Transnational Domestic Workers and the Migration-Labour Regime in Asia

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Distinctive Traits of Domestic Work

- Domestic work is highly **gendered** as women’s work. When paid for, domestic labour is not only structured along **class** lines, but often **racialised** as well.

- Predominantly perceived as labour that women require little training to do, and coupled with its location within the home, **migrant domestic work** is **devalued and commoditised** as reproductive labour that is not only unskilled and lowly, but not work that locals wish to do.

- Migrant domestic workers play an increasingly significant role in plugging social reproductive gaps in the areas of housework, childcare, and eldercare amongst many industrialised economies in East and Southeast Asia.
Transnational flows of women for domestic service in Asia can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when *amahs* from China moved to British colonies to meet the shortage of domestic workers amongst middle- and upper-class households.

Today, the figure of the female transnational domestic worker constitutes an important aspect of global migration flows as a result of the shift of reproductive work from the household to the market due to neoliberal economic restructuring.
Global Significance of Domestic Work Migration

- Based on a survey of 177 member countries, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that there are at least 53 million domestic workers worldwide, with women and girls (83 percent) comprising of the overwhelming majority.

- The Asia-Pacific region is home to 41 percent of the world’s domestic workers with 21.5 million individuals engaged in domestic work.
Among destination countries in East and Southeast Asia, Hong Kong is the only place which recognises ‘domestic work’ as ‘work’ governed by a contract that specifies a minimum monthly wage, working hours, and days off and statutory holidays.

Countries of origin have attempted to develop various interventions to enhance the protection of migrant domestic workers through skills training for departing migrant workers, mandatory pre-departure orientation programmes, etc. Some have also endeavored to provide facilities and services for migrant workers in countries of destination where there are large concentrations of their nationals.

In 2012, the Indonesian government raised the stipulated amount of pre-departure training hours to 400 hours (or 40 days) for those without prior experience in a concerted effort to formalise and raise the standards of domestic work.
Adopted on June 16, 2011, at the 100th International Labour Conference in Geneva, Convention No. 189 lays down basic principles and measures regarding the promotion of decent work for domestic workers.

Among others, C189 provides for equal treatment of domestic workers vis-à-vis other workers; protection against abuse, harassment, violence, discrimination and forced labour; right to social security and maternity leave; minimum wages; rest days; and right to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

To date, 11 countries have ratified the convention:

- 6 in Latin America: Uruguay, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Paraguay, Dominican Republic and Columbia
- 2 in Africa: Mauritius and South Africa
- 2 in Europe: Italy and Germany; and
- 1 in Asia: the Philippines.
Steps Forward

Opening up towards regional cooperation

Countries in East and Southeast Asia are part of regional consultative processes (e.g. the Bali Process, the Colombo Process, and the Abu Dhabi Process). The 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers represents a step towards a regional perspective on protecting migrant workers.

Cooperation between migrant NGOs and trade unions

In the case of Hong Kong, the emerging cooperation between migrant NGOs and trade unions has provided a firm basis for pushing forward discussions on the need to consider domestic work as work, and for domestic workers to be protected like other workers.

Emergence of NGOs dealing with migrant worker issues

Civil society organisations, including faith-based organisations, have emerged as an important stakeholder in migration discussions in the region.

- Singapore examples: rTansient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME).
Day-Off Policy in Singapore

- Singapore has yet to ratify C189. However, the mandatory weekly day-off policy implemented by the Ministry of Manpower in January 2013 represents a significant step forward towards meeting international labour standards for domestic workers.

More maids are changing employers when they are not given Sundays off

Straits Times, 27 Feb 2014

I want to rest and meet my friends. Ah ma cannot walk, so I have to take care of her all the time.

– Indonesian maid Suharni, 28, who took care of a 70-year-old woman for six months
The Migration/Recruitment Industry

- Particularly in the context of Asia, labour migration is largely mediated by complex networks of informal and formal brokers, ranging from village-level recruiters to multinational agencies located in major destination areas.

- Scholars have argued that it is “precisely because migration management is becoming increasingly sophisticated [that] the demand for brokers is omnipresent at all levels” (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012).

- Singapore:
  - 1,129 existing licensed employment agencies that provide placement services for households looking to employ migrant domestic workers
  - over 62 percent setting up shop only within the past five years (Ministry of Manpower 2013).
Debt-financed migration “model”

- **Cost of migration** (including recruitment and placement charges) recouped from the domestic worker’s salary.

- **Domestic work contracts**: typically 2 years in length; foreign domestic workers are allowed to perform domestic chores only for their employers at the residential addresses stated in the work permit.

- **Platt et al., 2013**: the majority of Indonesian domestic workers did not pay any recruitment fees to a training centre or intermediary prior to their arrival in Singapore, but instead undergoes a salary deduction period where their agencies/employers recoup the costs of migration, including fees.

- Although this route of migration might appear attractive, particularly amongst those with little access to capital, it can take between 7-9 months to complete the salary deduction period.
Conclusion

- Demographic trends, particularly with an increasing ageing population in East and Southeast Asia, signal a burgeoning need for migrant domestic workers to help plug significant care deficits in more developed economies.

- The migrant domestic worker will remain a key member of ‘global householding’ in the foreseeable future.

Promoting domestic work as decent work and dignified work is crucial to the well-being of individuals and families, in source and destination countries.
Thank you for your kind attention.

Dr. Maruja Asis’ lecture entitled “Here Today and Tomorrow: Transnational Domestic Workers and the Decent Work Agenda in Asia” may be viewed at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q1Pqsstgo