

# Identity Management among Indonesian and Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore\*

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**Abstract:** This study examines how the identities of migrant domestic workers are likely to be endangered and how these individuals struggle to reconstitute them. It is largely based on an interview and observational study with Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers in Singapore. Inspired by the sociological discussion of Goffman and Ishikawa, the study reveals how each migrant domestic worker manages her identity in her specific social context. This study shows that domestic workers contrive tactics to negotiate their situations, given that domestic work is considered a low prestige occupation and workers tend to be divested of the usual "identity kit" to make up their identity front. Specifically, to compensate for their discredited status, domestic workers attempt to reconstitute their damaged identity, obtain a new identity kit, recall previous social and family roles, or anticipate a future identity. They also attempt to acquire new skills and increase their value, so they can identify themselves as more than "just a maid." They obtain additional roles in an attempt to change how they feel about themselves, to alter the meaning of being a domestic worker, and to redefine their relationships with others either by individual struggles or through collective activities. This study also points out a possible pitfall of identity management among the actors. The mechanism of identity politics might lead to an erosion of value, alienation from other domestic workers, and a strengthening of conventional stereotypes and generalizations regarding ethnicity, nationality, and gender. In this context, how non-governmental organizations play a role in mitigating the pitfalls of identity management among domestic workers is also examined.

**Keywords:** identity, migrant domestic worker, Singapore

## Introduction

Studies focusing on the lives of migrant domestic workers in Asia have addressed

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the restrictive and oppressive government policies that regulate them and the accompanying problems of exploitation and deprivation they face in individual work environments (Tyner, 1994; Constable, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Wisnuwardani *et al.*, 2005; Ueno, 2008). Due to a lack of comprehensive labor protection laws in most receiving countries, migrant domestic workers are basically at the disposal of

employers. For example, the majority of workers do not receive a day off each week and being housed in the employers' private home puts them at greater risk for being treated badly or exploited (Chammartin, 2004).

There continues to be a negative social label attached to the occupation of the domestic worker, which results from governments and agencies treating them as cheap, disposable goods (Ueno, 2008). In this context, migrant domestic workers are not only economically exploited, but also deprived of value and the tools needed for their identity management. This study aims to examine several phases of the identity management of migrant domestic workers as a marginalized group in the receiving country. It will primarily use the anecdotal evidence obtained through interviews with Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers and ex-workers in Singapore.

Singapore is one of the top hiring countries, with one in five or six households hiring a live-in migrant domestic worker.<sup>1</sup> These domestic workers are strictly supervised by their employers. The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act stipulates that the domestic worker shall not become pregnant or deliver any child in Singapore during the validity of her work permit and shall not indulge or be involved in any illegal, immoral, or undesirable activities, including breaking up families in Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Security bond conditions of the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore also regulate that if a domestic worker works in a place other than the employer's house, becomes pregnant, disturbs the order of society, or overstays in Singapore without proper authorization, the employer's security bond of 5000 Singapore dollars is forfeited.<sup>3</sup> Hence, employers closely monitor their workers, sometimes exercising their power to the point of being abusive.

A report by Human Rights Watch, based on more than 100 interviews with domestic workers, agencies, and government officials,

illustrates a massive maltreatment of migrant domestic workers in Singapore. Types of mistreatment include forced confinement, restrictions on communication, long working hours, lack of rest days or holidays, restrictions on religious practices, and close monitoring by members of the employer's family (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Using interviews with 113 former Indonesian migrant domestic workers from Singapore, the Institute for Economic, Social and Cultural (ECOSOC) Rights documents problems typically faced by domestic workers in their employers' houses. Workers were denied holidays or rest breaks, given heavy workloads, confined to their employers' houses, had limited access to information and communication, and were prohibited from practicing their religions (Wisnuwardani *et al.*, 2005). Reports show that domestic workers in Singapore are subject to constant surveillance by their employers. They also become targets of discrimination from the local society because they are unskilled female workers from less developed countries. The stigma of being migrant domestic workers follows them wherever they go—even outside the household (Ueno, 2009). The situations faced by migrant domestic workers may strongly enhance the need for identity management. Thus, research questions arise on how the identities of migrant domestic workers are likely to be endangered and how they struggle to reconstitute them.

## Theoretical Framework

In the literature, the issue of identity has been addressed in several dimensions. Some studies have spotlighted the diasporic nature of migrant domestic workers. Parreñas (2001), for example, discusses the social identity of Filipina domestic workers from the shared experiences of dislocation:

partial citizenship, family separation, contradictory class mobility, and the feeling of social exclusion within the migrant community. Yeoh and Huang (2000) illustrate how domestic workers in Singapore configure social identities under conditions of diaspora. This is revealed in their attempts to create a “home away from home” by constructing a “self” in contrast to the one imposed upon them by others. The subject of identity is also discussed under the concept of transnationality. Basch *et al.* (1994), for example, argue that identity formation endures by building transnational social networks and economic alliances. The worker can be dislocated in the migrant community, but, upon return to her home country, she might be able to present herself well due to the economic power and transnational social network she was able to build while working abroad. Using the framework of Bourdieu, command of the English language as “cultural capital” was examined and found to contribute to the formation of identity for Filipinas working in Taiwan (Lan, 2003). According to these leading studies, the creation of identity can be discussed in terms of the cultural capital of language and other aspects of lifestyle, economic capital of sending remittance, or the social capital of establishing a network in each receiving country. Identities are also addressed at a more interactional level. Lan (2006), for example, discusses how migrant domestic workers are engaged in self-presentation in the front/backstage distinction, as theorized by Goffman (1959).

Implicit in most studies is the assumption that domestic workers are a homogenous group; therefore, the differential identity management among sub-groups has been largely ignored. In fact, most extant studies, with the exception of Chin’s (1998) work, which examined hidden transcripts used by Filipina domestic workers against Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia, tend to ignore the fact that migrant domestic workers will likely be pitted against one

another in their individual identity battles. Needless to say, individual domestic workers are not able to complete their identity management alone; rather, it entails real or imaginary social interactions with others. As with stigma, it resides in the interpersonal relationship and the relational attitude (Goffman, 1963; Ishikawa, 1992). As a result, a domestic worker may inevitably utilize others for her identity project by constructing “self–other” distinctions. While existing studies tend to critically analyze how employers attempt to assert their superiority by confining domestic workers to an inferior or childlike category (Rollins, 1985; Chin, 1998; Anderson, 2000, 2004), there is a relative scarcity of discussion in the literature that critically examines how domestic workers utilize their employers and other groups of people in their construction of “self–other” distinctions.

Inspired by Goffman (1963) and Ishikawa (1992) who developed Goffman’s stigma concept along the rigid framework of identity management, this paper aims to explore the ways in which domestic workers attempt to reconstitute their damaged identity: (i) by obtaining a new identity kit to rebuild their identity; (ii) by recalling previous social and family roles; (iii) by foreseeing a future identity that may compensate for their current situation; (iv) by acquiring additional skills and value to identify as more than “just a maid”; (v) by acquiring additional roles; or (vi) by creating a new title and meaning within the category of domestic work, either individually or collectively. This paper also discusses (vii) how domestic workers may engage in attempts to diminish the value of “others” in order to elevate their own value. In this regard, it examines one pitfall of identity management among actors and describes how the mechanism of identity politics can lead to the erosion of value and further strengthen some of the conventional stereotypes and generalizations regarding ethnicity and gender. In this context, this paper examines how

non-governmental organizations (NGO) play a role in mitigating the pitfalls of identity management among domestic workers.

## Data Collection

This study is part of a larger study on feminization of migration in the Asian region with a research focus on migrant domestic/care workers and cross-border marriages.<sup>4</sup> The data on migrant domestic workers for this paper was gathered between August 2002 and February 2010 over an aggregate total of 4 months in Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines using four procedures. First, in Singapore I spent a considerable amount of time in three households using participant observation to document interactions between domestic workers and their employers' families. The employers and five domestic workers (three Filipinas and two Indonesians) agreed to participate in the study and allowed me to stay in the employers' homes in exchange for teaching Japanese cooking to domestic workers. In order to maximize the time spent there and to follow up with the latest incidents, I visited the houses, on average, twice a year during the research period. Second, interviews were conducted with twenty-one domestic workers (nine Filipinas and twelve Indonesians) in Singapore who were introduced mostly by the first five domestic workers. Interviews took place in workplaces on workdays or in parks, coffee houses, and shopping malls on the workers' days off. Third, in order to diminish the bias of overrepresentation of those living in relatively good conditions, I interviewed domestic workers in an NGO shelter in Singapore (eight Filipina and five Indonesian) and ex-domestic workers from Singapore in another allied shelter in Batam, Indonesia (four Indonesian). Fourth, with the help of ex-domestic workers, I was able to interview ten ex-domestic workers from Singapore in

Cilacap, Indonesia, three Indonesian ex-Singapore domestic workers in Hong Kong, and two ex-Singapore domestic workers in the Philippines.

In total, the sample consisted of twenty-two women from the Philippines and thirty-six women from Indonesia. At the time of the interview the women were between 18 and 64 years of age with most being in their twenties and early thirties and the Indonesians being typically younger than the Filipinas. The length of employment in Singapore varied widely, spanning from a few months to 18 years. Most of the Filipinas were high school graduates, while some had completed or partially completed undergraduate degrees; whereas, most of the Indonesians had graduated from junior high school and some had only elementary schooling. As for marital status, the interviewees included single, divorced, separated, married, and widowed women, but, since many of those interviewed were in their twenties, over half were single. All the names used below are pseudonyms. For recording purposes, I either used a tape recorder or transcribed fragmentary notes while talking to the respondents and added connecting sentences immediately afterwards.

Interviews with the Indonesian Embassy in Singapore, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration in the Philippines, several NGOs in Singapore, Jakarta, and Manila, and three training centers in Indonesia provided supplemental material. Concomitantly, I was able to make observations when I participated as a volunteer or expert research assistant in various group gatherings and activities organized by the NGO in Singapore. A comprehensive questionnaire survey about the lives of domestic workers was also conducted in the NGO shelter in Singapore with 219 residents between October 2007 and August 2008. Although the results of the questionnaire are not used in this paper, they provide useful background information regarding the following: reasons for going to

Singapore, amount of debt incurred to work in Singapore, working conditions (types of chores, work schedules), income, various disciplinary codes set by employers, basic attributes of respondents (country of origin, religion, age, educational background, marital status, previous work experience), and type of maltreatment that brought them to the shelter.

## Management of Damaged Identity

### *Obtaining Identity Kits*

One of the challenges unique to migrant domestic workers in Asia is that they tend to be divested of the usual “identity kit” to make up their identity front. Identity kit refers to personal possessions needed for the presentation of self.

One set of the individual’s possessions has a special relation to self. The individual ordinarily expects to exert some control over the guise in which he appears before others. For this he needs cosmetic and clothing supplies, tools for applying, arranging, and repairing them, and an accessible, secure place to store these supplies and tools—in short, the individual will need an “identity kit” for the management of his personal front. He will also need access to decoration specialists, such as barbers and clothiers (Goffman, 1961: 20).

Domestic workers are instructed by the placement agency in the sending country to take only a handful of personal items to the receiving country of Singapore. Luxurious personal items are either confiscated in the counterpart agency in Singapore or the workers are not allowed to use them. For Indonesians, this regulation applies more thoroughly and usually starts while they are in their home country; most Indonesian

women enter Singapore via training centers, so all personal belongings, including accessories, family photos, and mobile phones, are invariably scrutinized. At the training centers the applicant’s hair is cut very short; hence, applicants enter training centers with various lengths of hair, but all leave with similar short hairstyles.

The possession of identity kits may also be strictly regulated by employers in Singapore. Domestic workers are often denied their personal belongings that would help them maintain their identity, appearance, and usual leisure activities. Employers confiscate the domestic workers’ passports and sometimes valuables, like mobile phones or wristwatches. While some domestic workers are provided with their own rooms and drawers or wardrobes in which to keep their personal belongings, others are not. Many domestic workers sleep in the same room as an infant, an employer’s elderly parent, or a patient in care. In some cases, they may sleep on the living room floor, under the stairs, or even in a storage room.

On the other hand, upon entry to Singapore, domestic workers are exposed to the latest fashions, hairstyles, cosmetics, accessories, and mobile phones available for purchase. An Indonesian worker, Rani, her name shortened by her former employer, a practice commonly seen in Singapore, rushed to the hair salon to get her hair straightened when she received her first salary and day off after working ten months with her new employer.

Rani: I have waited for this day. My hair is curly. My previous employer sent me to the employment agency for regular haircuts. I did not like my short hair. I don’t like my curly hair.

Ranie’s frizzy hair that she had from birth was no longer part of what constituted her identity.

In addition to selecting hairstyles, some employers also decide on the clothes that

migrant workers wear; often purchasing them from local markets or even from bazaars in neighboring countries. At work, migrant domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia usually wear ragged T-shirts and culottes or short pants that symbolize their occupation. Their clothes are not uniforms as such, but they are in accordance with the “dress code” of domestic workers. However, on Sundays, young domestic workers gather at holiday enclaves, such as the Orchard and City Plaza, wearing shiny T-shirts and trendy jeans, and sometimes purchasing clothes, cosmetics, necklaces, and pierced earrings in an attempt to recapture some of their personal belongings.

Of all the items needed for their identity management, unquestionably the most important is a mobile phone. While it might have been widely believed that the mobile phone is the foremost indispensable tool for securing access to the outside world, for many domestic workers it is not just a communication tool, but rather the symbol of a modern identity. I found in the early period of my research that most Indonesians, upon receiving their first salary after the initial 5- to 8-month debt period, first sent remittance back home and then purchased a mobile phone. In many cases, however, employers, claiming that mobile phones were a distraction, forbid domestic workers from purchasing or possessing them. Despite that, almost all the Filipina domestic workers I interviewed after 2005 owned one. Even if the phone is confiscated by the employer, a domestic worker strives to borrow one from a friend or purchase another one. As Janeth, a Filipina, said, “employers just cannot take it away from us.” Along with stylish clothes and new hairdos, mobile phones, for what they symbolize, have become indispensable items for domestic workers’ identity kits.

#### *Recalling Roles Prior to Singapore*

Goffman (1961) describes the ways that patients in mental hospitals lose their pre-

vious social identity after hospital admission. Just as the authorized role in mental hospitals is exclusively that of patient, for those working in households in Singapore the officially recognizable role is that of domestic worker. It has been pointed out that Filipina women tend to experience downward mobility when they become domestic workers (Constable, 1997; Parreñas, 2001). In my study, there are only a handful of domestic workers, all Filipinas, who previously held professional jobs. Among those is Aileen, formerly an elementary school teacher, who proudly mentions, “I think I was hired here because I was a teacher. Now I tutor two children.” She gave up her teaching job in the Philippines and moved to Singapore because she expected to earn much more as a domestic worker.

For others, their identity prior to moving to Singapore is largely that of family member, and they continue to identify themselves in receiving countries exclusively with regards to their family role in their home countries. Filipinas and Indonesians migrate to Singapore to support their kin to varying degrees, and they expect to receive some respect from the kin who receive remittances. Tina, a 38-year-old Filipina, states, “I am proud of my son and myself . . . a mother of my son. He is a good son.” Whereas Tina sends her son to a private high school, other domestic workers send their siblings to higher education or obtain motorcycles, electric wells, medical treatment, and food for their family members. With remittances, family members’ standard of living improves. Women who work abroad and send remittances home act as shadow kin members (Tacoli, 1996), which is somewhat analogous to having transnational identities. Thus, they develop their lifestyles as domestic workers abroad, while, at the same time, actively maintaining the supporting role in their families at home by sending money and numerous gifts.

### *Foreseeing a Future Identity*

Alternatively, some domestic workers identify themselves with their future status. Some envision the future life back home, as a madam furnishing a new house, as a shop owner, or as a mother. Vivi from Indonesia, who recently married, is fascinated by the idea of buying a house.

Vivi: I am looking for nice cloth for the curtains. In my village, we cannot find good fabric.

Interviewer: But you haven't bought a house.

Vivi: No.

When Vivi became obsessed with buying a house, she started to behave like a madam by speaking softly and walking elegantly in her employer's house.

When asked about their future plans, some women discuss their plans of starting Internet cafés or grocery shops in their hometowns. Puri, a young Indonesian woman, was 16 years old when I first interviewed her and had been in Singapore for 11 months. She had lied about her age on her passport and was planning to go to high school with the money she would earn in the following 2 years. A significant number of Filipinas identify themselves with their future anticipated jobs in the West. Twenty-five-year-old Suzan perceives herself not merely as a domestic worker in Singapore, but rather as a trainee for her future job as a caregiver in Canada. She has already begun buying winter clothes in preparation for living in Canada.

Suzan: I don't intend to work here for long. My salary is very low.

Interviewer: What do you think you will do after Singapore?

Suzan: Going to Canada.

Interviewer: I see.

Suzan: Singapore is just a stepping stone for me. I need money and work experience to apply for the visa for Canada.

Interviewer: Isn't it difficult?

Suzan: No. I don't think so. My sister went to Canada after working four years in Singapore. Of course, she had to pay more than 6000 (\$US3900) Singapore dollars to the agency.

There are some Filipinas whose lives are organized around the opportunity to live in the West, namely Canada, Spain, and Italy, just as some Indonesians start to buy baby clothes in Singapore before they become pregnant or even before they marry. Sometimes, an anticipatory socialization with new reference groups (Merton, 1949) is what sustains their current identities.

### *Acquiring Additional Skills and Value*

Among the interviewees there are women who bolster their self-worth by mere association with previous professional jobs, family roles, or even future anticipated roles. Some attempt to increase their value while working in Singapore, most typically by obtaining new skills; for example, many Indonesians struggle to learn English through self-study or even by attending language courses. English is the first and foremost requirement for those in need of a job and, moreover, something that all parties involved, including employers, domestic workers, and local citizens, can appraise. Some domestic workers will attempt to develop other skills as well. The Indonesian embassy provides classes for Indonesian domestic workers to obtain their junior high school education or improve their cooking, computer, sewing, hairdressing, and English skills. Often individual domestic workers ask the embassy to call or write to their employers, so they can secure a regular day off in order to attend classes.<sup>5</sup> Filipinas are also greatly interested in signing up for the classes, and many who have a regular day off attend them. Cristina, a 38-year-old Filipina with 17 years' experience working in Singapore, has taken nursing aid, sewing, and several computer classes organized and

conducted by the embassy, church, and private individuals. Cristina has just signed up for an aromatherapy class, which will provide her with a certificate upon completion.

Interviewer: Why do you keep taking the classes?

Cristina: I don't know. I just keep learning. I can kill my time and it's good to learn something new. It's really me, learning all new skills.

Besides attending the skill improvement classes, there are other ways for domestic workers to increase their value. Twenty-six-year-old Tala won 1500 Singapore dollars by competing in a beauty contest organized by the Philippine Association. Sixteen other Filipina domestic workers also participated. On the day of the contest she did her nails and hair and wore four different outfits: ethnic attire, casual wear, sportswear, and an evening gown. She borrowed them all from her church friends and became "a Queen for one day" (Maglipon, 1993: 53). Since then, Tala has occasionally been called Miss Philippines by her employer. Filipina domestic workers' identity formation has been impacted by the wide range of activities made available by professionals from the Philippines who engage in commerce or religious vocation and have built a middle class community in Singapore.

### *Acquiring Additional Roles*

Domestic workers may develop a low self-esteem if their sense of worth is mainly derived from the domestic work they perform; consequently, their sense of fulfillment often comes from activities in different spheres apart from their domestic work. Usually, they become customers or consumers; for example, some workers participate in monthly or bi-monthly group birthday celebrations in some restaurants. As one Filipina mentioned, "It's good to be served by others." Workers may become consumers in

shopping centers, buying birthday or Christmas gifts for their families and others. Sometimes, domestic workers spend a significant amount of money on gifts for their employers, as in the case of Bibit, an Indonesian, who spent nearly 100 Singapore dollars (\$US65) out of her monthly salary of 320 dollars on her employer's Christmas gift. Once in a while, Bibit buys small gifts, such as nice T-shirts, for her employer's family. She once took them to a local restaurant to celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary.

Bibit: I gave them [employer's family] a Christmas gift. I was thinking what's good for the whole family. Sir and his daughter love SENDO [the employer's family cat], and I like SENDO too. So, I went to the pet shop and bought a small bed for SENDO.

Interviewer: Can I see the bed?

Bibit: Yes, of course.

Interviewer: It's so cute and it must be comfortable for the cat.

Bibit: Yes. But SENDO does not sleep in the bed.

Domestic workers in Singapore frequently receive used clothes, bags, and old shoes from employers or their kin members. Although this gift-giving practice has been analyzed critically in several studies in the West as being an attempt to construct a superior middle class for employers (Anderson, 2000; Romero, 2002), some domestic workers do the same, although much less frequently, to compensate for their inferior status and force employers to reciprocate their generosity. The difference, according to one Indonesian domestic worker, is that employers give domestic workers used items, but domestic workers give employers brand new gifts.

Notably, there are a handful of domestic workers who spend their precious days off helping others; for example, Tala, who won the beauty contest, has been engaged in doing volunteer work in a mental hospital through a Catholic church.

Tala: The Catholic Church I attend asked me if I was interested in some volunteer activity in mental hospital. I joined the group and go there every month. I don't want to spend all my Sundays window shopping with my friends. I wanted to do something meaningful.

The church also loaned her a mobile phone, and she subsequently became a counselor for fellow domestic workers.

A small number of domestic workers, either Filipinas or Indonesians, act as role models for others who are deeply troubled, and they engage in NGO activities that assist domestic workers with shelter, educational and counseling services. At the "Help Desk" run by an NGO, there are several Filipina volunteers who take turns every Sunday giving advice to other domestic workers who are desperately in need of guidance. This contradicts the widely-held perception among employers that giving workers numerous days off work will negatively affect their diligence.

More notably, there are a substantial number of domestic workers who work in different sites besides the employers' house. While some are forced to work without additional salary, the majority are paid a nominal sum. A second shift tends to be in the house of the employer's kin member or at shops run by the employer. Etry, a 25-year-old Indonesian, who was eventually caught by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), explains how she managed to work two shifts.

Etry: My employer asked me if I was interested in working at her cleaning shop. I said to her that "I want to try it first." So I got up early and cleaned the house, washed the clothes, and then I went to the shop. So I worked in two places. I worked there for ten months. But finally I was caught by MOM officer. This officer was a lady and she was very careful. One day, she came to the shop as a customer. She handed over one of her

shirts. Two weeks later she came again with another shirt. We had a chat. She looked kind and friendly. But the third time, she came to me with a letter.

Interviewer: How did she find you?

Etry: The neighbor called MOM.

Interviewer: Didn't you mind working in two places, the employer's house and shop?

Etry: No, I didn't mind.

Interviewer: It's illegal, isn't it?

Etry: Yes. It's illegal, and I was very busy and tired. But more money, some change in my life.

It may be in this context that illegal work appears attractive to some domestic workers. Another Filipina, who used to take up illegal domestic work on her day off, seemed to be satisfied with the fact that she was treated as an equal because she was paid the same hourly wage as local Singaporean domestic workers. It seems that she becomes "an authentic worker" only on Sundays. Moreover, it is sometimes incorrect to assume that migrant domestic workers are engaged solely in general cleaning, washing, and cooking at the employer's home. They are often also asked to do the following: provide child care; take care of elderly, handicapped and/or sick family members, or family pets; look after school homework for children; run errands for the family; give the wife a pedicure or blow dry her hair; massage the body of an auntie or grandmother; paint walls in the house; tend to the garden; bake a cake; sew a dress; wash a car; do secretarial work; or help with household accounting work. Thus, some domestic workers, including Malaya, a 35-year-old Filipina, claim that the word "maid" does not signify the type of work they are engaged in.

Malaya: My employer introduces me to the guests as a foreign domestic manager in this house.

Interviewer: Do you like to be called that way?

Malaya: I don't know . . . maybe. Because I think that is what I do here.

It has been pointed out that domestic work requires doing various tasks at the employer's convenience, depicted by Anderson as "permanent availability", which makes the work demeaning (Anderson, 2004: 107). However, domestic workers sometimes, certainly not always, prefer to portray themselves as all-round players. They perceive it as a measure of their capability, and it implies that employers trust them, which may result in a rise in rank from the "just-a-maid" status.

### *Depriving Value from Others*

In relation to identity management, some incidents may exemplify a pitfall among migrant domestic workers, that is, the mechanism of devaluing one another. In my study, there was a number of opportunities to observe various attempts among domestic workers to differentiate the "self-other." In this regard, first, it should be noted that domestic workers are inevitably compared to one another. This is partly because the employment agencies put a different price tag on them according to their country of origin.<sup>6</sup> Particularly, Filipinas and Indonesians are often pitted against each other. Placement agencies tend to stress that Filipinas are clever, outspoken, and responsible, whereas Indonesian women are deemed to be obedient, patient, and hard-working. In other words, agencies construct the images of workers by their nationalities, in order to pair them with certain types of households and the different needs of the employers. Accordingly, in the interviews, Filipinas often make negative comments about Indonesians, typically referring to their poor intelligence, odor, and uncivilized manner, as seen in this conversation with Maria.

Interviewer: Last night, your employers were very critical about domestic workers in

your presence. I am sorry. I think it's rude to you.

Maria: No, it's ok. Because, they are not trainable, and Indonesians smell, you know?

Interviewer: I see . . .

Maria: A strong body smell. Even if you wash their bodies many times, you cannot take it out. They got the smell for long time.

It is obvious that Maria did not consider herself to be at the same level as Indonesian domestic workers. Comments like "Indonesians are not clever", "Indonesians are different from us", "they are not civilized", and "they use black magic" were sometimes reported during interviews with Filipinas. The underlying assumptions in those statements are dichotomies of refined versus vulgar, clean versus filthy, and clever versus damned, suggesting that Filipinas are the former. On the other hand, some Indonesians are bothered by how "clever" Filipinas are thought to be, as seen in statements like "Filipinas are too smart." Indonesians may collect and circulate numerous stories regarding how Filipinas are naughty and bully Indonesians. Furthermore, some Indonesian workers try to compete with Filipinas with their honesty and diligence, upon which employers place paramount value.

In addition, some Indonesians may differentiate themselves from other Indonesians in their home country, by making comments like "I am lucky, because my cousins and friends in my village cannot leave the country." Moreover, they often discriminate against domestic workers who work in Malaysia, as reflected in the interview with Ira, a 23-year-old Indonesian.

Ira: Indonesians who went to Malaysia are not good ones.

Interviewer: What do you mean by "not good"?

Ira: They are not good looking. They are not smart. They couldn't learn English.

Interviewer: How do you know?

Ira: When I was in the training center, I saw good ones went to Singapore.

In their identity battle, they easily create the “other” category to elevate their own worth. “Us–them” distinctions are an inevitable part of the construction of group identities (Dickey and Adams, 2000). Likewise, although domestic workers tend to be divided in terms of their country of origin, regional differences within the country are often significant. For instance, the region can be a source of their self-worth, as some Javanese domestic workers differentiate themselves from the women who came from other regions, reflected in statements like the following: “Women in Kalimantan are bad people because they ate their own people” and “Sumatera people are bad too because people in Riau have tiger attitude, and they fight back.” Consequently, some Indonesian women are viewed by fellow Indonesian domestic workers as being neither compromising nor forgiving, but rather belligerent and therefore not suitable for domestic work and caregiving.

This identity battle inevitably extends to relationships with employers. Domestic workers, now as in the past, are involved in status relationships with employers. Some employers curse at their domestic workers with or without reason. Sharon, a Filipina, experienced this routinely with her employer.

Sharon: The wife is short-tempered. Sometimes she is kind, asking me to eat this, eat that. But when she is in a bad mood, she is cruel. If she comes back from the office in bad mood, I have to prepare myself. She scolds me without reason. She says that I’m stupid and a liar, and I cannot be trusted.

Phrases, like “you are stupid” and “you are liar”, are widely used by employers to insult their domestic workers. Some interviewees were told by their employers that “you are dirty”, “you have no brain”, and “a

cockroach is better than you.” They are so deprived of value and meaning partly because employers utilize domestic workers as their status marker in that “her presence emphasizes and reinforces her employer’s identity” (Anderson, 2000: 19–20). Employers deprive domestic workers of their value in an attempt to raise their own self-worth; then domestic workers repeat this cycle against others, including their employers. This has been confirmed with the studies of Filipinas who mobilize their symbolic value by using “good English” to negotiate with employers (Lan, 2003) or to discredit local employers (Lorente, 2007). In Singapore, Filipina domestic workers are proud of the English they speak and ridicule “Shinglish”, the type of English spoken among Singaporean workers. Furthermore, they despise local employers who hire Indonesian domestic workers to work for lower salaries (Lorente, 2007). Similarly, in my study, some Filipinas working in the private residential area, formerly known as the residence of expatriates, tend to regard Singaporeans as being inferior, compared to their own superior Western or Japanese employers. They are likely to blame Singaporean employers for being vulgar and incapable of acquiring the Western concept of human rights. When domestic workers talk about their employers behind their backs, they circulate a wealth of information about their employer’s families with statements like the following: “in my employer’s family, wife is a boss”; “Mum is very fussy”; “maid next door told me Malay wife is very jealous”; “employer never lets the maid go out”; “wife plays mahjong every weekend”, “Mum does nothing at home,” and “daughter doesn’t listen to her mother.” Hundreds of short messages regarding the employer’s character can be exchanged, which serves to discredit his/her family. I also observed, as in other studies, that employers are the targets of jokes from domestic workers (Maglipon, 1993; Constable, 1997), which presumably helps them increase their level of self-worth.

### *Altering the Meaning*

While there are some domestic workers who acquire new skills and expand their activities by obtaining new roles or stretching old ones and depriving value from others, some workers strive to change the meaning of “domestic worker” by identifying themselves differently. Although migrant domestic workers in Singapore are called “FDWs” (an abbreviation of “Foreign Domestic Workers”) by the government and “maids” by employers, agencies, and the local people, Filipina domestic workers address themselves differently. Jesamine exemplifies this in her conversation with me.

Interviewer: How would you address yourself in terms of your job? I mean, shall I call you a maid?

Jesamine: No, DH is the name.

Interviewer: What is DH? Domestic helper, right?

Jesamine: No, no, DH, mum.

Interviewer: What’s the difference?

Jesamine: It’s cool.

A similar attempt at redefining identity was observed with Sutina, an experienced Indonesian domestic worker who got used to eating pork. She recalled the job interview with her previous employer.

Employer: Can you cook pork?

Sutina: Yes.

Employer: Can you eat pork?

Sutina: Yes.

Employer: Why? Indonesians cannot eat pork?

[silence]

Employer: Why can you eat pork?

Sutina: Because I’m an International Muslim.

Sutina explains that other domestic workers are Muslim in their ways and she is Muslim in her own way by saying, “What is important is we connect with God.” She did not begin eating pork because she had to

adapt herself to cooking for various Chinese employers, but rather she contrived a new meaning to being a Muslim with the adjective “International.” She became more flexible about her beliefs, and, besides, she was told that pork was good for her skin. In both cases, when interviewed, the women insisted that I address them as “DH” and “International Muslim”, and by doing so they were trying to expand the circle of people who use the terms.

Altering the meanings attached to being a migrant domestic worker could be more collectively accomplished with the help of NGOs. For instance, two members of one NGO in Singapore wrote a lyric and composed a song that conveys a message of what it takes to be a migrant domestic worker. Other Indonesian domestic workers in the same NGO wrote a humorous script with plenty of jokes that played in a theater about the painful journey to becoming a migrant domestic worker.<sup>7</sup> The actors from the NGO shelter and the audience that was made up of mostly domestic workers became aware of how the application and recruitment process contributed to them feeling inferior. This particular NGO also held a “National Domestic Workers Assembly”<sup>8</sup> where they were able to learn the deficits embedded in the Singapore labor system and share the life experiences of domestic workers from various nationalities and ethnicities. Through these encounters they are able to share some pain but also some fun with other domestic workers. At the same time, they acquired various perspectives and meanings about themselves and their relationships with employers, the local society, and their own families.

Increased self-awareness is most typically observed among NGO shelter residents with greater opportunities to interact with other domestic workers through daily activities. Arlene, a 25-year-old Filipina who has stayed in the shelter with over seventy residents, illustrates this point in the following:

Arlene: I came here because my employer abused me and did not pay my salary. After a week, I knew Indonesian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Burmese [women] . . . their experiences and sufferings are very similar to mine. Of course, their lives are also different in many ways.

This NGO fosters interactions among shelter residents through cultural exchange activities and self-presentation where migrant domestic workers can share the rhetoric and vocabularies to narrate their own lives and problems. This also enables them to extend their social network beyond their nationality and sub-ethnic group, claiming that they are all “sisters” to each other.

## Conclusion

We may easily be convinced that migrant domestic workers suffer economically, but we may not necessarily see that they also suffer from an identity issue. However, the interviews and observations in our study of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore make it clear that they are also deprived of value, tools, and meaning for their identity management. Actually, they are desperately in need of identity tools and in search of value and meaning for their lives.

Domestic workers in this study relied on a wide range of tactics to restore their identity. Some attempts are successful, but many fail. Noteworthy in this context is that limitations are inherent in each identity-restoring effort. Those who do not have regular days off have no free time and may find it difficult to equip themselves with identity-related items, to sign up for skill-building courses, to perform volunteer activities, to dine out in restaurants, or to purchase gifts for their employers in order to subvert the status relationship. In relation

to recalling roles prior to working in Singapore, for some workers the subjective images attached to previous roles are not good and for many they are ambivalent. It is partly because, for some migrants, family violence or separation may constitute a reason for leaving a home country to become a domestic worker.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, most Indonesian domestic workers were either domestic workers in their home countries, Malaysia or Arabic countries, or they were unemployed prior to migrating to Singapore.

Future roles anticipated by migrant domestic workers may prove disappointing. Family lives after returning home will not necessarily be successful because the absence of wife/mother can be detrimental to children’s school achievement and a husband’s fidelity. Also, migration to countries in the West, like Canada and Spain, may not be an option for many, since college/university certificates and high placement fees are required.<sup>10</sup> In reality, they might be cheated by the employment agency and not reach the destination countries, or they might not be able to accumulate exorbitant agency fees while sending remittances to their families in the Philippines. Dreams of a happy family life back home or migration to the West may be unrealized.

Acquiring additional roles may prove difficult for domestic workers, especially if attempted in the employer’s house. Aside from having a heavy workload, they have to work harder to verify their worth. Domestic workers must weigh the costs and benefits of making excessive efforts in each instance (Ishikawa, 1992). Generally, taking on extra roles is exhausting for domestic workers and employers have little regard for their well being.

On the other hand, the strategy of discrediting others is more readily achievable; however, as pointed out, this often leads to value deprivation and further strengthens some of the conventional stereotypical ideas and generalizations. Examples of statements

include “Filipinas are clever but cunning”, “Indonesians are honest but uncivilized”, “Singaporeans are greedy and cruel”, “expatriates are generous and superior in their morals”, and “the role of homemaker should primarily belong to women.” Domestic workers’ efforts to recover their own self-worth often reinforce prejudices and stereotyping. It is precisely through these efforts that a migrant domestic worker can be devalued if she becomes aware of the mechanism (Ishikawa, 1992).

Of all the attempts to manage identity, altering the meaning of being a migrant domestic worker can be regarded as the most fundamental, since it directly addresses the deeply ingrained stigma attached to the position. When a respective society changes its perception towards migrant domestic workers, every domestic worker can potentially benefit (Ishikawa, 1992). However, subverting the structure of oppression that contributes to domestic workers’ low self-esteem takes time; therefore, it might not immediately address the current predicament of individual workers (Ishikawa, 1992).

Lastly, regardless of the difficulty of valorizing efforts, this paper ends with pointing out the threefold function of the NGO. First, it is to encourage some domestic workers to acquire the role of peer counselor or “sister” to help other domestic workers in trouble, either at the Help Desk of the NGO or in more daily interactions with shelter residents. This is in accordance with Ogaya’s (2004) observations. Organizational activities of migrant domestic workers allow them to “upgrade” their status by taking on various roles, such as a student in a skill-training course, a volunteer teacher in a class, etc. Second, it helps them raise awareness of the structurally determined devaluing mechanism detrimental to their low self-esteem, by organizing group meetings and gatherings. Third, it will mitigate the pitfalls of identity management among domestic workers. When domestic workers have a

limited knowledge of their fellow migrants they tend to accept the ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by employment agencies, employers, and local society. After living together in the NGO shelter, which praises multi-cultural exchanges and intimate interaction among domestic workers of different nationalities, some workers develop a different perspective toward domestic workers of other nationalities, reflect more on their own perspectives, and recognize commonalities among themselves. It can be argued that shelter residents who have experienced the most unfavorable working conditions may become an agency for social change. Also, people from various countries with different religious and ethnic backgrounds who identify themselves as “DH”, “International Muslim”, or other self-enforcing categories (Sacks, 1979), for instance, may potentially transgress the socially enforced categories of nationality, ethnicity, and even gender.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Although the Singapore government seldom refers to the number of migrant domestic workers, the latest estimate by the Strait Times is close to 200 000 (*The Strait Times*, 25 September 2009). This is a significant number for a country with only 1 049 011 resident households (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2006).
- 2 Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (Chapter 91A).
- 3 Ministry of Manpower (Singapore). [http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work\\_pass/foreign\\_domestic\\_workers.html](http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work_pass/foreign_domestic_workers.html)
- 4 This study is supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research in Japan (No.19402011, FY 2007-09).
- 5 An interview with an official at the Indonesian embassy in Singapore.
- 6 Currently, approved countries for the supply of migrant domestic workers to Singapore are the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar,

- Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand. Women from the Philippines earn the highest wages. [http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work\\_pass/foreign\\_domestic\\_workers/application0/requirements.html](http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work_pass/foreign_domestic_workers/application0/requirements.html).
- 7 The title of the play was “Voices by Bridget Lew and ‘HOME’ team.”
  - 8 National Domestic Worker Assembly was held at Hotel Royal, 6 December 2009.
  - 9 Especially for some Filipinas who use labor migration as a means of separation from their husbands (Ueno, 2009).
  - 10 One of the requirements for application to the caregiver program in Canada, for instance, is the educational level equivalent to Canadian high school (<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/work/caregiver/apply-who.asp>). This is usually interpreted as tantamount to 72 units (around 2 years) from university/college in the Philippines. Agency fees for application to Canada, Spain, and Italy are as high as 250 000 to 500 000 PHP (5600 to 11 200 USD) (interviews with several domestic workers and agencies in Singapore and Manila, from December, 2009 to February, 2010).
  - 11 In some countries in Asia, such as Hong Kong, “legitimate” migrant domestic workers can be male.

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