

## Supporting domestic workers to start their own enterprises, from Hillbrow to Hackney

by Andrew Thompson

The role of domestic workers can be approached from various angles. Tuliza Sindi, a Johannesburg based lecturer and social entrepreneur, came to the subject through architecture, focusing on the role of domestic workers in household living spaces, and on their unique role at the crossing point between racial, cultural, and economic divides. At worst, she believes domestic labour can “cement, sustain, and replicate” the old ills of apartheid.



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Douglas Racionzer, a South African who has been based for many years in London, describes himself as something of an old anarchist. He became interested in the wages for housework movement originating in Italy in the 1970s, which campaigned around women’s right to work outside of the home, unemployment benefits, parental leave, and equal pay.

Tuliza now runs a social enterprise called [BRNWSH](#), which helps domestic workers from Hillbrow, a Johannesburg neighbourhood known for its diversity and high incidence of poverty and unemployment, to start up their own businesses. The company says domestic workers and cleaners constitute “one of society’s greatest frontiers of untapped and wasted human potential.”

Douglas, on the other hand works for [Hackney Cooperative Developments](#) (HCD), a London inner-city development agency that supports a range of social and ethical organisations, local start-ups, and cultural and creative entrepreneurs. Like Hillbrow, the borough of Hackney has



higher than average national rates of poverty and unemployment.

Douglas and Tuliza met through a mutual friend and began exploring what could be done to help domestic workers create better, more sustainable livelihoods. Douglas points out that there are significant differences in the structure of the domestic work sector in the two countries. In South Africa there is a larger proportion of domestic workers who do a wider range of jobs. In the UK, the employment market is more atomised between care workers (many of whom do not consider themselves domestic workers as such), cleaners, and a group of workers who are really indentured labourers – almost slaves – for very wealthy families.

Domestic workers face a whole range of complex problems. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), there are 67m domestic workers over the age of 15 worldwide and four out of five of them are women. Just under one in five of them are migrants. Most work long hours for low wages. Seven out of ten are in the informal economy which mean their rights – for example to sick pay, health care, and pensions – are not enforced. Less than a decade ago, in 2013, the ILO introduced convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers. ‘Decent work’ is defined as employment that respects human rights, and the rights to safety, reasonable remuneration, and the physical and mental integrity of the worker. This standard is still not met in many parts of the world.

A recent report in South Africa found that the typical domestic worker there is a single mother who supports four people in her household on an income of not more than 3,000 Rand a month (£156 or US\$203). She lives in a brick house or flat and spends one to two hours a day travelling to work. South Africa’s new minimum wage of 20 Rand an hour (£1.05 or US\$1.35) does not formally apply to domestic workers.

Supported by a grant from the British Council’s DICE Fund, BRNWSH, with the help of HCD, has set about helping cooperatives of domestic workers in Hillbrow to launch their own creative and social enterprises, providing help for an initial group of 26 with training, mentorship, coaching and networking. The 26 have developed a wide range of business projects. They include making jewellery from upcycled materials; selling herbal tea; and setting up a day-care centre for children.

The idea is to give the women the expertise to hone business skills such as accounting, stock-taking, marketing and promotion. The collaboration has created a free-to-use online toolkit. As part of the project, five out of six chosen women went on a study-visit to London to meet and compare notes with domestic workers who are running their own social enterprises in Hackney.

The positive news is that the women involved benefited from the trip, gaining new skills and increased confidence. Their social are on firm footing, with a good prospect of becoming sustainable and helping both their founders and their communities. Douglas is unequivocal. The project, he says, shows that “An inclusive and creative economy is not only possible, but is actually being done. It is being done in a very localised setting of course, but this is replicable, and more projects like this need to be undertaken.”

At the same time both Tuliza and Douglas say that the process has been very emotional and at times very challenging. We all have dreams of a better life, but those dreams don’t always come true.

Tuliza mentions the case of one beneficiary who was told she was losing her job in South Africa, but who was selected for the study-visit to London. In her mind the visit to London



would be transformative and would unlock all her problems: so it was very hard coming back to the unchanged prospect of unemployment back at home.

Understandably, some of the beneficiaries wanted immediate benefits such as cash and resources for their nascent enterprises, rather than tuning in to the project leaders' message of longer-term self-reliance and empowerment. Douglas says that the philosophical concept of resentment – the psychological state resulting from suppressed feeling of envy and hatred which cannot be satisfied – has shown itself on occasion.

Significantly perhaps, both Tuliza and Douglas have been relatively low-profile about publicising the undoubted successes of their project. In a world of slick marketing, they have resisted the hard sell approach. Tuliza is convinced that “if it is not hard to sell, and if it is easily packaged, then you are not moving the needle forward”.

