments and NGOs to promote education for girls in remote regions, have all strengthened this desire to keep girls in the village, particularly the youngest ones. Increasingly there are also awareness raising activities to inform parents and children of the many problems linked to the migration of young female domestic workers.

In villages in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire, men now encourage women to reduce the number of young girls migrating to the city. We are seeing a shift in gender relations regarding the decision to send girls away: in the past, men let women manage this issue and had to accept sending the girls off to "try their chances" in the city because they were unable to suggest satisfactory alternatives. But a recent development of new cash crops (cashew nuts) generating new income has allowed men to have more influence over the plans for children's and youth's urban migration.

However, despite some improvements in the financial situation at the end of the 1990s, collective family groups have also experienced problems stopping the migratory flow of girls to the city. On the one hand, despite disillusion that the real conditions of return for some migrants had not come to fruition, the poorest parents say they were "obliged" to continue to send their daughters off: they were "trapped" by their extreme poverty...

On the other hand, the young girls themselves do not always agree with the new point of view of their parents, who try to stop them from moving to the city. Adolescent runaways going against their parents, who forbid them from going to work in the city, have been reported all over the sub-region. These girls are certainly more exposed to the domestic exploitation trafficking networks. However, empirical evidence from Côte d'Ivoire shows that these young girls manage to organise migration for work outside of parental control through their personal networks and that this happens in relative safety: although they are not protected from exploitation in their work, they are nevertheless avoiding the most abusive practices, particularly that of child trafficking. We can clearly see here that young girls from rural areas are developing the desire to act autonomously in comparison with village practices and activities. For these girls urban migration is an important source of change, not only in terms of their family and customary rules but also in terms of demographic and matrimonial behaviour (Lesclingand 2004 b).

To Conclude?

This document aimed to demonstrate the diverse nature of the 'little domestics' phenomenon in West Africa. Extreme working conditions clearly must be criticised and opposed. But far from the simplistic and sensationalistic representation of young female domestic workers as 'young slaves' who are victims of trafficking, I wanted to demonstrate the main aspects of a complex practice,

which is both well-established and is undergoing transformation due to, amongst others, the effects of growing urbanisation, economic recession, developments in female economic work and globalisation.

Temporary migration among girls and young women to undertake domestic work in West Africa is clearly not a consistent trend and variants can be seen in terms of the practical details, the effects and the implications. Due to a lack of concrete information, there is little discussion in this article on the difference between seasonal migration for domestic work (which appears to be high in Burkina, Senegal and Mali) and non-seasonal migration (which is more dominant in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin).

My research in Côte d'Ivoire has enabled me to discover the diverse nature of the employment statuses of young female domestic workers and to demonstrate for the first time the existence of a specific market for juvenile domestic service. Yet it is here that a common trait becomes clear from all of the studies (of which the number has increased over the last few years) undertaken in West Africa: juvenile domestic service has become a business. There is no sense in demonising this development in itself: for example, the recent introduction of a wage system for young domestic workers has given a market value to the work and, as a result, a wage to the young person undertaking it.

By way of conclusion, we must bear in mind that domestic workers – women as a majority – remain a neglected category of workers. We must therefore highlight the need (or the urgency?) to undertake in-depth research – qualitative and quantitative – into the issues of child and youth domestic workers. Exploring what has become of ex-little domestics would be a useful angle, particularly in terms of capturing and understanding explanations behind the reasons for the varying employment paths.

Field Work and Methodology

In order to study the many different dimensions of the use of young female domestic workers and to document how the practices change, it is essential to integrate a micro-economic and micro-social description of certain situations, varied experiences and concrete examples to a broader macroeconomic and historical approach. Different types of sources have also been combined to enable me to build on my doctoral research on the service of young domestic workers in Abidjan.

There is still very little documentation of the issue of child domestic labour (or that of women in general). I have nevertheless been able to work from diverse written sources, which have overcome to a greater or lesser extent this issue (statistical data and demographic, anthropological and sociological studies of the organisation of households, migratory movement, the "informal sector", activities of women and schooling of children.....). They have provided a framework to the studies I personally carried out over 12 months on the ground, split over three trips (1999, 2000 and 2001). This practice of returning various times, which I thought at first may complicate the study, actually proved to be very effective and adjusted to the temporal nature of the subject matter, particularly in terms of observing young female domestic workers, the growing number of placement agencies and following the growing media attention given to the trend.

The oral sources were the first part of this research. They enabled me to explore the daily and domestic ways of life, to serve as biographies, and to describe practices and behaviour, but also to understand what links them (opinions, values, symbols). I chose an entirely qualitative method using an ethnographic approach (in-depth observations, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, life stories) and favouring close observation of what was going on in places where many people were interacting: mainly homes, but also markets, small scale street traders, scrubland, placement agencies, the ICCB office in Abidjan and more for fact-based purposes; official meetings celebrating children's rights, forums on helping children in difficulty, etc.

By personally spending a lot of time on the ground and through repeat visits I had access to a greater understanding of the standard framework of the experiences and it meant I could build up a relationship of trust with the people interviewed. Being a white sociologist learning on African soil had the advantage of inspiring my thoughts on the situation of fieldwork, and particularly on the illusive possibility of being in the neutral position of researcher in the social sphere I was studying.

The majority of the difficulties encountered during this study – particularly in terms of getting access to young female domestic workers and giving them a chance to have their voice heard, which is sometimes forbidden, and also in terms of gaining the trust and interviewing professional placement intermediaries (whose activities – which are often illegal and sometimes clandestine – are regularly criticised by the local press) were overcome by developing an intermediary system to get in touch with the interviewees. It was therefore necessary to question and control the effect that working with these intermediaries could have.

In total, the whole study is composed of 173 interviews, 101 of which have voice recordings. Most were carried out in Abidjan, but some were done in the Bondoukou region (in the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire), and these interviews were undertaken with a diverse range of households and people: employers of young female domestic workers (30); girls either working as 'little domestics'

or who had worked previously as in that role (51); placement/recruitment intermediaries (27); village parents who have girls working as 'little domestics' (5); and various people working directly or indirectly with the young domestic workers phenomenon (NGO managers, international bodies, organisations, Ivorian ministers, journalists).

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