

The History of Coloured Domestic Workers in Canada

by Kathy Jacques

After the 19th century, women were the ones who mostly held the occupation of domestic. It was one of the “most common paid employment for Canadian women before 1900” (The Canadian Encyclopedia 1). At first, women domestics were white. However, when we started devaluing this work, it became less popular amongst white women and there was a shortage of domestics (The Canadian Encyclopedia). We then started employing women from other countries such as “Britain, Scandinavia, central Europe...” (The Canadian Encyclopedia 1).



However, it was only after WWII that we started having coloured domestics from the West Indies and the Philippines (The Canadian Encyclopedia). Between 1955 and 1967, three thousand black people migrated to Canada to become domestics (Cohen). Before this period, the policy of immigration was racist; the Canadian government did not want to have coloured domestics. When Africans first arrived in Canada, working as domestics was one of the only jobs they were allowed to do (Sadler).

In 1955, there was the *West Indies Domestic Scheme*, which gave a few advantages to coloured domestics (Cohen). After working one year for their master, women domestics could apply to obtain their immigrant status which allowed them to stay in Canada. In fact, many women stayed in Canada (Silvera). However, if the immigration system judged certain domestics “unacceptable”, they still had the right to expel them from Canada (Cohen 135). Moreover, after their mandatory year of work as domestics, most women did not want to do that job anymore because the conditions were too difficult.

At first, only rich families had domestics. However, since middle-class women “preferred factory or office work” we recruited domestics from other countries to take care of the children (Cohen 134). This was one of the reasons why the government had to bring domestics from other countries. Since there were more domestics, their conditions were worse.

Families who asked for servants had to pay their entry to Canada. In return, the domestics had to guarantee a year of work for the family. After they had done their year of work for their employer, they were allowed to find another job somewhere else. Moreover, in contrast to white women, black domestics were “required to have a grade eight education, be single and in good health, be between the ages 25 and 40...” (Cohen 135).

In 1967, the *Immigration Act* was put in place to give better conditions to domestics and also to help other immigrants who wanted to come to Canada. However, this act did not really help their situation because coloured women were, most of the time, not able to achieve all the criteria needed to become domestics so they did not get their “landed status” (Cohen 136). Coloured domestics were also excluded from many advantageous conditions such as having a minimum wage and limited working hours. The only advantage this act gave domestics was that they did not have to work one year for their employer; they could leave before if they wanted to.

In 1973, the government put the *Employment Authorization Program* in place . This program improved the domestics’ condition a little because the employer had to give them minimum wages and working hours were limited. However, these women were not able to become Canadian residents. The government gave coloured domestics a one-year “visa” to work as a domestic. “The permit would cite a specific occupation, a specific employer and the term for which it was valid” (Silvera, 40-41). This “visa” could be renewed up to five years, but after that, coloured women had to go back to their country. Since not all employers were fair, there were still many women who were exploited.



In 1979, the *Foreign Domestic Movement* was created. This movement allowed women who worked as domestics for two years to apply for their landed status to stay in Canada (Cohen 136-37). It also gave much better conditions to coloured domestics. For example, “the new policy required employers to pay a foreign domestic worker at least 25 percent above the minimum wage...” (Cohen 137).

In 1992, there was also the *Live-in Caregivers Program*. This program was established to set new and better conditions to women who wanted to become domestics. Finally, in 1993, there was the *Legal Education and Action Fund*. This association presented a chart, which claimed that the conditions that had been established in 1992 violated the “*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* by denying women’s equal benefit of the law and discriminate[d] on the basis of national and ethnic background” (Cohen 138).

Even though coloured domestics’ conditions have improved a lot since 1955, there are still rich Canadian people who try to “provide low-costs servants” (Cohen 139). Lets’ hope the conditions of Canadian domestics will keep improving.

Works Cited

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