



The Gender Studies Programme at ISEAS was established in 2005 to contribute to the literature on gender research, publishing and policy consultations. The programme, headed by Dr Theresa Devasahayam, covers two areas: women and politics; and health and social vulnerabilities of marginalized women, including chronically poor women, low-skilled women, migrant workers, sex workers, older women, trafficked women, and internally displaced and refugee women. These areas are explicitly chosen to fill a gap in the research in the region, and are explored from a diversity of theoretical perspectives and disciplinary approaches.



Empowering Women, Boosting Economies: Examples from the Asian Region

BY THERESA W. DEVASAHAYAM AND SRI RANJINI MEI HUA

Across the world, International Women's Day will see women's economic, political and social achievements being celebrated. In Southeast Asia, there is much reason to celebrate since gaps in health and education have closed significantly over the recent decades. Yet gender gaps continue to persist in the area of employment. Closing this gap is critical since it has been found that boosting women's economic participation has the effect of propelling the economy forward. But how this gap is closed should also be of concern to governments.

Director of the Centre for International Development at Harvard University, Ricardo Hausmann, referring to the Gender Gap Report 2011, said that among the 134 countries covered in the report: "We have found that gaps are closing between women and men's health and education ... And, yet only 60% of economic participation gaps have been closed. Progress will be achieved when countries seek to reap returns on the investment in health and education of girls and women by finding ways to make marriage and motherhood compatible with the economic participation of women."

This point is clearly demonstrated in the region of Southeast Asia. In nearly all the countries, education figures show an improvement in terms of women's parity and participation in recent decades. Overall, the gender gap in education is negligible (less than 0.1) with the exception of the Philippines showing gender parity in this regard.

Gender parity was also demonstrated in the case of Brunei Darussalam for school enrollment at all levels up to tertiary level education, although in the larger population, men demonstrate a higher literacy rate.

Cambodia, however, is the only country where the gap is the biggest with enrollment in secondary and tertiary education being skewed in favour of boys. Similarly, in Vietnam, girls and women are often not encouraged to pursue higher education. Thailand, on the other hand, shows a striking contrast with more women than men in secondary and tertiary education; at least 50 percent of the total female population attains university education, versus only 39 percent of males.

In the areas of health and survival, women tend to live longer than men across all countries in Southeast Asia, with developing countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines ranked highly despite low income per capita. In Thailand, for example, despite its relatively low GDP per capita of US\$7,783, women can expect to live in good health for up to 65 years, while the estimated average for men is 59.

Investments in education and health go a long way in improving the lives of women and girls. But such investments alone without policies to remove labour force discriminatory practices against women fall short of generating its greatest benefits.

The number of years that women and men can expect to live in good health in Singapore, with a GDP per capita more than six times that of Thailand is 75 and 71 respectively.

In contrast, the gaps in employment continue to be significantly pronounced in the countries of Southeast Asia, especially in terms of economic participation and opportunity. While Vietnam's labour force participation in terms of female-to-male ratio is the highest (0.92), Malaysia, surprisingly, has the lowest score (0.57). Indonesia also demonstrates a similar trend. Although there are close to equal numbers of women and men enrolled in tertiary education, it was found that women's labour force participation in Indonesia is below the average of the 134 countries surveyed in the report. Furthermore, women's participation in senior and highly-skilled positions tends to be exceedingly low. Likewise, Singapore's figures are not promising with a ratio of 0.74 with 60 percent of women compared to 82 percent of men engaged in the labour force.

Numerous obstacles come in the way of women's participation in the labour force. Society continues to expect that women are the primary caregivers and nurturers in the family, and that they prioritize this role above all other interests. Thus it becomes imperative that policies enable women to combine work demands and family commitments. In fact, it has been found that in countries where greater support has been rendered to women to combine work and having children, female employment and fertility rates tend to be higher.

But the picture is far more complicated. Religious ideologies that emphasize women's role in the family over participation in public life continue to persist in the region. For example, Islamic gender norms have been a powerful force containing women's employment status, which explains the

fairly low rates of formal labour force participation in countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The more fundamentalist visions of Islam have appeared in Malaysia—its impact most felt in the east coast with the implementation of Syariah law.

Investments in education and health go a long way in improving the lives of women and girls. But such investments alone without policies to remove labour force discriminatory practices against women fall short of generating its greatest benefits. In the same vein, facilitating women's participation in the labour force is of equal importance such as through the provision of support structures to help women balance their caregiver and worker roles.

In most countries in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, the provision of care continues to be a private matter rather than a public concern. In affluent economies such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, as well as in developing countries like Malaysia, care work is increasingly being purchased. As household incomes rise because of the emergence of the dual income family, this has resulted in women seeking to transfer their domestic responsibilities to other women with the aim of joining the labour force themselves.

It was in the 1980s that the shift from manufacturing to services in these economies led to a surge in female labour force participation. As a result of a reduction in the number of hours that working women and/or mothers are able to spend managing the household, this has given rise to the outsourcing of care work, resulting in its commodification.

Moreover, demographic changes have intensified the need for care. Care work is purchased not only for raising children but also to meet the needs of a fast ageing population. With increasing affluence in countries, employing a foreign woman to undertake part if



An Indonesian worker in a Malaysian factory in Kuala Lumpur.

not all of the care provision in a family has become a reality for increasing numbers of families. In fact, hiring additional labour for care work has become a response to an urgent need.

On the demand side, households generally benefit from the purchase of such care services mostly from poorer countries in the region. On the supply side, households from which women enter the care industry, also benefit largely from this emerging global chain of care. Remittances sent home by these women go a long way in improving the lives of their families as household incomes rise.

But in this global chain of care, migrant households suffer a gross violation of their care rights as a result of the absentee caregiver. For these women who have to travel distances and care for other women's children rather than their own, reconciling work and family is an acute issue. Moreover, that women continue to dominate care work reflects their low bargaining power in the labour market since this kind of work is undervalued and, therefore, not highly remunerated. That they tend to be low-skilled and come from poorer foreign countries also signals class and ethnic

dimensions in the global care chain.

The problem does not stop there. In destination countries as well, it is doubtful if the option of purchasing care work is sustainable in the long run. Will there always be a supply of women from the poorer countries in the region to help women from the more affluent countries? What if the costs of care work were to go up and become unaffordable to the average middle-class household? What then are the options to a family in need of care? Hence, the globalization of care need not be a solution since it generates a host of social uncertainties and labour inequalities.

There is an urgent need for governments to enhance the provision of support mechanisms such as childcare facilities should they want to see more women become active participants in the labour force. Currently, care work is invisible in the eyes of policymakers since this concern is not seriously taken up in the socio-economic policies of most countries in the Southeast Asian region. But governments in the region cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the need for care in their own countries if they intend to embrace development

in the long run.

Drawing women into the labour force has positive effects far greater than meets the eye. Women's labour force participation has multiplier effects on fertility, infant, child and maternal mortality, and child health outcomes.

Beyond the individual and family, gender equality in the labour force has positive effects on economic growth.

Boosting female employment has been found to generate a major chunk of global growth in recent decades. GDP growth is derived from three sources: employing more people; using more capital per worker; or increasing the productivity of labour and capital as a result of harnessing new technology. Employing more women makes sense especially since economic trends are shifting from the manufacturing sector, traditionally a male preserve, to the service sector.

Conversely, failing to absorb women into the labour force has its costs. A report undertaken by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific details how restricting employment

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opportunities for women has cost the region between US\$42 and US\$46 billion a year. Another study on Japan found that closing the gender gap in labour force participation had the result of boosting the country's GDP by as much as 16 percent.

Care work needs to be recognized as a responsibility that should be shared instead of a concern only of women. While it may be an "invisible" contribution of women to their families and to society, care work should be valued for what it is worth. Achieving gender equality is one thing; empowering women in every area of their lives is a more substantive goal governments should be working towards.

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Life Strategies of Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore

BY KAYOKO UENO

I have been interviewing migrant domestic workers in Asia for a decade. But it has only been recently that I came to realize that my brief experience as a migrant domestic worker, which had almost been buried in oblivion, had some effect on the undercurrents of my own research. In 1978, when I first went abroad, I stayed with a family in Wichita, Kansas who ran a stockbreeding farm. I did all the household chores on the farm, except for the cooking. A Japanese friend of mine, who introduced me to this family and who had previously worked on the farm, claimed to have been treated as a “guest” in the household. But unlike him, my experience on the farm was very different. Perhaps it was because I had asked if I could help around the household. But on looking back, it was possible that the family was eager for me to help out in the household because I was a female while my friend was a male.

I have to say that I did not dislike working on the farm. On the contrary, I was fascinated by the modern household equipment such as the washing machine that was run on a drum, the garbage disposal attached to the kitchen sink, and the huge built-in oven. However, my relationship with the lady of the household was not easy. She expected me to do whatever she had

asked me, and was insistent that I was always beside her. I went to church, the shopping centre, and almost everywhere else with her, as if I were her accessory. She was kind to me when she was in a good mood, and generously gave me things like clothes and bags that she did not want to use anymore. Since the time I had left Kansas and moved back to Japan to embark on an academic career, I seemed to have forgotten the experiences I had in the US until recently.

I had many opportunities to visit Singapore during the 1990s, and became interested in studying the lives of foreign domestic workers there. I started to read articles and books about migrant domestic workers, and to understand how geographic closeness between the “ma’am” and “maid” was related to ethnicity and class differences; how the status of a housewife creates an insecure position and emotional instability for a female employer, how acts or words of kindness are used to assure the identity of a female employer and her family and friends, along with notions such as “maternalistic exploitation” (Rollins, 1985) and “status marker” (Anderson, 2004) applied to the relationship between the female employer and her domestic helper.

Furthermore, those studies also gave me a vital insight into why the relationships these women had with their fe-

male employers were far more important and different than the relationships they had with their male employers, who stood apart and were perceived to be generous and kind.

I left the homestay family after two months, much sooner than the scheduled period, because I could not tolerate the short temper of the lady of the house. I convinced myself that my experience in Kansas was part of my private journey in learning about different cultures, and growing from adolescence into adulthood.

In contrast, migrant domestic workers in Singapore do not have the liberty to leave their jobs. Unlike me, looming over their heads are the debts and penalties they owe labour recruitment agencies, and the pressing need to remit whatever earnings they may have accumulated to the families they had left behind.

Just as I was attracted by the automation of household chores and plentiful daily dishes with desserts in Kansas in the 1970s, some domestic workers in Singapore are bewildered by the abundance of expensive foods such as meat consumed for an everyday meal. Many are also enthralled by the excesses of even middle-class families such as the kind of modern furniture and electrical appliances that furnish their homes.

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Indonesian domestic worker doing laundry for the family she works for



On the other hand, they become exhausted by endless tasks, unrealistically high expectations and surveillance strategies employed by their employers. While they enjoy the occasional sweet gestures from employers, many are forced to endure harsh treatment on a daily basis, as I had to during my experience in Kansas. Employers may vent their frustrations on domestic workers, while domestic workers further become depressed by the class differences between their employers and themselves when they find restaurant receipts being thrown into the litter bin, admire the expensive clothes of their female employers, and attempt to carry the golfing kits of their male employers, only to realize that the work they do is undervalued and, therefore, low-paid.

My recent book, *Life Strategies of Women Working as Domestic Workers in Asia* (published by Sekaishissha, 2011, in Japanese), deals with the experiences of migrant domestic workers in Singapore, mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines, and is largely based on numerous interviews and opportunities for participant observation among these women for over a decade. Curious from the start about the patterns of interaction between domestic workers and local employers, it did not take

long before I received permission to interview employers and domestic workers. From 2001 to 2011, I interviewed a total of 78 domestic workers. Supplementing these interviews were questionnaires that were distributed to 218 domestic workers housed in the shelter managed by HOME (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics), a local non-governmental organization dealing with migrant worker issues. I also attended numerous focus group meetings and events organized by HOME in which domestic workers participated. Most of the narratives in my book were taken from interviews conducted over several years while cooking Japanese dishes together at some employers' houses and spending the "days off" with as many domestic workers as I could. Developing amicable relationships with some of these women led me to several visits to Indonesia and the Philippines.

In the book, I illustrate how these women are constrained by emigration/immigration policies and practices of recruitment agencies, and at the same time through sheer ingenuity, negotiate the very circumstances they find themselves in, so as to overcome the difficulties they encounter. While they are expected to conform to the regula-

tions and rules set by governments and recruitment agencies both of the sending and receiving countries, they do not always succumb to them.

The exploitative structure which migrant domestic workers find themselves having to confront should not be made light of. Yet the book does not depict them as victims of the "global division of reproduction" (Parreñas 2001) or "transnational welfare" (Piperno 2007), or in other words, as the "weak" who lack the capacity to change their destiny; these assertions of their lives only serve to stigmatize such women. These assumptions also lead us to ignore the critical decision-making processes these women are involved in, and how they negotiate a variety of struggles they face.

Conversely, viewing them as positive actors in various relationships reveals how they contrive unique methods to secure their safety, and make a difference in their lives. They acquire not only skills for domestic or care work in Singapore, but also "tactics" for "resisting" employers and recruitment agencies in some cases, and in others, their kin back in their countries of origin, and other domestic workers whom they have befriended in Singapore.

Domestic workers also attempt to acquire new skills and roles to increase their value, so they can identify themselves as more than “just a maid.” By so doing, they further alter the meaning of being a domestic worker, and redefine relationships with others either by individual struggles or through collective activities.

Migrant domestic workers in Singapore are not a monolithic group but instead depending on their nationality, they are pitted against each other according to countries of origin. They make use of “weak” or “victim” positions depending on their relationships with employers, sometimes with other domestic workers, and even with NGOs. The book aims to unravel the intertwining structures of oppression and resistance in this uncertain relationship between the “strong” and the “weak” embedded in the experiences of each domestic worker.

The importance of “migration networks” prior to embarking work in Singapore cannot be underestimated. In a chapter of the book, I analyze the informal and formal/institutional networks of these women that are critical in persuading them to leave home and take on employment abroad. Specifically, questions are raised as to how they obtain information, and under what circumstances they decide to work abroad; why they choose Singapore out of several possible destination countries; and why the women of the families, not men, tend to leave home. I also illustrate how these women become commodified as “domestic workers” through not only skills instruction but also through the detailed regulations they receive on their personal belongings and the kinds of hairstyles they should adopt, and other disciplinary forms they may learn at the training centres in Indonesia, as well as in the employment agencies in Singapore. It is through these processes that their skills and demeanour become “standardized” and hence, these women become “saleable” in the domestic worker market in Singapore.

From the second chapter onwards, the book delineates the lives of domestic workers in Singapore. Unlike other workers, their workplace coincides with the private sphere of their employer. In this arena, the employer may arbitrarily decide who constitutes family members, hence defining who is in need of the care and attention of the domestic worker.

Moreover, it is the employer who defines the content of domestic work. Because the country’s employment laws do not apply to a domestic worker in Singapore, an employer is prompted to disregard her home as a workplace. Given these circumstances, often a quasi-family relationship develops between the domestic worker and her employer. In many instances, employers take the relationship for granted and “forget” that the domestic worker is a hired worker, leading to a situation in which the domestic worker ends up working long hours. This quasi-family relationship has also led to delays in salary payment in some cases. Moreover, the attitude of employers to domestic workers may be related to the fact that these women are “foreign”. While there exists a geographic closeness between them since they share the same space of living, there is a social distance between them in terms of nationality and ethnicity. It is not surprising then that employers treat foreign domestic workers as if they are “invisible”—like a fly on the wall—and yet her services are sorely needed.

Given these complex aspects of their lives, domestic workers have been found to co-opt strategies of resistance in response to exploitation and coercion by employment agencies, employers, local people, and their families left behind. Based on the framework discussed in the book *Weapons of the Weak* by James Scott (1985), I found that domestic workers deployed various strategies to cope with the different circumstances they find themselves in, either self-conceived or borrowed from friends, often involving a subtle, yet inconspicuous and calculated manipulation on their part.

Accordingly, how migrant domestic workers struggle to reconstitute endangered identities is also paramount. Inspired by the sociological ideas proposed by Irving Goffman (1963), my research found that migrant domestic workers manage to compensate for their discredited status by obtaining

a new identity kit, recalling previous social and family roles, or anticipating a future identity. Domestic workers also attempt to acquire new skills and roles to increase their value, so they can identify themselves as more than “just a maid.” By so doing, they further alter the meaning of being a domestic worker, and redefine their relationships with others either by individual struggles or through collective activities. The mechanism of identity politics in this case leads to a strengthening of conventional stereotypes and generalizations regarding ethnicity, nationality, and gender. 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 “wives should take responsibility for household chores”. Thus, the practice of recovering their own self-worth often reinforces prejudices and stereotyping. Paradoxically, it is precisely through these practices that a migrant domestic worker ends up devaluing her own group.

Lastly, using some of Giddens’ concepts (1991, 1992), the discussion sheds light on how migrant domestic workers transform conventional relationships in home countries, and reconstitute new ones with the creation of the reflective self in the social setting of modern Singapore. Migrant domestic workers are supposed to work hard in the best interests of the employer’s family. In reality, however, they devote enormous time and energy to others; for example, some of them lead active social lives by engaging in relationships with the opposite sex. With the increasing availability of mobile phones and personal computers, they communicate and meet not only with their kin, but also with their boyfriends, girlfriends, same-sex partners, and even husbands

whom they had met in Singapore. In some cases, there exists an overlap between labour migration and marriage migration, and among these women, there is a transformation of the status of the woman from a labour migrant to a marriage migrant. There is also evidence that female kin might join these migrant women in Singapore as domestic workers, resulting in the tightening of family relationships. In this case, although there is a care drain observed among these families in their home countries, this might come hand in hand not only with a monetary gain but also with love or care gain in Singapore.

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