

# Self-reflective guide

## Domestic servitude

### Overview

You will watch a short video to understand domestic servitude within an intimate or familial relationship. Domestic servitude is when someone is forced to work in a private home, often without pay, freedom, or the ability to leave. It might occur within familial relationships as well as within an employer context.

### 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.



### Background to the story

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/EI7T0LY4ZkA](https://youtu.be/EI7T0LY4ZkA)  
(watch the video)

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### Scene 1: Dinner with friends

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

**Reflection:**

How is power 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? Reflect on Mimi's body language, tone, and how much autonomy she has. Does she have a choice and voice in the relationship?

**Q 2: What does this say about gender roles, expectations, and control?**

**Reflection:**

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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### Scene 2: Fall out from dinner

**Q 1: What are some warning signs of control and abuse?**

**Reflection:**

Reflect on how Mimi responds to Lee and whether Lee is angry about the situation or is this about exerting control over Mimi? Observe Mimi's body language and how scared she looks. Does this go beyond a typical disagreement in a relationship? There is emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse, restriction in movement, threats, coercive control, inequality in the relationship, and isolation.

**Q 2: How might Mimi's family respond if they knew?**

**Reflection:**

Reflect on the fear of bringing shame upon the family and the impact on family honour. 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, and potential impacts on the marriage prospects of other daughters over how the person is being treated.

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### Scene 3: Personal reflections

**Q 1: What barriers might prevent Mimi from leaving this situation?**

**Reflection:**

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 (DFSV) and domestic servitude, and how does coercive control appear differently in each?**

**Reflection:**

Mimi is often required to work like a servant under constant control, has no freedom to stop, and is isolated from others. She believes that she has no legal or social options. Mimi's story highlights psychological imprisonment and dependency, due to threat, deception, and coercion.

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.

### Additional reflection questions (optional)

- Why might a person experiencing domestic servitude within an intimate or familial relationship not see it as a form of abuse?
- How can I use this knowledge to support others or raise awareness in my community?
- Who can I talk to if I see or suspect a situation of domestic servitude?

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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.

### Where to get help

- **The Additional Referral Pathway**  
[salvationarmy.org.au/additional-referral-pathway/](https://salvationarmy.org.au/additional-referral-pathway/)
- **Anti-Slavery Australia**  
[antislavery.org.au/contact/](https://antislavery.org.au/contact/)

*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](https://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/](https://open.uts.edu.au/uts-open/study-area/law/modern-slavery/)*

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