

**CHILDREN'S VIEWS OF SRI LANKAN AND FILIPINO DOMESTIC  
WORKERS: A RESEARCH STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE CENTER FOR  
THE STUDY OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**

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The Center for the Study of Childhood and Adolescence, a non-governmental, non-profit organization which focuses its activities on childhood research, has recently completed a qualitative study on Greek Cypriot elementary school children's perceptions of, knowledge about, and attitudes towards Sri Lankan and Filipino women who are employed as domestic workers in Cyprus. The research consisted of in-depth interviews and focus groups with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade children and was supported by the Bi-communal Development Programme which is funded by USAID and UNDP and is executed by UNOPS. In this article, a few specific examples of how children view Sri Lankan and Filipino domestic workers are presented in an effort to provide a sense of how the larger world shapes children's understandings of these people and how, at the same time, the children themselves shape their understandings through their own everyday experiences.

When we asked the children to say what comes to mind when they hear the feminine form of "Sri Lankan" (Sri Lankeza) and "Filipino" (Filippineza), the overwhelming majority of children pointed out "domestic worker", which suggests a clear identification between the respective national categories and the particular profession. Children also used a variety of other related words to describe Sri Lankan and Filipino domestic workers such as "cleaning lady" and "babysitter". One boy even used the term "slave" and "fool" to describe Filipino domestic workers because, as he explained, people order them about all the time, and exploit and make fun of them. Colour was another important description that most of the children readily pointed out. They described Sri Lankan and Filipino domestic workers as "black" in contrast to "our" white colour.

In fact, some of the children, in their attempt to understand who Sri Lankans and Filipinos are, imagined them as radically different from "us." For instance, one boy imagined their food habits as exotic and weird, "They eat snakes, they are poor people, and they do not eat the kinds of food we eat". Similarly, another boy pointed out that the Filipino domestic worker his family employs has six brothers to which a girl added that "because they have nothing much to do, they have children".

Although children identified numerous differences between "us" and "them," some of them also identified similarities. The most common similarity pointed out was "character" which children saw as being similar between Sri Lankans and Filipinos on the one hand and Greek Cypriots on the other. As one boy explained referring to Sri Lankan domestic workers: "They are like us . . . like our mother takes care of us, she takes care of us in the same way . . . like we clean our houses, she cleans it in the same way too". Yet, despite their overall positive assessment some of the children qualified their statements with doubts about the validity of their beliefs. For instance, one girl in a focus group discussion explained that "it might be lies, all these things we believe, when Sunday comes, which is their day off, they might show their real self".

Most of the children described Sri Lankan and Filipino women as “good” or “very good”, as having a “good character”, and as being “polite”. Other characteristics mentioned were: friendly, sensitive, loving, obedient, hardworking, and helpful.

Yet, for some of the children their positive evaluation was based on their understanding of these women as “passive”, “obedient”, and “non-complaining”. One boy, for example, made it a point to tell us that the character of Sri Lankan domestic workers is good because “Let’s say they can’t even get upset with you if you do something wrong to them”. For this boy, the quality of their character is measured by their ability or inability to react to those who do something wrong to them. In other words, being subservient, non-reactive, and obedient is a sign of good character. As another boy explained, “I myself had a Filipino in my house, she was relatively good and she obeyed me. She was good” .

Of course, not all children were particularly excited about the presence of foreign domestic workers in Cyprus. One boy, for example, was very clear about his dislike for Sri Lankan women and foreigners in general, “They are not the group of foreigners that I like. Let’s say I do not like blacks . . let’s say we dress in the winter and wear shoes, they walk around with sandals. I do not like this. We should not be a country like the United States which hosts people. Let’s say Canada hosts a lot of foreign people, they have their own customs but I do not think we are that country I mean, we are a different country. In Canada they might see things differently but most of us Cypriots do not like them [i.e. foreigners] coming.”.

For other children there is a question of trust, that is to say, whether you can trust the upbringing of your children to a Filipino domestic worker. In a girl’s own words, “Most people trust them. I think we should not because if she takes care of a child she might, let’s say, teach him her [i.e. Filipino] religion, manners and customs of her country, so that the child grows up differently”.

When it came to comparing Sri Lankan with Filipino domestic workers many children expressed their clear preference for Filipinos because, as one boy explained, “they do not steal like Sri Lankans.” However, overall Filipino and Sri Lankan women were seen as being much better for domestic work than Russian and Bulgarian woman who were seen as being more involved with other types of work (e.g. as artistes in cabarets, as barmaids, etc).

Many of the children whose families employed domestic workers described their relationships with them as “good” or “very good.” For some of the children the relationship is extremely important. One girl, for example, was very clear about her feelings towards their Sri Lankan domestic worker, “I love her and she loves me” . She explained that their domestic worker helps them when they need something and is very sensitive especially towards children, “I like the fact that she loves us, does not get upset with us, and has contact with us every day”.

For other children, their relationship with the domestic worker depended to a large extent on how they evaluated her character in relation to her work performance. One girl, for example, likes her Sri Lankan domestic worker because “she always cleans. When she does not have anything else to do, she calls my mum on the phone to ask her what else there is to do?”.

On the other hand, not all children were happy with their domestic workers. Some of them disliked certain aspects of their domestic worker's behaviour or character. For instance, one boy was not happy with their domestic worker because as he explained "it is hard to get them to do what you want."

Not all children saw the employer-domestic worker relationship the same way and some children were quite critical about the exploitation of these women which they perceived was taking place. In a focus group discussion with children, one boy pointed out that some Cypriots exploit Sri Lankan domestic workers by paying them less money than they should and by giving them too much work which the employers themselves do not want to do. Another boy also added a critical point of view on this issue, "I know homes, which I should not mention, that exploit them severely and say, 'go and get me that' because they do not feel like getting it themselves. She should do everything. But should they be doing everything?". To this, another boy reacted with, "Ok, he is somewhat right, but what is their main job? To do those things. We pay them, why shouldn't we order them about?" The above illustrates that some children are capable of being critical about cases of exploitation that they know about. On the other hand, it also illustrates that other children feel a sense of entitlement which in their minds justifies ordering about Sri Lankan women who are, after all, employed by them and therefore should carry out the employers' wishes.

But how would these children feel if their domestic worker decided to leave or if she had to leave because her visa expired? Most of them said they would feel "sad" or "very sad". One reason brought up by some children was that the domestic worker had been with the family for many years and they felt a connection. Some children considered their domestic worker to be a member of the family while others saw her as a friend. One girl, for example, said she would be sad if their domestic worker left because she would lose a friend). As she explained, "when I am by myself, she keeps me company. A few days ago when I was sick she came and saw me. She loves me".

It is obvious that the picture which emerges from this study is quite complex. Children's understandings of Sri Lankan and Filipino domestic workers are filled with stereotypes, prejudices, and ignorance. At the same time, children - and especially children whose families employ domestic workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines - often develop relationships with these women and come to know them in a more intimate way, that is to say, they come to understand them and relate to them at a more human level. Yet, even in these cases stereotypes and misconceptions are not absent. These contradictions in the children's worlds are reflective of the larger contradictions which exist in Cypriot society in general and which often give rise to 'doubletalk' of the sort "we are not racists but . . .". Education can certainly play an important role in helping children develop a better understanding of these people, about their cultures, histories, reasons for leaving their families behind to come to Cyprus for work, and about their often complex and unprivileged worlds. However, formal education by itself cannot address the questions of racism, tolerance, and respect. Other institutions such as the family and mass media need to rethink their roles in society and contribute to this way of thinking. Moreover, the State needs to take its own responsibilities and address the multiple challenges that such intercultural encounters give rise to. Cyprus is a multicultural society and will continue to be one; the challenge to create a more inclusive society which is respectful of difference is even more imperative now that the country has entered the European Union and

peoples from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds will be even more likely to live among us.

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