Keep Quiet: Unheard Voices of Domestic Workers in Nigeria

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Introduction

This chapter explores the phenomenon of silence and unheard employee voice among domestic workers in Nigeria. While voice involves the presence and processes that facilitate two-way communication between management and employees (Marginson et al., 2010), unheard voice is a situation in which employees express their voice, and it is ignored. Silence is where employees fail to express their voice, either because of the risks involved in doing so or because of the perceived futility in doing so (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Grant, 2013). When the perceived risks of voicing outweigh the perceived benefits, silence is likely to ensue: the withholding of any form of genuine expression about a perceived or experienced injustice from persons capable of effecting change or redress (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Conceptually, silence is the failure to voice (Morrison, 2011, 2014) and there is research interest in how employers perpetuate a climate of silence concerning a range of issues (Donaghey et al., 2011). The term 'Employee voice' refers to the ways in which employees attempt to have a say – formally and/or informally, collectively and/or individually – potentially to influence organisational affairs relating to issues that affect their work, interests, and the interests of managers and owners (Wilkinson et al., 2020, p. 5). In the extant literature on industrial relations, voice is concerned with workers' issues while in organisational behaviour and human resource management literature, the focus is more on organisational improvement (see Oyetunde et al., 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2021). While voice is considered critical to both employees and employers, notions of voice are very much rooted in western scholarship, and research on voice remains concentrated in traditional organisations in formal economies within Anglo-American countries (Pyman et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2020b). The few studies conducted on employee voice in regions of the global south suggest that voice may have limited applicability to contexts in which cultural values and working conditions differ considerably to those in western nations (Mellahi et al., 2010; Soltani et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we therefore seek to expand current knowledge on the extent to which voice can be exercised by workers who have heretofore largely been ignored in academic literature. Research on employee voice often treats voice as a universal concept that applies to all workers (Bell et al., 2011), but Syed (2020) notes that depending on the national or workplace context, there may be employee voices that are not heard and/or situations in which vehicles for voice are not present (see also Pyman et al., 2016). We explore the extent to which voice can be exercised by domestic workers and potentially give space for some of these missing voices. Drawing on Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice, and loyalty framework and Rusbult et al.'s (1982) neglect framework, and inspired by Gunawardana's (2014, p. 453) attention to how voice can be enacted in controlled spaces, even 'no-voice' spaces (Willman et al., 2006), we consider how institutional and cultural factors specific to our study context impede the provision of opportunities for and expression of employee voice among domestic workers in Nigeria – preventing them from having a voice to allow for positive workplace change (Oruh *et al*., 2018). Therefore, we examine how employees (with no formal avenue for voice) can carve out spaces for expressing themselves.

Our study contributes to the literature on the abovementioned topic in three key ways. First, scholars have posited that employees in precarious work in developing economies have limited avenues to express voice and are likely to withhold suggestions for resolving problems and making improvements to work processes let alone suggestions to improve their working lives (Burgess et al., 2013; Wilkinson et al., 2020b). We provide empirical support for this proposition and show how the construct of employee voice, although often contested, is predicated on western values for employee participation and self-expression that are antithetical to the preferred people management styles practised by employers of domestic workers in Nigeria. The present study therefore extends our understanding of the relevance of western concepts for explaining voice and silence to an employment context that is characterised by extreme asymmetrical power relations. Second, we extend the exit, voice, loyalty, neglect (EVLN) framework to demonstrate how the vulnerable workers in our study are unable to engage in formal voice, exit, or neglect, and that 'loyalty' has a different meaning in a context in which employers expect unquestioning obedience as default employee behaviour. Thus, we unpack the concept of voice, which has largely been focused on formal channels (at least in the human resource management and industrial relations literature) to include more informal and peer-to-peer avenues. Third, given the disorganised and unregulated nature of the Nigerian informal sector, our findings lend themselves to important policy

implications, and we identify the role of labour unions and the government with regard to protecting employees' rights at work.

In the sections below, we review the EVLN model and common conceptualisations of voice and silence. We then outline the employment context for domestic workers in Nigeria, focusing on the unregulated nature of the informal economy in which domestic employment is undertaken and the intersection of gender, age and occupation that places domestic workers near the bottom of Nigeria's hierarchical social structures, rendering them vulnerable to mistreatment in the workplace. After describing the research design and data analysis, we present our findings and discuss their implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical Framework: Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect

Hirschman (1970) proposed the exit, voice, and loyalty framework, to which Rusbult, Zembrodt and Gunn (1982) added Neglect (EVLN). It is in this context that we consider the four potential employee responses to adverse circumstances in the workplace: leave the organisation (exit), speak up about concerns (voice), patiently await improvement (loyalty), or wilfully underperform (neglect). However, the tendency for employees to opt for any of these four options (EVLN) is a function of the sociocultural, economic, and institutional environment, which is hostile, particularly for domestic employees in the precarious sectors, who are often left with no option but silence (Morrison, 2014). Nigerian workers most frequently opt for silence due to the expectation of absolute loyalty and respect for one's superior, which shows how motives for voice or silence may manifest differently in different sociocultural settings and other (economic, employment-related, and institutional) contexts (Umar & Hassan, 2013; Oruh et al., 2018). With no right to or expectation of voice, silence reflects what could be seen as akin to modern slavery (Crane, 2013). This is because such employees do not have the choice to exit their employment, to formally voice, or to neglect, while the consequent loyalty is a pretence or forced behaviour, which Caruana et al. (2021) refer to as a 'sad and sorry state of a non-field'; hence, such employees need to find innovative and unsanctioned ways to exercise their voice (Gunawardana, 2014). In this study, we therefore widen the concept of voice from its common usage in the EVLN model to include unofficial informal voice whereby workers create their own informal and individual spaces for expressing voice themselves (Atzeni, 2016). This approach may include embracing interpersonal relationships and contextual social interaction' with their employers. At times, they may seek advice from external organisations such as non-governmental organisations, agencies, and

other relevant actors, including relatives, who can support them with advice (Gunawardana, 2014).

Domestic Workers and the Nigerian Informal Sector

Domestic work is highly gendered, with women or girls hired to undertake various household chores, such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, and childcare, while their male counterparts are mostly employed as drivers, gardeners, and gatekeepers (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2016). Domestic employment is common in Nigeria, where children (often from underprivileged homes in rural areas) are trafficked to work in 'well-to-do' households in the city (Tade & Aderinto, 2012). The rise in demand for domestic workers in Nigeria has been attributed to a number of factors such as, increasing workloads among middle-class white-collar workers, particularly in dual-earner couple households; the scarcity and high cost of time- and effort-saving household appliances; and the preference for household assistance from 'outsiders' rather than family members, which is driven by a decline in the extended family structure system (Ladon, 2005; Olayiwola, 2019; Tade & Aderinto, 2012).

In Nigeria, many workers – including domestic workers – are in the informal economy, which is excluded from the coverage of the Labour Act (Agomo, 2011). In other words, most Nigerian workers are not in jobs that are subject to labour standards such as freedom of association, freedom from forced labour, freedom from child labour, and non-discrimination in employment. They have no legal protection from unsafe working conditions or workplace abuse (Akinwale, 2014). The workers in this sector tend to have little or no education, are generally unskilled, and have very limited access to financial resources (Yusuf, 2014). Employers often dictate domestic workers' employment conditions informally, without any legal backing or legal contracts (Awosusi & Adebo, 2012). The majority of domestic workers in Nigeria live under the control of their employers, who are commonly referred to as '*oga'* or 'madam', meaning 'boss' (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2016). The '*ogas*' decide the working hours, pay, and location of residence of their domestic workers. Domestic workers typically work very long hours and have little or no autonomy over their schedule (Adisa *et al*., 2021), and anecdotal reports of exploitation and sexual abuse are common (Olayiwola, 2019). This phenomenon in domestic employment in developing economies is all too common (Dwyer, 2012; Atzeni, 2016), where the socioeconomic and institutional context, among other factors, fuels and sustains this form of modern slavery (Crane, 2014; Caruana et al., 2021).

Intersectional Disadvantage

As young women employed in low-skilled, unregulated jobs are performed in people's home, domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to workplace mistreatment. Research conducted in the global north demonstrates how precarious working conditions and service-sector priorities for customer satisfaction combine to silence young hospitality and retail workers from speaking out against the sexual harassment they experience from customers (Good & Cooper, 2014, 2016). Similarly, Kensbock et al. (2015) show how women working as room cleaners in five-star Australian hotels are subject to high levels of sexual harassment due in part to the gendered nature of their jobs; a low value is placed on domestic work conducted in people's living spaces and the 'workplace' is a private, intimate location, a bedroom, with no third-party oversight to discourage harassment. When jobs are low skilled and workers can easily be replaced, workers have no power with which to negotiate better treatment. This is particularly true in strongly hierarchical and patriarchal cultures such as is prevalent in Nigeria (Arisi & Oromareghake, 2011), where power distance is high and cultural norms emphasise the supremacy of age over youth, men over women, and superiors over subordinates (Hofstede, 1980), all of which are antithetical to the expression of voice (Morrison, 2014).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology because of its exploratory nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and the need for more studies on employer-employee relationships in Nigeria's domestic work sector. The study adopts an interpretivist philosophy, which facilitates the collection of rich data and the interpretation of a lived social-corporate reality using words/text (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 21 domestic workers and 11 employers of domestic workers. Due to the difficulty in gaining access to domestic workers who were working in private households at the time of this study, participants were recruited through the lead author's personal network and via snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). The lead author knows several individuals whose relatives are domestic workers and arranged to contact them. Those who declined to participate were asked to recommend other domestic workers who might be willing to do so, and each new participant was also asked to suggest another domestic worker to interview. A similar technique was used for recruiting employers to the study, with the initial participants being known to the lead author and recommending subsequent participants. Snowball sampling permits researchers to access samples that may otherwise be difficult to reach and represents a time- and cost-efficient way of sourcing participants and securing their involvement (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The

potential disadvantage of this technique is the increased potential for sampling bias, because the participants are known to each other and may have more characteristics in common than would be the case in a random sample of the overall population of domestic workers in Nigeria.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (Domestic Workers)

No.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Education completed	Age	Years in domestic employment	Hours worked per day	Sleep-in or Sleep-out
1	Josephine	Female	Secondary	20	3	15	Sleep-in
2	Chaney	Female	Secondary	19	2	14	Sleep-out
3	Daisy	Female	Primary	20	4	12	Sleep-in
4	Florence	Female	Secondary	22	4	12	Sleep-in
5	Camila	Female	Secondary	21	4	13	Sleep-in
6	Diana	Female	Primary	18	5	14	Sleep-in
7	Gabrielle	Female	Primary	20	6	15	Sleep-in
8	Gail	Female	Primary	21	7	14	Sleep-in
9	Della	Female	Primary	20	6	12	Sleep-in
10	Aggie	Female	Primary	20	4	14	Sleep-out
11	Alberta	Female	Secondary	21	4	14	Sleep-in
12	Marina	Female	Primary	19	3	15	Sleep-in
13	Sandra	Female	Primary	22	6	12	Sleep-in
14	Anita	Female	Primary	23	6	12	Sleep-in
15	Amber	Female	Secondary	21	4	13	Sleep-out
16	Prissy	Female	Secondary	21	3	14	Sleep-in
17	Belinda	Female	Primary	23	6	15	Sleep-in
18	Beverley	Female	Secondary	19	2	13	Sleep-in
19	Cheryl	Female	Secondary	19	3	14	Sleep-in
20	Doris	Female	Primary	20	6	12	Sleep-out
21	Jenny	Female	Primary	21	7	14	Sleep-in

Note: 'Sleep-in' means the participant resides at the employer's home, while 'sleep-out' means the participant resides elsewhere.

We conducted the study in Lagos, the most populous city in Africa, with more than 20 million residents (World Population Review, 2019). Interviews were conducted in English and took place at locations of the participants' choice, such as cafés for domestic workers and workplaces for the employers of domestic workers. The average duration of the interview was one hour. The interviews were built on two central questions for domestic workers and one main question for employers, all derived from the literature on voice and silence (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Pinder & Harlos, 2001): (1) What are the challenges that you experience as a domestic worker? (2) How do you express your views, concerns, or opinions to your employer? (3) As an employer, do you involve your domestic worker in decisions that affect her working life? These open-ended questions allowed the participants to elaborate on their own views and experiences and prompted follow-up questions over the course of the interview process related to the hours of work for which the domestic workers work and the existence of employment contracts. No participants consented to audio recording of the interviews, despite

assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The domestic workers were concerned that their voices could potentially be identified by their employers and could lead to a loss of employment, while the employers were concerned that they could be identified by the authorities. Therefore, detailed notes were taken and read back to the participants at the end of each interview to confirm that what was recorded was a true representation of the participants' statements. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

Table 2: Sample Characteristics (Employers of Domestic Workers)

Serial No.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Profession	Age	Marital status	No of children
1	Yin	Female	Banker	39	Single	2
2	Fernandez	Male	Medical doctor	52	Married	3
3	Binta	Female	Business owner	46	Divorced	2
4	Andrew	Male	Banker	39	Single	2
5	Bukky	Female	Business owner	40	Married	3
6	Cristina	Female	Business owner	38	Divorced	2
7	Hamah	Female	Medical doctor	42	Single	1
8	Ana	Female	Business owner	46	Divorced	2
9	John	Male	Banker	38	Divorced	3
10	Khadya	Female	Business owner	40	Married	2
11	Shade	Female	Business owner	43	Single	2

The demographic characteristics of the study participants can be seen in Tables 1 and 2. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 23 years old for domestic workers and from 38 to 52 years old for employers. Domestic workers worked between 12 and 15 hours a day, and the majority resided at their employers' homes. All the domestic workers were single, with no children of their own. Employers were middle-class individuals from the three major tribes (Yoruba, Hausa, and Ibo) in Nigeria who worked as business owners, bankers, or medical doctors. While their marital statuses varied, all employers had childcare responsibilities. We drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach to interpret the interview data. The two authors who conducted the interviews read through the first set of interview notes and created initial codes based on chunks of text representing specific ideas or concepts (e.g. assault, fear of dismissal, working 'on-call' hours). The second set of notes were then read and coded using both the codes already generated and new ones pertaining to concepts that had not appeared in the first interviews. This process continued for all the interview notes, with the two authors working independently and then coming together to confirm or challenge each other's coding. The third author was then given a subset of the interview notes to code. We discussed any differences and reconciled to produce a final, agreed list of codes. Our analysis then moved from this first order coding of participant statements to the identification of themes into which we sorted the codes. For example, 'fear of dismissal', 'physical punishment' and 'social

learning' were grouped together under the theme 'perceived repercussions of voice'. We reviewed each theme for internal and external heterogeneity following Patton (2002), seeking to ensure that the codes within each theme fit together and that clear distinctions existed between themes. This latter task was particularly challenging as some broad codes (such as 'fear of exercising voice') were applicable to more than one theme.

Research Findings

Below, we present the themes that we identified in the data and interpret them in the context of the theory on voice and silence. We begin by describing the workplace context for domestic workers in Nigeria as evidenced in their accounts of their working lives and in employers' accounts of the employment relationship. We then move on to examine workers' interactions with their employers in terms of voicing their work-related views and concerns. We draw on the accounts of both workers and employers to explore their perceptions of entitlement to and the outcomes of employee voice for domestic workers.

The Nigerian Workplace Context for Domestic Workers

In this section, we describe the key challenges associated with being a domestic worker in Nigeria. The participants' narratives reveal an absence of formal contracts of employment and job descriptions, which contributes to long working hours, with no set start or finish times and often with harassment and sexual abuse. This situation produces an employment relationship that both domestic workers and employers compare to slavery.

Informal Contracts and Job Descriptions:

Our participants' accounts reveal that none signed a contract of employment or saw a written job description for their role. The majority of the domestic workers in our study (15) secured their jobs through relatives and were simply informed by their parents or guardians that they would be going to work in the city without being told any specifics about the job. The following statements typify the participants' experiences.

> *I was told only two days before my departure from our village to Lagos about the job. To be honest, I was happy that I was going to be living in the city. All I knew was that I would be helping my madam with general household chores. I was not aware of any contract of employment, and no job description was given (Marina, 19 years old, domestic worker).*
>
> *Perhaps because the job of a domestic workers requires no academic qualifications to do it, and it is such a 'lowly' job…a formal contract of*

employment and a job description are not involved. I do everything that I'm asked to do, without hesitation, and I receive no benefits except my salary, which is paid to my parents (Cheryl, 19 years old, domestic worker).

The remaining six participants were recruited by unregistered employment agents who took them from their family homes to those of their new employers. Among all the participants, many accounts featured references to the importance of working without complaint so as not to bring shame upon one's family. The domestic workers in our study were keen to protect their family reputation by being loyal to the employers and not complaining.

The agent discussed the job with my parents, and I was brought to Lagos by the agent. I stayed in her house for one week and was then brought to my madam. I did not sign any contract. I do everything…yes, everything…without complaining. My mum even warned me before I left to be obedient and not to complain about anything (Diana, 18 years old, domestic worker).

When the employers participating in this study were probed concerning the issue of formal contracts and job descriptions, all reported that they saw no rationale for formalising the employment relationship and potentially limiting the range of tasks a domestic worker might be expected to perform by identifying specific duties in a legal document.

I couldn't offer her a contract of employment…that might reduce the scope of her work, and besides, we are talking about house-help here – there's no need for all that…I don't think that is done anywhere in Nigeria. I decide everything about her work and her life (Shade, 43 years old, employer).

The contract of employment was verbally agreed between me and the agent who brought her: that she would be my housemaid. And the job description is that she would do all jobs (Binta, 46 years old, employer).

Employers benefit from the absence of formal legal arrangements covering domestic workers' employment, because this absence grants employers unrestricted discretion over domestic workers' job role and working hours. It is therefore unsurprising that none of the employers in our study expressed an interest in providing employment contracts.

Long and Unstructured Working Hours

All the domestic workers who participated in this study reported that they work long hours, without a clear schedule. The average hours worked per day among the participants was 13.3 and some participants worked as many as 105 hours per week (see Table 1).

I do not have a start or finish time, as I am summoned at any time of the day and night to attend to the children or any household chore. For example, I was summoned around 3 a.m. this morning to attend to my madam's two-year-old child who was crying, and I did go back to sleep, because the boy went back to sleep at around 6 a.m. and I just carried on with my usual routine. I can say my working hours are roughly 15 hours a day or, let me just say, I work all the time, because I live with my employer (Josephine, 20 years old, domestic worker).

Without the protection of employment legislation and formal contracts stipulating working times, workers in the informal economy often work extremely long hours (Davy et al., 2019). Even in nations where domestic employment is subject to legislation, the maximum working hours are often set at a higher level for domestic workers than for workers in other sectors (Blofield, 2009), and the ability of domestic workers to assert their employment rights is often severely constrained by their migrant status and potential live-in requirements, which gives employers coercive power over domestic workers, who are dependent on their employers for accommodation and subsistence (Cox, 2012). As illustrated by the domestic worker below, expectations for long working hours are standard among employers.

I have not worked less than 90 hours a week in the last 3 years. I worked at two places before here, and the story is the same, perhaps worse. It is work all the time. I can speak to you now because I am on an errand; otherwise, I have no time (Belinda, 23 years old, domestic worker).

Gender-Based Violence

Domestic workers' vulnerability to physical abuse is heightened by the isolation and intimacy of their workplace – they carry out their work in the employer's home, where unwanted attention is unlikely to be interrupted by third-party oversight. More than half of the domestic workers in our study indicated that they have been sexually harassed or sexually assaulted by either their employer or members of their employer's family. These participants never reported the incidents due to their fear of being dismissed.

It has happened to me twice. I did not report it, because I knew I would be sacked if I did. I have seen it happen before, so I keep it to myself in order to keep my job (Jenny, 21 years old, domestic worker).

I could not have reported it because whether my madam would believe me or not, I will be the one to leave. Her brother, a university graduate, sexually

harassed me, but I keep it to myself…he warned me not to mention it to anyone. I don't want to lose my job and go back to the village (Beverley, 19 years old, domestic worker).

The remainder of the domestic workers in our study declined to comment on this issue, citing concerns that their employers may find out they spoke about this subject, and they would lose their jobs as a consequence. We can speculate from this reluctance to speak on the topic that these workers have undergone similar experiences to those who reported being subjected to sexual harassment and assault or have witnessed such incidents happening to co-workers. These findings are in line with those of many researchers, who argue that fear of reprisal, fear of not being believed, and fear of adverse career consequences are some of the reasons why sexual harassment is under-reported in the workplace (e.g. Vijayasir, 2008).

Employer Receptiveness to Voice

When employers were asked whether domestic workers could voice their concerns or opinions about their jobs, none were of the view that this would be appropriate. They felt that the domestic workers' subservient status with regard to both their age and job role, made doing so inappropriate. Indeed, nearly all the employers interviewed interpreted 'concerns or opinions' as complaints, rather than constructive suggestions for improving working conditions or productivity.

Why should my domestic worker complain? First of all, it is wrong for a young person to complain when they are sent on an errand by an elder…not to talk of my domestic worker who was employed to serve me. Second, I don't think it's ethical, because I give them a job, and they are complaining about doing the job. (John, 38 years old, employer).

This excerpt reflects the culture of high-power distance that is prevalent in Nigeria and the cultural norm that requires young people to show respect and deference to their elders (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019). Another employer contrasted voice unfavourably with work ethics and courtesy:

You call it 'voice', but to me, it is rudeness and laziness. How could my servant, someone I employed to serve me, complain about the job? I think it's an insult. I have never experienced it. I don't think I could stand such a domestic worker…they normally are very obedient (Khadya, 40 years old, employer).

Similarly, when asked if domestic workers were consulted with regard to decisions that affected their work, employers were universal in their negative response. Paying for labour is associated with complete authority over the labourer:

> *Come on, they are domestic workers, I don't see a need for that… (Fernandez, 52 years old, employer).*
>
> *No, I don't involve my domestic worker in any decisions. That is insulting. I just give orders, and she complies (John, 38 years old, employer).*
>
> *I pay for her time. So, I decide how, when, and where that time is spent. She has no say in it at all. I am the decision-maker here (Cristina, 38 years old, employer).*

The prospect of having discussion – let alone consulting or negotiating – with domestic workers on job-relevant decisions was perceived by employers as unnecessary at best and entirely inappropriate at worst. Ascribing any value to the views of someone they consider socially inferior was perceived as demeaning. Employers framed domestic worker subservience and employer authoritarianism as social norms within the deeply hierarchical social structure of Nigeria, unrelated to 'good' or 'bad' people management (Adisa et al., 2021). As evidenced in the excerpt below, a dictatorial management style and the expectation of workers' total compliance were not seen as antithetical to treating one's staff well:

> *I think it's the culture here for housemaids to just comply with whatever their masters say. Employers don't like to hear complaints or suggestions from housemaids. Even myself – as much as I love to treat my housemaid well, she dares not complain about anything (Yin, 39 years old, employer).*

Two key points can be taken from the above narrations. First, voicing any job-related dissatisfaction to their employers places domestic workers at risk of termination of employment. Second, this situation is at least in part due to employers perceiving employee voice in the context of domestic employment to represent a challenge to their authority. This challenge is seen as culturally unacceptable given its juxtaposition with Nigeria's cultural norms of respect and obedience towards one's elders and one's employer, particularly when the latter is of a higher socioeconomic status (see Emelifeowu & Valk, 2019).

The Perceived Negative Repercussions of Voice and Silence as Alternative

Participants who reported having expressed their voice in the workplace on previous occasions invariably suffered adverse consequences and opted for silence thereafter.

> *I complained about my workload and long working hours to my previous madam. I thought we could arrive at a compromise whereby my workload and working hours would be reviewed. But she dismissed me the following day complaining that I was lazy. I think that keeping utterly quiet is the best way a domestic worker can avoid troubles and keep her job…which is what I'm doing now (Gold, 21 years old, domestic worker).*

Silence, which has been defined as withholding any genuine expression about a perceived or experienced injustice (Pinder & Harlos, 2001), is a tactic that was learned not only by those who had direct experience with the repercussions of expressing voice in the workplace but also by those who engaged in social learning through observing the experiences of others:

> *We were two domestic workers – me and another lady. She was dismissed a few months ago, because she complained that madam's brother woke her at around 2 a.m. to prepare food. This angered madam a lot and she smacked her severely and dismissed her. I remember madam saying, 'How dare you complain of doing what I bought you to do?' So, for me, complaining about anything is like a first-class ticket to getting dismissed (Florence, 22 years old, domestic worker).*

Florence's story demonstrates the commonly held view among domestic workers that it is not safe voice one's dissatisfaction in work-related matters, because this has been seen to lead to physical assault and ultimately termination of employment. Employers agree with the view that a domestic worker who expresses their voice would be penalised.

> *I sometimes ask her if the job is too much for her, but she always says 'no'. I would have sacked her if she had said yes, because it means she's lazy (Khadya, 40 years old, employer).*

In an informal economy, where unskilled labour is cheap and plentiful, employers view their domestic workers as replaceable. In the excerpt above, offering workers the opportunity to express their voice was less about their concern for domestic workers' wellbeing and more of a trap designed to catch workers who were dissatisfied with their heavy workload.

Domestic Employment as 'Slavery'

The workplace experiences recounted by the participants demonstrate that domestic workers are subject to heavy job demands and job insecurity, and they fear job loss or sanctions from their employer, thereby restricting their ability to report mistreatment. In some accounts, participants compared these working conditions to enslavement.

> *My oga once called me an idiot slave. My days are planned by my madam…I am always on duty, and I dare not complain about anything, because I will lose my job. I am like my madam's property (Anita, 23 years old, domestic worker).*
>
> *Let me just tell you exactly what it is. Domestic workers are slaves, while their employers are the slave owners. For a domestic worker to enjoy a good working relationship with her master and keep her job requires her not to complain about anything, good or bad…just do exactly as you are told. (Prissy, 21 years old, domestic worker).*

The notion of domestic workers being personal property also arose in many of the employers' accounts. One employer referred to domestic workers' status as 'slave-like' and saw this situation as an unavoidable by-product of the job they perform, distancing herself from her own role as an employer in upholding this status.

> *I decide what my domestic worker does and plan her days…I basically plan her life. She carries out my instructions to the letter and has never complained about anything…She has never looked into my eyes…I call that slavery, but that is unfortunately the nature of her job (Ana, 46 years old, employer).*

By ascribing a universality to these asymmetrical power relations and emphasising domestic workers' freedom of choice regarding their occupation, employers evade personal responsibility for perpetuating the slavery-like working conditions.

> *Honestly, they are like slaves that you purchase. Feed them and use them for all sorts of things. I basically programme my domestic worker's life. I am not proud of it, but that is exactly what is it, and it is sort of universal in Nigeria (Bukky, 40 years old, employer).*
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> *If you call it slavery, then it is voluntary, because they knew what the job would entail before they came into it (Binta, 46 years old, employer).*

Domestic workers' lives are under the control of their employers. While they are compensated financially for their work, the wages are low, even more so considering the long hours worked. Pay is typically sent home to the domestic workers' parents and the obligation the domestic workers feel to honour the employment arrangements their parents made on their behalf is a strong motivation for them to continue in what is perceived as a difficult job. This could be likened to late 19th -century indentured labour (Castles & Miller 1998). We argue that the nature of a domestic worker's job presents debilitating implications for their voice to be heard in the workplace.

Adapting & Creating Informal & Individual Spaces for Expressing Voices

While Nigerian domestic workers do not have the luxury of exiting, voicing about, or neglecting their role due to the constraining socio-environmental factors, genuine loyalty to their employers is also not present. Yet, such workers must find a way of expressing their voice in some small way by adapting to or finding small spaces within the environment in which they find themselves. The work of domestic workers in Nigeria depends on outsourcing (unregistered) agencies, which organise and distribute the workers to their various employers, or they work directly for the agencies. As one participant noted, 'The nature of this work is based on an individual arrangement – only one of us can be sent to a particular work location at one time, making it difficult for domestic employees like us to come together, let alone organise and develop resistance' (*Alberta, 21 years old, domestic worker*). Insights from some of the participants show that the harshness and individuality of this nature of work is common among domestic workers, and it essentially offers little space for solidarity. According to one participant, who reflects the opinion of the majority:

> *Every two weeks, I come to this agency office to sign a document or discuss my work process. I often meet the same faces, people in a similar situation to me. As time went on, we started talking and sharing our experiences. Sometimes, we even met on the street and started bonding and sharing advice, tips, and measures that one can adopt to navigate this lonely and cruel work arrangement, where employers use and abuse us as they wish* (*Della, 20 years old, domestic worker).*

Another domestic worker commented on such peer-to-peer or sideways voice as follows.

> *I know a few girls in this neighbourhood who are also domestic workers…We occasionally meet up when we run errands for our bosses to discuss our plights, share experiences, and advise each other…We normally advise*

ourselves on the importance of keeping quiet (Josephine, 20 years old, domestic worker).

Notably, this peer-to-peer voice process (Loudoun et al., 2020) has been enabled by the very precarious and untenable nature of domestic work, including 'the agony of being exploited' (*Anita, 23 years old, domestic worker*), which domestic workers have in common, and the opportunity to share their similar complaints and situations. In this way, by coming to the agency office, while individualising their unique experiences, these domestic workers become more visible and interconnected, leading to informal meetings wherein they share complaints and ideas to mitigate their situations. Furthermore, some of the participants commented that they use the relatives of their employers as a voice mechanism. As Gail commented:

> *My boss and his wife are very hostile towards me. They treat me worse than a slave. But mercifully, the mother of my boss is very empathetic and caring. So, I seized the opportunity to tell her my stories. We interacted more deeply and developed a social bond and emotional intimacy. We discussed the reality of social deprivation and related emotions. She gives me advice and tips on when and how to best appeal to my boss* (*Gail, 21 years old, domestic worker*).

Jenny commented on how she uses prosocial behaviour to engage and develop a good relationship with her boss:

> *I usually tell her what she likes to hear whenever she queries me about any issue. For example, I said no when she asked if her nephew had harassed me…that way, she is happy with me (Jenny, 21 years old domestic worker).*

The quote above illustrates that it is not as simple as the worker simply trying to help the boss. In this case, they see it as part of a strategy to gain confidence, so this is very much the first step in a longer process that might not be all about pleasing the boss. Rather, telling the boss what they want to hear is prosocial, but the motivation might be otherwise. Beyond interpersonal relationships and social interactions, one of the ideas shared by domestic workers is that they can '*find support from outside their workplace'* (*Binta, 46 years old, employer*) by talking to their relatives and agencies, who often advised them to endure the situation in order to keep their jobs. According to one participant, 'I normally complain to my mum when I talk to her on the phone, but she always advises me to endure whatever the treatment is in order to keep my job' (*Agie, 20 years old, domestic worker*). Furthermore, the peer-to-agency

relationship can be another viable strategy for accessing and expressing informal and individual voice.

> *My agency often advises me not to discuss whatever happens in my place of work with anybody, because I will lose my job and it will get me in trouble. Sometimes, she promises to talk to my boss but yes, I often tell my agency (Diana, 18 years old domestic worker).*

As one participant commented, 'the agency lady is so compassionate and caring – she once told my boss to take it easy with me, because I was going through emotional distress because of a family problem' (*Gabrielle, 20 years old, domestic worker*). Another participant shared that although most of these workers are mindful of their jobs, 'They are quite thoughtful. Madam Clara (the agent) is a star, she understood my predicament and initiated my move to my present place of work' (*Doris, 20 years old, domestic worker*). One employer admitted that 'Agencies represent the link between domestic workers and employers' (*Andrew, 39 years old employer*); hence, they are influential in employment relations concerning domestic workers. This means that domestic workers can develop social capital and interpersonal relationships with their agents (as they do with their peers) in order to express their voice. Therefore, securing peer-to-peer support, interpersonal relationships, and contextual social relationships (with employers and their relatives) as well as external support (from relatives and agencies) are strategies that some of the participants employ when adapting to their environment and creating space to informally and individually make their voices heard (Gunawardana, 2014).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we explored the extent to which voice can be exercised by domestic workers in Nigeria and the strategies they can adopt to potentially find space for expressing their voices. Similar to other developing countries, including South Africa, Buenos Aires, and Sri Lanka (Dwyer, 2012; Gunawardana, 2014; Atzeni, 2016), domestic workers in Nigeria face difficult and often dangerous working conditions characterised by long working hours (with no set start or finish times), a complete lack of autonomy over their time and work tasks, and the threat of physical and/or sexual abuse. Their position as marginalised members of society on account of their gender, age, and lack of occupational and educational qualifications places them in an extremely vulnerable position with their employers, whose power over them is near-absolute (Umar & Hassan, 2013; Oruh et al., 2018). Employers exhibit an authoritarian people management style, in line with Nigerian cultural norms, thereby distancing themselves from

any felt responsibility for the unfavourable working conditions experienced by their staff. This harsh reality at times is tantamount to modern slavery (Caruana et al., 2021), but even within this context, workers try to create their own space to express their voice (Gunawardana, 2014).

Theoretical Implications

We examine our findings through the lens of the EVLN framework in order to uncover the structural constraints in the form of state regulation (or lack thereof) and cultural norms, which disable domestic workers in Nigeria from responding to unjust and potentially dangerous working conditions with any options other than silence, which is a form of modern slavey (Crane, 2013; Caruana *et al*., 2021). Hence, workers must be creative in order to adapt to their environment by making the most of what is obtainable, such as embracing interpersonal relationships and contextual social interactions with their employers as well as using peer-to - peer or sideways voice with other workers. They can also relate their experiences to and bond with their agency to gain sympathy and support or seek advice and support from external non-government organisations and other relevant actors – all possible ways of creating space for voice expression (Gunawardana, 2014). If the domestic worker exits her job, this may reflect poorly on both the domestic worker and her family, and given that working conditions are similar across employers, the expectation of finding a more favourable position is likely to be low. Domestic workers are young, female, poor, and in possession of few educational qualifications. In a hierarchical society in which age, masculinity, and financial resources most prized, such domestic workers are marginalised members of society with few (if any) attractive alternative employment options.

As can be seen in our findings, if a domestic worker voices their concerns to their employer, they are risking physical abuse and/or termination of employment. Engaging in ‘neglect’ by showing a lack of interest in work or not fully engaging in job tasks is likewise not a viable option. While Allen (2014, p. 46) suggests that neglect may ‘enable employees to exert some power over their employers by getting the employer to pay for work that has not actually been

done, this would not be the case for the domestic workers who participated in our study. They are low skilled and can be easily replaced. Finally, the 'loyalty' response doesn't carry the same meaning as it might in a western organisation. In the global north, there is evidence that employees' loyalty to their employer increases their propensity to engage in voice, as they are highly invested in improving their workplaces (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2009). In Nigeria, however, employers of domestic workers expect unquestioning obedience as a matter of course. 'Loyal' domestic workers are simply trying to not lose their jobs. It is not that they are patiently and confidently waiting for working conditions to improve. As the findings of our study show, the concept of employee voice is predicated on western values connected o 'speaking up', which are not shared by all cultures – particularly in developing countries, such as Nigeria, where the reality of domestic workers is akin to modern slavery. This means the EVLN framework (and the notion of voice more generally) needs to be adapted to the Nigerian context. Hence, we have expanded EVLN by considering what voice means in this context, as workers do not have the same tools that are available in the west, so they must adjust in order to find ways of expressing voice themselves (Gunawardana, 2014).

While voice is contested in the west there is at least some acceptance that speaking up is normal and the issue becomes the how and to what extent voice is facilitated (Wilkinson et al. 2010; Wilkinson *et al*., 2018). The employers in our study demonstrated a near total unwillingness to consider any acceptable level of workers' voice. This rejection of voice for employees can be attributed to the cultural norms prevalent in Nigeria. Hofstede (1980) describes how, in high-power distance cultures, there is no assumption of existential equality between superiors and subordinates. The social hierarchy is based on a fundamental inequality between workers and their '*ogas*'. To accept views or suggestions from a social inferior implies some deficiency on the part of the employer, and this threatens their status. In this context, employee voice is equivalent to telling employers they are incompetent with regard to managing their staff.

Policy and Human Resource Management Implications

Domestic workers have no legal protection from unsafe working conditions and workplace abuses, and they are effectively voiceless. The onus is thus on the government and policymakers to enact and enforce laws that regulate the informal sector of the economy. A key consideration for policymakers (both at federal and state levels) is to make Nigeria a signatory to the ILO Domestic Workers Convention and extend the provisions of the Nigerian Labour Act to include domestic workers and other players in the informal sector, including

both employers and the currently unregulated agents who place domestic workers with households. In the context of an amended Labour Act that extends protection to the informal economy, human resource practitioners would contribute by compiling job descriptions for domestic workers and establishing advisory services to provide guidance to domestic workers on their employee rights and how to claim them. Even in the currently unregulated context of the informal economy, labour unions could play a key role in educating domestic workers about their employment rights under articles 23 and 24 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which specifies (among other rights) just and favourable conditions of work, reasonable limitations on working hours, and holidays with pay.

A more difficult challenge lies in shifting employers' attitudes towards domestic workers. Educational initiatives by the government and human resource practitioners may have difficulty gaining immediate traction given the strong cultural norms in Nigeria in relation to power distance and obedience towards one's elders (Hofstede, 1980). A more fruitful avenue may be attempts to manipulate perceptions of social status. If employing domestic workers is currently seen as a symbol of superiority (Olayiwola, 2019), emphasising the need for more progressive and humane treatment of staff (for instance, a transformational leadership style) as indicative of one's sophistication and good taste may be a more successful route to change.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendation Future Research

This study extends the extant literature on employee voice by showing how institutional factors and cultural norms disempower domestic workers in Nigeria and prevent them from effecting positive change in their workplaces. We build on extant research to demonstrate how in the face of structural factors that inhibit voice, exit, and neglect, domestic workers in Nigeria respond to unfavourable work conditions in the only way that is available to them: adapt, which includes employing acquiescent and defensive silence to avoid conflict with their employers and thereby retain their jobs, while seeking external support and advice (Gunawardana, 2014). In combination with the lack of legislative protection afforded to domestic workers in Nigeria, high EVLN contributes to the use of low-quality, authoritarian people management practices by employers (Hofstede, 1980). Thus, Nigerian cultural norms governing the supervisor-subordinate relationship preclude the meaningful use of employee voice as it is understood in a western context. However, by investigating what voice means in the restricted environment (occasioned by cultural and patrimonial constraints, such as in Nigeria), where workers lack similar tools to what is available in the west and are therefore required to make relevant adjustments, the voice prospects of domestic workers can then be better managed

(Gunawardana, 2014). Our work has limitations. With few male employers compared to female employers as study participants, we could not identify potential gender dynamics in the employment relationships. Interviews with employer-employee pairs would have provided greater scope with which to examine perceptions and expectations of working conditions and critical incidents from opposing perspectives; however, securing the participation of domestic workers whose employers were being interviewed would have proven very difficult if not impossible, given their concerns about being identifiable. Perhaps most crucially, our inability to produce verbatim transcripts of the interviews may have impacted our analyses.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides a basis from which it is possible to investigate employee voice further in under-researched contexts and among disenfranchised populations. Future research with domestic workers might examine whether voice is more likely to occur in households employing multiple domestic workers: Is there any safety in numbers or any solidarity among co-workers in this context? What are the long-term consequences of silence for domestic workers in terms of health, wellbeing, and economic activity? When does silence lead to exit? And perhaps most crucially for change to take place, how can employers be persuaded to improve working conditions for domestic workers given how they seem to benefit from the status quo? Answering these questions has value not only for the employee voice literature, but for the lived experiences of millions of women in domestic employment in Nigeria and globally.

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