

Community discussion guide

Domestic servitude

Session overview

This session uses a short video to explore domestic servitude within an intimate or familial relationship and to guide discussion and reflection with the participants.

How to run the session

- Pause after each scene where it says, 'community discussion' and guide a reflective discussion using the questions and prompts provided in the guide.
- Total session time: 60-90 mins

Session objectives

- Recognise the signs of domestic servitude in private homes.
- Differentiate between domestic violence and domestic servitude.
- Understand the legal definition and rights of individuals.
- Promote reflection and awareness in the community.

Definition: domestic servitude

When a person does not consider themselves free to stop working or to leave their place of work or a relationship because of coercion, threat or deception and the person's freedom is significantly restricted.



Opening the session:

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Acknowledgement of Country

- We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and pay respect to Elders past, present, and emerging.

Trigger warning

- This session includes sensitive content related to forced marriage. Please take care of yourself during the session.

You can step out of the room at any time and speak with the facilitator if needed.

Safe space

- This is a respectful and confidential learning space with no right or wrong answer.
- Please use only deidentified information.
- Participate as you feel comfortable.

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Introduction

(facilitator speaking notes)

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Today we are going to be watching a video on exploitation that happens in private households, where the individual is forced to work with little or no pay, often under threat and pressure and without the freedom to leave. It includes control over someone's movement, unpaid work, confiscation of documents, and threats. It can occur within a family or an employer context.

Background to share

Mimi was 20 years old when she migrated to Australia on a spouse visa. Mimi lived with her parents and two younger sisters in her home country before migrating to Australia. Mimi's parents have worked hard to provide well for her and her sisters, however life in her home country has limited opportunities, especially for women. The parents want to find good men for their daughters to marry.

 **My Truth:**
youtu.be/EI7TOLY4ZkA
(show the video)

Scene 1: Dinner with friends

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Summary:

Mimi is serving dinner. Her husband Lee dominates the conversation and doesn't let her sit. He explains their marriage arrangement in a way that highlights his power.

Q 1: What is your impression of Mimi and Lee's relationship?

Prompt:

Explore with the participants how power, respect and equality are or aren't present in the relationship. Who makes all the decisions? Does this feel like a typical relationship or something more controlling? Explore what a healthy relationship looks like, and how societal and cultural expectations might influence how we view gender roles and who the authoritative figure at home should be.

Q 2: What differences do you observe between the two marriages?

Prompt:

Lee orders her around, is critical of her, minimises her in front of the friends, controls the finances, whereas the visiting couple seem happy, and seem to have more of an equal relationship.

- One needs to note that we might not know everything about a couple by briefly observing them. There might be couples who seem to have a perfect relationship on the outside, but they might be experiencing abuse.

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Scene 2: Fall out from dinner

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Q 3: What does this say about gender roles, expectations, and control?

Prompt:

Consider how traditional gender roles may be used to justify unequal treatment or unpaid work at home.

Explore how societal and cultural norms might shape expectations that women should be obedient, invisible, or always be available to serve.

Think about how these expectations can mask coercive control or domestic servitude, especially when combined with power imbalances like dependency, isolation, and immigration threats.

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Summary:

Mimi tells Mia she's not allowed to go out alone. After the guests leave, Lee yells at Mimi and makes threats.

Q 1: What is Mimi's life like in Australia?

Prompt:

Not a happy one, Lee does not trust her, she is not allowed to go out on her own, the life she was promised in Australia is different to her reality.

Q 2: What are some warning signs of control and abuse?

Prompt:

Explore how power is expressed in Lee's interaction with Mimi and whether this relationship feels equal, respectful, or caring. Does it show signs of control, fear, and power imbalance? Explore Mimi's body language, tone, and how much autonomy she has. Does she have a choice and voice in the relationship?

Q 3: How might Mimi's family respond if they knew?

Prompt:

Explore the fear of bringing shame upon the family, impact on family honour (the threat about her sisters). In some families they may unintentionally dismiss signs of servitude as normal or as fulfilling ones' responsibility as a wife. Families might prioritise reputation, stability, keeping the peace, potential impacts on the marriage prospects of other daughters over how the person is being treated.

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Scene 3: Personal reflections

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Summary:

Mimi describes her daily life, including threats, confiscated passport, lack of freedom. She feels like a prisoner and slave.

Q 1: What barriers prevent someone like Mimi from leaving this situation?

Prompt:

Limited knowledge about her rights in Australia, she has no access to money, language barriers, fear of deportation, impacts on her wider family, not wanting to bring shame upon her family, family obligation, and a sense of duty towards her family. In some cultures, divorce might be considered a taboo.

Q 2: What is the difference between domestic, family and sexual violence and domestic servitude?

Prompt:

Servitude differs from domestic violence in that the person is often required to work like a servant under constant control, has no freedom to stop, and may be isolated from others. The person may believe they have no legal or social options. Mimi's story highlights psychological imprisonment and dependency, due to threat, deception, and coercion.

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Q 3: How does coercive control show up in domestic servitude, and how is it different from coercive control in domestic, family and sexual violence (DFS)?

Prompt:

In DFSV, coercive control often includes emotional abuse, financial control, and isolation. In domestic servitude, these are compounded by forced labour, immigration threats, restricted movement, and the expectation of unpaid, ongoing work where the person has no choice and control over their situation. The person is made to feel like they cannot stop working.

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What does the law say

- Domestic servitude is one form of modern slavery and is a serious crime in Australia.
- The Commonwealth Criminal Code criminalises servitude and penalties can include imprisonment of up to 20 years.



Conclusion

One of the challenges of identifying domestic servitude is that it happens behind closed doors. It is not uncommon to come across situations where a woman is doing all the household chores. It becomes exploitation when she has no agency over her life, where she does not consider herself free to stop working, and when her personal freedom has been taken away.

Everyone is born free and equal. Exploiting someone and restricting their freedom and movement is a gross violation of human rights.

Thank you again for attending the session and for all your valuable contributions. Please feel free to reach out with any further questions.

Where to get help

- **The Additional Referral Pathway**
salvationarmy.org.au/additional-referral-pathway/
- **Anti-Slavery Australia**
antislavery.org.au/contact/

Facilitator tips

- Observe non-verbal cues and offer check-ins for any participants who appear distressed.
- Normalise pauses or silence – these are signs of processing complex emotions.
- Remind participants regularly that their contributions are valued and that this is a learning space and the intention of the session is not to pass judgement on anyone.
- It is important to note that domestic servitude does not only happen within a family relationship and can happen outside of a family relationship such as when working for an employer. For example, someone is brought to Australia to work as a domestic worker in a private household but instead is exploited. It can happen in businesses as well. To learn more visit: modernslavery.gov.au/about-modern-slavery/types-modern-slavery/servitude
- To further enhance your knowledge and understanding about modern slavery you can undertake this free e-module developed by Anti-Slavery Australia open.uts.edu.au/uts-open/study-area/law/modern-slavery/