
Dimitris Kalantzopoulos

This chapter focuses on the economic and social factors which shaped domestic work in Cyprus, as well as the institutional framework adopted by the British colonial government. It explores the reasons to seek work in households of others and the power relations which structured domestic servants’ living and working conditions during and after employment. The chapter focuses on the close relation between adoption, slavery, prostitution and domestic service and attempts to highlight how gender and class defined social norms which set the context of domestic work for different strata of Cypriot society. An understanding of the multiple and complex factors which shaped the very nature of the phenomenon requires a scrutiny of the initial stages of becoming a domestic servant. To understand why a young girl or woman works in someone else’s household it is necessary to analyse the social norms of society as a whole. To understand who was accepted as domestic worker and how such decisions were made requires an analysis of the legal framework.

In this chapter, legislative interventions on domestic service are analysed through laws passed by Cyprus’ British colonial government, accompanying minutes, and dispatches by governmental officials and committees to London, as well as through the regulatory framework suggested by supranational organizations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Regulation of work and regulations as to who would be allowed to work as domestic servant appear as being of equal importance for the colonial administration. What was the logic and goals set by the government? Whose problems did the legal framework try to solve – those of the employers, the workers, or both? How did this legislation come into being? To what extent did Cyprus’ government comply with its obligations deriving from Britain’s membership in the ILO?

Domestic work has been neglected in the history of Cyprus and this chapter attempts to fill this gap and place Cyprus’ case in a global history of domestic work.
Adoption, Unwaged Domestic Work and the Female Domestic Servants Law

Throughout British colonial (1878–1960) rule, child labour was common practice and constituted an important part of the local economy. During the first half of the 20th century, employers in the majority of cases did not declare employment of children, and the prevalence of the systems of adoption and of apprenticeship, coupled with low levels of wages, secured the maximisation of employers' advantages. In addition to its economic significance, child labour had an important position in the social structure. The system of male apprenticeship was mostly practiced within family contexts to secure succession in craft and technical occupations. Domestic work involved mainly girls, employed as servants in the homes of the bourgeoisie. Most were sent by their families for a specific period with the aim of supporting the family financially and of covering the costs of their own dowry. Many poor families, in particular peasant families who did not want their daughters, sent them into lifetime domestic service, in which case, according to Proini (Morning Standard), adoption was the most usual practice.

In early- and mid-twentieth century a woman older than twenty-one years could not find a husband unless she was financially secure, as even men of the poorest class expected a dowry of 40 to 50 pounds. Thus, poor girls had to either find a dowry or remain single. Often domestic service was the only means of financing a dowry and girls had to start working early to have enough savings at the age of marriage.

In theory, the system could fulfil its purpose. The master or mistress would deposit a small wage in a savings bank in the name of the child, would take care of its health, and would help it to find a husband. Usually, however, the only remuneration was food, shelter and scant clothing. Moreover, girls were often seduced by male members of the household and many parents spent their daughters' wages. In consequence, in many cases domestic servants

---

1 Pantelis Varnavas, Παλεύοντας για τη ζωή (Fighting for life) (Nicosia, 1990), 33, 40.
2 Proini, "Η υιοθεσία εις την Κύπρον" ("Adoption in Cyprus") 1 September 1935.
3 Cyprus State Archive, Secretariat Archives: SA1/1494/27/2, "A Law/a bill for the Protection of Females in Domestic Service," Commissioner of Famagusta to the Colonial Secretary, 16 October 1936.
5 SA1/1494/27/2, Commissioner of Famagusta to the Colonial Secretary, 16 October 1936.