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## Strategies of Resistance among Filipina and Indonesian Domestic Workers in Singapore

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This paper presents the analysis of interviews with Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore regarding their strategies of resistance in response to exploitation and coercion by employment agencies, employers, the Singaporean public, and kin and family members in their home countries. Many strategies identified in previous studies about domestic workers' resistance/negotiation elsewhere might not be applicable in Singapore because of greater surveillance and stricter regulations there. Various strategies noted in this study are likely to be more subtle and inconspicuous. Although these women are rendered victims by the global economic system, they have developed various strategies to protect themselves. This study also discusses the relative and fluid position of vulnerability among domestic workers of different nationalities.

### Introduction

The phenomenon of women from developing countries crossing borders to perform household work and/or caregiving in more economically advanced nations has been the subject of considerable research since the late 1980s. Studies reveal a disparity between the experiences of female migrant domestic workers and "unskilled" or "low skilled" male migrant workers. First, women in domestic work tend to work alone in the insular environment of the home, thus, they face greater risks of experiencing ill-treatment and exploitation compared to men who mainly work in groups in public locations such as construction sites (Chammartin, 2002; 2004). Second, a home is perceived as a private domain (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Romero,

1988; 2002), whereas the work of male migrant workers is performed in what are considered as bona fide workplaces. There had also been some discussions on how "sisterhood" between a domestic worker and a female employer, both supposedly belonging to the inferior gender, can transform into maternalistic exploitation by the latter (Anderson, 2000; Romero, 1988; 2002). Third, domestic workers' relationships with their own families, particularly their relationships to their children, are likely to be fraught with more difficulties than the experiences of male migrants. In fact, a significant number of migrant domestic workers must leave small children behind (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). Even as they become breadwinners, migrant domestic workers continue to perform their gendered role as carers while male migrant workers are less burdened by caregiving. As a result, migration causes much pain to migrant mothers and their children (Hochschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002; Horton, 2009; Parreñas, 2001; 2005). Although migrant women in professional jobs experience similar struggles, these issues are more pronounced among domestic workers because of the difficulties of family reunification (Chin, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001, 2002; Horton, 2009; Parreñas, 2005).

Despite the exploitation, victimization and marginalization of these women, previous studies have shown that they are not only passive victims, but they are also proactive actors. In examining the narratives of domestic workers, Parreñas (2001) reveals that domestic workers in Los Angeles and Rome abide by their employers' disciplinary measures, but simultaneously subvert them by using various strategies and tactics. Domestic workers can utilize family-like relationship with their employers to solicit loans or legalize their status, frown to make their employers apologize for offensive treatment or to ease the workload, or cry to evoke sympathy. Similarly, Romero (2002) illustrates how domestic workers negotiate with their employers to improve working conditions. Although these strategies and tactics developed by domestic workers in the West are highly insightful and encouraging, migrant domestic workers in countries with less stringent state regulation against employment agencies and employers might not find them useful. Using these "immediate struggles" (Parreñas, 2001:188) in Asian countries may, in fact, lead to the termination of their work contract by employers.

### *Framework*

In major receiving countries of migrant domestic workers in Asia, forms of resistance are usually covert, passive and discreet. Constable's study of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong presents various forms of resistance

— for example, she elaborates on the function of jokes, which "symbolically reverse(s) the roles of employer and domestic worker" (Constable, 1997:174). Chin (1998), in her insightful study of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia, discusses how the women cope with and/or fight female employers who spy on them. Some of the hidden strategies of resistance deployed by domestic workers include talking back to an employer in a subtle way, performing acts of self-deprecation, taking advantage of an employer's sense of gratitude, and persistently smiling at a nagging employer (Chin, 1998). In Taiwan, domestic workers show deference in front of their employers to avoid trouble, but then gossip and ridicule them on their days off (Lan, 2006). Stimulated by these studies, this paper further explores some of the typical difficulties domestic workers encounter, together with aspects of the day-to-day strategies they employ for their survival, using research on Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers in Singapore.

Domestic workers in Singapore, as well as live-in domestic workers in Asia and the Middle East, generally encounter more difficulties than their counterparts in the US and Europe. Among the difficulties facing migrant domestic workers in Singapore, the three most formidable are: the absence of labor laws regulating the conditions of domestic workers,<sup>1</sup> Singapore's immigration regulations, and the exchange policies of employment agencies. First, the Employment Act, which defines holidays and wages in Singapore, does not apply to migrant domestic workers; therefore, it is possible for them to be denied holidays for the entire duration of a two-year contract (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Second, under Singapore's Immigration Regulations (Regulation 21), employers are held responsible for monitoring the migration and health conditions of domestic workers under their employ. Employers must post a security bond of S\$5,000, which can be forfeited if the domestic worker runs away, becomes pregnant, or marries a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident, or if the worker engages in any activity that is detrimental to the security and well-being of Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Domestic workers are required to undergo a medical examination every six months; those found pregnant are repatriated. Third, domestic workers are strictly constrained by the employment agencies' exchange plan, resulting in

<sup>1</sup> The Employment Act (Chapter 91) stipulates that it does not cover domestic workers, <http://agcvldb4.agc.gov.sg/>, accessed on 30 November 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Immigration Act (Chapter 133), Immigration Regulations (Regulation 21), Security Bond Form For FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS (working in households), [http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/etc/medialib/mom\\_library/work\\_pass/files2.Par.9876.File.tmp/Step\\_by\\_Step\\_Guide\\_on\\_FDWP\\_eRenewal.pdf](http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/etc/medialib/mom_library/work_pass/files2.Par.9876.File.tmp/Step_by_Step_Guide_on_FDWP_eRenewal.pdf), accessed on 30 November 2009.

economic and psychological harm and diminishing the domestic worker's power to bargain with employers. Under this plan, the employer can return a domestic worker to the agency within a certain period of time with little or no fine should the worker be deemed unsuitable. If a worker is returned, she must pay a placement fee to the agency (one or two months' salary) and sometimes lodging fees (Ueno, 2008).

The struggles and difficulties faced by domestic workers have attracted much research attention. Previous studies regarding domestic workers' struggles and negotiations in Singapore largely focused on actions waged in public spaces. Examples include attempts by domestic workers to create their new "homes" in Singapore while maintaining social networks in their countries of origin (Yeoh and Huang, 2000) and asserting their own culture by wearing their local attire and speaking their native languages in public spaces (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Given the political environment of Singapore, the public activities of domestic workers are mainly in skills training programs and volunteer activities rather than in advocacy and lobbying activities (Ogaya, 2004). While these activities are important for individuals, there is a need to consider the wider range of interactions between migrant domestic workers and their employers, as well as the struggles faced by migrants in other domains. It is worth noting that, despite the structural hardships, migrant domestic workers often continue to renew their contracts with their employers in Singapore (Human Rights Watch, 2005). This raises the question of how they, under structurally hostile working conditions, manage to cope for extended periods of time. Being privy to intimate family interactions (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001) and having direct, daily contact with their employers may enable domestic workers to develop survival strategies.

This study adopted James Scott's framework of resistance of the weak and marginalized. He originally described the framework to discuss the resistance strategies put by peasants in Malaysia against exploitation and domination (Scott, 1985). While the previous studies (Chin, 1998; Constable, 1997; Parreñas, 2001) were interested primarily in Scott's (1990) concept of hidden transcript, this study focused more on the specific types of resistance that take the form of sabotage, false compliance, dissimulation, pilfering, gossip, feigned ignorance, and desertion (Scott, 1985). I propose that the same methods employed by unorganized peasant farmers with limited financial resources may also be observed among domestic workers in Singapore who face structural difficulties. Cognizant of the dangers of over-idealizing behaviors (Constable, 1997), I tried to be mindful of unobservable behaviors and practices, or even silence, which may also be interpreted as resistance. Also, it may be necessary to examine the "ambivalences and ambiguities of resistance" (Ortner, 1995:190). With this in

mind, I explored how Filipina and Indonesian women reconstruct and reframe their position of vulnerability to resist or redefine the negative labels attached to them.

Specifically, this research covers several domains of domestic workers' daily negotiation and resistance, mostly with employers but also with training centers and employment agencies (these actors have not received much research attention), the local society, and kin members in the home countries. Since exploitation can begin in the sending countries for some women, the process prior to moving to Singapore for domestic work merits attention.

Another dimension worth exploring is the power relations among domestic workers from different countries of origin. There are close to 200,000 live-in migrant domestic workers employed in Singapore – about one in six households in the city-state hires a migrant domestic worker.<sup>3</sup> Entry to Singapore as a domestic worker is limited to nationals from thirteen specified countries, with the vast majority coming from the Philippines and Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> Employment agencies and employers in different countries vary in the treatment of migrant domestic workers (Ueno, 2008). Also, domestic workers hold certain perceptions of their counterparts from other countries. In Malaysia, Chin (1998) found that Filipina domestic workers shared and reinforced the public's negative stereotypes of Indonesians. The impact of the differential treatment of migrant domestic workers on the struggles of subordinate sub-groups has yet to emerge in the literature.

### Methodology

Data collection for this research took place between January 2002 and January 2009. During this span of time, I spent a total of about three months of data collection in Singapore and Indonesia. The study employed observation and interviews which were carried out in four phases.<sup>5</sup> I

<sup>3</sup> Although the Singapore government seldom refers to the number of migrant domestic workers, the latest estimate by the Straits Times is close to 200,000 (*The Straits Times*, 25 September 2009). This is a significant number for a country with only 1,049,011 resident households (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> 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. [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), accessed on 30 November 2009.

started with participant observation of the interactions between domestic workers and their employers' families in three households where I spent a considerable amount of time during my fieldwork in Singapore since 2002. Initially, three employers and five domestic workers (three Filipinas and two Indonesians) agreed to participate in the study. I have known the three employers for a long time, a factor which helped in securing their approval to be interviewed for the study and to obtain permission to interview their domestic workers. In exchange, I taught Japanese cooking to the domestic workers of these families. I visited the three households, on average, twice a year during the research period. The regular visits to Singapore enabled me to be updated of the latest incidents and developments. Later, the three employers introduced me to three other employers. However, the other employers did not allow me to speak with their domestic workers. From 2002 to 2009, I was able to interview an additional seventeen employers. Secondly, I conducted interviews with twenty-one domestic workers (nine Filipinas and twelve Indonesians) in Singapore, who were mostly introduced to me by the five domestic workers I interviewed earlier. These interviews were carried out between April 2003 and January 2008. I interviewed the participants in their workplaces or in parks, coffee houses and shopping malls on their days off. Thirdly, in order to reduce the overrepresentation of domestic workers in relatively good conditions, I conducted interviews with domestic workers in an NGO shelter in Singapore (four Filipinas and one Indonesian) and former domestic workers (four Indonesians) who were staying in another shelter in Batam, Indonesia. These interviews were done in October and December 2007 and January and August 2008. The last set of interviews was with former domestic workers who had returned to Indonesia. For this segment, ten former domestic workers in Singapore were interviewed in their homes in Cilacap, Indonesia. A domestic worker who used to work in Singapore introduced me to the return migrants. These interviews were conducted in March 2008.

In total, I interviewed sixteen women from the Philippines and twenty-nine women from Indonesia. The research participants' ages ranged from 18 to 48 years (i.e., at the time of the first interview with them). Most of them were in their twenties and thirties, and Indonesians were generally younger than the Filipinas. Their length of employment in Singapore varied widely, spanning from a few months to eighteen years. Most of the Filipinas were high school graduates and some had completed or partially completed undergraduate degrees. Most of the Indonesians, on the other hand, had graduated from junior high school and some only had elementary schooling.

<sup>5</sup> This study received support from the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research in Japan.

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 transcribed fragmentary notes while talking to the respondents and added other details and completed the sentences immediately following the interviews. In the initial stage of data collection, I tried to use a tape recorder, but two participants specifically asked me not to tape the interviews. I decided to take interview notes instead. Since they spoke slowly and the English was fairly simple, it was quite easy to write the questions and answers. The interviews with the migrant women in Singapore were in English. In Cilacap, Indonesia, a key informant (the domestic worker who previously worked in Singapore) acted as an interpreter in some cases.

A total of 20 employers were interviewed between 2002 and 2009. Six employers were interviewed in 2002 and the remaining 14 were interviewed between 2003 and 2009. They were all married, ranged in age from thirty-one to fifty-five years, and had employed domestic workers from two to twenty-three years. They were all Singaporeans of Chinese descent, except for one Japanese expatriate.

Additional background information came from the interviews conducted with staff connected with the Indonesian Embassy in Singapore (in 2007), an NGO in Singapore (from 2007), two NGOs in Jakarta (2007), and three training centers in Indonesia (in 2007 and 2008).

## *Difficulties and Resistance*

### *Training Centers/Employment Agencies*

In general, the procedures for labor migration differ for women from the Philippines and Indonesia. Apart from legal channels, some Filipinas enter Singapore via tourist visas and find potential employers by registering directly with agencies in Singapore. In contrast, most Indonesian women are introduced by sponsors<sup>6</sup> to local training centers, where they receive training while waiting for employment and visas. Training centers teach

<sup>6</sup> In Indonesia, women aspiring to work overseas as domestic workers usually have a "sponsor" (this is the term that they use in Indonesia) who provides information related to working abroad and introduces them to a training center/placement agency, and give the applicants some money once they are accepted in the training center. The sponsor will have to bring back applicants to their homes if they fail the medical check. The training center, in turn, will pay a commission to the sponsor for referring the applicant. The migrant will have to repay the sponsor for all the expenses incurred in finding work abroad. Usually, repayment is by way of monthly salary deductions over 8-11 months.

language and household skills and provide anticipatory socialization that stresses obedience (training centers also require migrant workers to wear short hair). They also inspect migrants' belongings prior to departure from Indonesia, targeting items such as jewelry pieces, mobile phones, 'black magic'-related items,<sup>7</sup> family photographs, and contact information. Upon arrival in Singapore, employment agencies also search women's belongings. These inspections can extend into searching inside women's shoes or underwear, or even following the women to the bathroom to verify certain claims. The women can only take the bare necessities with them; any valuables are impounded until the end of their contracts. In spite of extensive searches, women found ways to bring forbidden items into Singapore.

I was told by an Indonesian agency not to bring any money to Singapore. But I got scared. If bad things happen, I cannot do anything without money. My father was worried about me working abroad. He gave me fifty Singapore dollars. I folded the bills and sewed them in the rubber part of my panty.

- Dewi, Indonesian

We just got married, and it's so hard to leave my husband. I wanted to bring my wedding ring. I was thinking and thinking how to take it with me. I sewed my ring into a sanitary napkin and put it in my panty during inspection.

- Eni, Indonesian

Other women talked about writing the phone numbers of former employers or relatives in English textbooks or on small pieces of paper. Others hid family photographs in their purses or in the bottom of their bags. One way for women to get back at training centers or employment agencies that treated them badly was to spread word about their irregular practices through their networks. Using their networks, women also sought information about good training centers and agencies for future reference.

<sup>7</sup> It was widely believed by Indonesian domestic workers, including former domestic workers, and staff in both training centers and placement agencies, that some people are able to exercise magic to promote their own health and safety, and to punish malevolent employers.

### *Employers*

Employers impose various restrictions on their domestic workers. They are particularly vigilant about mobile phones and, in many cases, disallow workers from purchasing or possessing them, claiming that they are a distraction. Despite these measures, all of the Filipinas interviewed in the study owned a mobile phone. At her former employer's residence, Sharon hid her phone underneath her mattress. One of Sharon's friends wrapped her phone in her underwear in a chest of drawers, and when she felt that her employer became suspicious she hid it with a Filipina neighbor until the suspicion died down. Another Filipina woman concealed her phone in a hanging basket of vegetables.

Obtaining a mobile phone is generally more difficult for Indonesian women because oftentimes they do not have a day off. Nonetheless, the majority of Indonesian women managed to secure a mobile phone. An Indonesian woman, who lived across the family where I stayed, did not have a day off and was followed by her employer's grandmother when she put the garbage out in the morning. She managed to pass a note asking for help and another Indonesian discreetly gave her a used mobile phone with a phone card. The other domestic workers in the neighborhood knew about the incident, but kept quiet.

Although it is not common, some employers install hidden cameras in their homes to monitor their domestic workers. However, these cameras may be less effective than believed as workers knew where they are located. A far more common method of surveillance is to conduct random checks. For example, one employer withheld information about the family's schedule of return from their trips. What the employer did not know was that their arrival was relayed to their Indonesian domestic worker via mobile phone e-mail from another Indonesian working for the employer's sister.

Other employers impose restraints on the domestic workers' food consumption. Although some employers tell domestic workers that they are members of the family, they still tend to watch what their workers eat. This inconsistency is exemplified in the narrative of Ruby from the Philippines. Ruby's former employer told guests proudly that she was just like a family member, and, in fact, Ruby felt like one, until the grandmother screamed at her, calling her a "stupid maid" for eating a fruit from the refrigerator. They said they were often reprimanded for using food up too quickly or letting it go to waste. Some employers ordered the women not to eat specific foods. In one particular house, the domestic worker was not allowed to eat meat. Susan, a Filipina who had previously worked for a "stingy employer," recalled that she habitually snatched food while cooking.

One day, her employer's mother-in-law unexpectedly appeared in the kitchen, and she hurriedly hid one piece of fried chicken in the pocket of her trousers and was badly burned.

For employers, their homes are private domains for relaxation and tranquility, but for domestic workers, they are workplaces, sources of stress, and places where they battle for survival. Typically, in most houses, the workday begins at around 6:00 or 6:30 a.m. and ends at around 9:00 p.m. At times, domestic workers must work until late at night if, for example, the employer is hosting a mahjong party or has visiting guests. The example of Sofi, from Indonesia, shows how workers strategize to complete their tasks and to have some rest. Sofi only has one afternoon off per month. Her work consisted of managing a three-storey house with a garden, looking after four members of her employer's family, and taking care of a dog and a cat – all by herself.

Sofi: The training center taught us general housework, but I invented some.

Interviewer: Really?

Sofi: I think I can make a bed beautifully. Auntie, please come with me...

Interviewer: It's very pretty.

Sofi: It is not what the training center taught me ... I bring coffee and the newspaper to the bedside table for sir and ma'am, and I help set ma'am's hair. When ma'am goes to bed, I bring a glass of cold tea and some wine for her.

Interviewer: You must be very busy.

Sofi: No, no, no. Ma'am goes to the office every day. So, they don't watch me working. It's not hard to work for this family if I know how to handle sir and ma'am. I finish washing clothes and cleaning the house in two hours. When ma'am comes home, finds the rooms clean and tidy, and then sees the beautifully made bed, she is already very happy.

Since the wife is a dominant figure in her employer's family, it is therefore crucial that Sofi keeps her female employer satisfied. To ensure her employment, she considered the characteristics of her employers and

the power relations in the family. She responds to sarcasm or rebukes with "Yes, ma'am."

Like Sofi, many domestic workers enjoy a respite after all the family members are gone for the day. On their own, they can relax and make phone calls. Although less prevalent since the introduction of mobile phones, telephone calls continue to be part of the communication links between domestic workers. When employers change their daily routines, for example, they take a day off work to stay home, domestic workers promptly contact their friends via mobile email and warn them not to call.

Among themselves, domestic workers talk about unreasonable employers and trade stories about incidents in their employers' homes, such as, "The Malay wife is very jealous", "The wife was yelling at her husband", "The daughter was fighting with her parents," and "The wife is angry because the husband had an affair." These narratives illustrate the home as a site of family tensions, which are witnessed by domestic workers. Given their knowledge of the private lives of their employers, sometimes their employers ask domestic workers about events in the neighborhood. In such instances, information becomes a resource that domestic workers may or may not choose to withhold.

Probably the most extreme control employers impose on their domestic workers is to forbid them from having a day off (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Often this is done under the pretext of being "for their own good." One employer explained that this would minimize the risk of his domestic worker becoming pregnant and to protect her from associating with male foreign workers, being cheated or losing money through gambling. This particular employer did not allow his domestic worker to have even one day off a month, or to talk to anyone other than family members, or even to step out the front door. Another female employer shared that she did not give her Indonesian worker regular days off because these can trigger mood swings.

Restrictions on days off often cause friction between employers and domestic workers. To get around this problem, domestic workers put forward claims – such as "My father is sick and I need to go to the bank to send money" or "My uncle is in Singapore" or "I want to pass him something for my parents" – that would give them an excuse to go out. Although employers may suspect that domestic workers are not telling the truth, they tend to weaken when domestic workers cite family reasons. For example, Jenny, from the Philippines, was able to take a week's leave and return home temporarily, citing the hospitalization of her father and a fire that razed her family home as reasons. She was also able to loan money from her employer.

In times of family emergencies, loans or advances against salaries are necessary because women entering Singapore through agencies normally do not receive a salary for the first four to eleven months; the repayment period for those from Indonesia may be longer. During the salary reduction period employers usually give their domestic workers S\$10 a month.

Some employers do not pay their workers even after the deduction period has lapsed. One thirty-five year old Filipina woman related how she dealt with the problem:

I got very nervous about it. I waited a week. But my employer didn't say anything about my salary. With all my nerve, I went to ma'am and said that I am taking care of your two children, but I am also the mother of my child. I was frightened, and my voice was shaking. I told her that my family just cannot make a living without my salary. I was crying and shaking when I said this. Ma'am gave me a whole salary the next day.

A real problem facing domestic workers in Singapore is not being able to leave a difficult situation due to a penalty equivalent to one or two months' salary charged by their agencies. On the other hand, under the exchange plan offered by agencies, employers can change domestic workers at nominal or no fees charged to them. Some agencies stipulate a free-exchange period of one year; other agencies allow six months for Filipinas and ten months for Indonesians. Manisen, from Indonesia, used the hostile system to her advantage by acting incompetently and being returned to the agency before the exchange plan expired.

I tolerated it long enough, but couldn't do it anymore. My former employer asked me to work at two places: her house in the morning and her mother's house in the afternoon. Food was not enough. I ate leftovers or just rice with gravy and instant noodle. So, I was thinking how to leave this house. If the employer thinks I am not trainable, she will return me to the agency. I left the previous employer, and my agency scolded me. The agency said, "Your parents must be very rich." She threatened me if I want to go to Batam?<sup>8</sup> I was so hurt. One day, I took the expensive teacup from the cupboard. The employer liked this teacup set. I dropped it on the floor. It was a stupid thing to do, but I felt better, I felt much better. When the cup broke, I cried from the heart... no acting.

<sup>8</sup> Batam is a scenic Indonesian island located one hour away from Singapore by high-speed ferry. It has a thriving sex industry.

Manisen escaped her employer's house by playing the fool. Not all the struggles are successful and, as mentioned earlier, domestic workers who are returned by their employers must repay the agencies. Manisen, for example, had her salary reduction period prolonged and she had to pay the expenses she incurred during her stay in the agency's dormitory. In addition, since she had already been returned to the agency twice, she ran the risk of becoming a "not hirable domestic worker."

The possibility for Filipinas and Indonesians to cooperate with each other is undermined by the differential treatment of the two groups. In general, Filipinas tend to be better off than Indonesians in terms of salaries and number of days off (the former is also less subject to rules on personal possessions and hairstyles). Filipinas have higher salaries because, as several employers stated, they are fluent in English, better educated, more intelligent, more efficient, and highly adaptable to Singapore society. In recent years, however, more and more Indonesians had been hired because they are presented by agencies as obedient, patient and cheaper.

Filipina and Indonesian workers have also been influenced by stereotypes about each other. In my interviews with Filipina workers, some claimed that, "Indonesian maids are different from us" and "They are not us." Indonesian workers, aware of the better position of Filipina workers, tend to prefer to distance themselves from Filipinas. In one case, an employer was considering to hire a Filipina to take care of his bedridden mother who had been released from the hospital. An Indonesian, Ranny, has been working with his family for seven years. When Ranny learned of the plan to hire a Filipina, she told her employer that she will leave. She reasoned that, "A Filipina maid will always become a boss if she works together with Indonesian. She will order me what to do. I will have to do everything." The employer acceded to Ranny's wishes. This example shows that although Ranny occupied a weak position, she used this very position to negotiate with her employer and successfully prevented the hiring of a "smart" and "cunning" Filipina.

#### *The Singaporean Public*

In addition to the direct and daily gaze of employers, friends and relatives who visit an employer's home also show a strong interest in domestic workers. Visitors tend to compare them with their own domestic workers. They observe the worker's every move and gesture and often become severe critics, questioning her character: is she a thief; is she a compulsive liar; does she have bad manners; is she filthy; does she litter in public places; or does she have loose morals. Moreover, migrant domestic workers are often portrayed negatively in newspapers (Ponnampalam, 2000).

When venturing into the public space, young women can become targets of sexual harassment. Etri, a twenty-five year old Indonesian woman, recalled a taxi driver saying inappropriate things to her and questioning her sexual experience. Etri believes that the driver saw her as being impudent because ordinary Indonesian domestic workers usually travel by public transport, rather than by taxi, and he knew that it was very unlikely that she would report him to the Singapore police. One female Filipina domestic worker stated that police questioned her when she was walking arm in arm with a Filipina male worker on her day off.

Domestic workers are sensitive to people checking whether their behavior is "appropriate for a maid." Indonesian women, in particular, are careful about actions like window shopping in expensive stores or using the restrooms in upscale hotels. As a result of this scrutiny, on their days off, many Indonesian women hold "private parties" in the compounds of shopping malls, on the beach, or even under bridges where they have a space of their "own" that is protected from the weather and the public's gaze. On the other hand, Filipina domestic workers tend to occupy fancier holiday enclaves. In general, they appear to be more confident and assertive because they speak English well and their level of education is equal to, or even higher than, the average Singaporean. Some Filipina workers reject being referred to as "maids," as the following exchange suggests:

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, ma'am.

Interviewer: What's the difference?

Jesamine: It's cool.

This exchange highlights the resistance of Filipina domestic workers to answer to the label of "maid" imposed on them by the majority. Women like Jesamine choose to refer to themselves as "DH." In so doing, they exercise a certain degree of agency and maintain an identity beyond and outside that of the "maid" carved for them by the dominant group.

### *Kin and Family at Home*

Domestic workers are not only exploited in destination countries. Conditions and family relations in their home countries can also put them in a disadvantaged position. Women are sometimes forced to work abroad to escape family problems like violence or excessive drinking or gambling by family member. Asis, an Indonesian woman who has been working for eight years in Singapore, said, "Most of the troubles come from Indonesia." She described her situation as follows:

When I was pregnant, he started to beat me. When he is not happy, he drinks and hits me. One day, he hit me really bad, so I went back to my father's house with my younger son because mother-in-law ordered me to leave my elder son. My father and sister think I should divorce him. But my husband says if I divorce him, he will kill me. I don't know what to do. I miss my boys.

Coming to Singapore enabled Asis to support her children – the older son is with her husband's mother while the younger son is with her father. Her migration may also provide a way out of her marriage. While in Singapore, she communicated with an Indonesian man who is working in Malaysia. Her statement below suggests her wish to find another man to be a father to her sons.

I called a man I whom I have known for some years. He gave me his advice. He even said that he wants to take care of my sons. I think he likes me. He works in Malaysia now. I want to find out if he has a good heart. I need to know this before going back to Indonesia. I wanted a hand phone to contact him, and I borrowed money from ma'am.

Similarly, two Filipinas who participated in the study were able to distance themselves from a problematic marriage. Both chose not to respond to phone calls or e-mails from their husbands.

For many workers, problems with kin often involve family members' incessant requests for money and goods. Based on the interviews, it seems that Filipinas, particularly married ones, regularly send money and gifts to their children. Several unmarried Indonesian workers related receiving many requests from their kin. For example, Nur gives most of her salary to her divorced mother's family. In other cases, parents, as well as uncles and aunts, constantly ask for money. Some relatives may also press the women for branded items.



In the face of unabated requests for money, some domestic workers had taken to spending for themselves. After acceding to requests for good and goods for some time, Stina, from Indonesia, started to spend a good part of her wages on herself. She explained, "I buy things, and I feel good. I feel really good about spending my money for myself." Another strategy is to invest or to make a major purchase, such as buying land. One participant stated that, if she had not purchased a house, all the money she had earned in four years would have been gone. Some workers decided to begin another contract without returning to their hometowns to avoid more expenses.

### Discussion

While states and capitalists want workers, what they get is people. This tension between "labor power" and "personhood" is particularly striking with reference to migrant domestic workers (Anderson, 2000:108).

In the global economy, migrant domestic workers are treated, in effect, as "products" (Anderson, 2000). For Indonesian women, the process begins with their experience in training centers, which provide them with cursory training in English and the use of household appliances for deployment to families in receiving countries. Part of the training process takes away the women's individuality. Domestic workers in Singapore are seen as products that are returnable or disposable (Chang, 2000). They are treated as if they are mass-produced products for consumption by middle and upper class employers; if employers are unhappy with their domestic workers, employers can easily change them. In Singapore, domestic workers are covered by an official immigration policy that emphasizes control over workers. As mentioned earlier, employers are obliged to monitor their domestic workers; they may be subject to punitive measures should their workers become pregnant, work elsewhere, cause disturbances, or overstay. Domestic workers are subject to systematic control from the moment they enter the country until they leave. The level of disciplinary control over domestic workers is quite different from that experienced by migrant domestic workers in receiving countries in the west.

The social exclusion of migrant domestic workers is evidenced by the fact that they are prohibited from marrying Singaporean citizens and they face explicit, as well as implicit, restrictions in the employer's household and other public places. Given the alienation or rejection felt by migrant domestic workers, it is appropriate to refer to their daily negotiations and struggles as coping strategies, some of which may involve "resistance" to

oppressive conditions. Every day these women attempt to restore their dignity as individuals in their own right. In this regard, having a mobile phone is not just a tool to connect with the outside world, but it also conveys symbolic significance for their personhood.

The global economy has been witnessing examples of resistance by migrant domestic workers (i.e., the "products" putting up resistance). For instance, Chicana domestic workers in the United States have developed general strategies to increase their value in the labor market. These include: (1) increasing the opportunity for job flexibility, (2) increasing pay and benefits, (3) establishing and enforcing a contract specifying tasks, (4) minimizing contact with employers, (5) defining themselves as professional housekeepers, and (6) creating a business-like environment in the workplace (Romero, 2002:89). We must keep in mind that domestic workers in the United States may have the option of commuting or working part-time while in Asia, domestic workers typically live with their employers. Another example of domestic workers attempting to resist control was observed by Constable (1997) in her study of domestic workers in Hong Kong. She found that some Filipina domestic workers were asserting their rights and participating in demonstrations (Constable, 1997). In recent years, Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong have also engaged in similar activities.

Most of the strategies observed by Romero, and some by Constable, cannot be employed by domestic workers in Singapore. Firstly, in the United States and Hong Kong, holidays and political freedom are protected by law whereas in Singapore holidays and days off are not mandated for domestic workers and political freedom<sup>9</sup> is restricted for all citizens. Consequently, domestic workers cannot freely engage in organized activities, such as forming unions. They cannot participate in demonstrations to further their rights as workers nor can they engage in business as this requires capital. Secondly, while most domestic workers in the United States (and some in Hong Kong) may live apart from their employers, all migrant domestic workers in Singapore live with their employers; thus, minimizing contact with employers is not possible. Thus, strategies that are effective in the United States or Hong Kong are not available to or possible for migrant domestic workers in Singapore.

The strategies described in this paper are similar to resistance activities detailed by Scott (1985). When employers are not present, domestic workers

<sup>9</sup> In Singapore, the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act restricts "any person who commits any act which obstructs or interferes with the traffic in any public road" and "any riotous, disorderly, or indecent behavior." The discretionary application of this law may be used to encroach upon freedom of assembly or discussion.

call or talk to their friends, or they only complete work that will be noticed by their employers while cutting corners on the rest (sabotage). Through their daily contact with their employers, domestic workers increase their employers' reliance on them on the one hand, and reducing control over them on the other. In fact, many domestic workers pretend to be unaware of the existence of surveillance cameras (false compliance). In response to scolding or complaints from employers, as consummate actors, domestic workers shout out a recited "Yes, ma'am," disguising their true feelings (dissimulation). They consume food that they have prepared for their employers (pilfering). They also talk ill of their employers and agencies, harming their reputation (gossip), or they feign incompetence in order to avoid futile confrontations with employers (feigned ignorance), and leave their workplaces legitimately by getting sent back to the agency by the employer (desertion). Many of these strategies are doable because domestic workers actually witness the power dynamics of family members and are aware of the family's daily routine and schedule. This study provides evidence of various strategies of resistance used by domestic workers that go beyond those detailed by Scott. I found that domestic workers provide information to employers about neighboring families and use "family" claims in negotiating with their employers. Some domestic workers "occupy" areas in shopping malls and under bridges during holidays. Many Filipinas reject the terms "maid" (used by employers and local society) and "FDW" ("foreign domestic worker" used by the Singapore government) and refer to themselves instead as "DH." In addition, it appears that a significant number of Indonesian women might use "black-magic" to protect themselves from unreasonable employers; hence, Indonesian training centers regularly search and confiscate "black-magic"-related special stones, roses, and slips of paper with Arabic writing from departing domestic workers. Women also devise strategies to resist exploitation by family members in their home countries. In fact, while in Singapore, some domestic workers begin divorce proceedings against violent or unfaithful husbands. Others reject kin members who demand money or expensive gifts by purchasing land, houses, or other assets, and sometimes by splurging on themselves.

The strategies of resistance described in this study do not depend on any organizations and can be carried out by individuals. Some strategies are developed by the women themselves or they may have learned them from colleagues through their fluid networks (Parreñas, 2001). For example, the term "DH" was not created by one individual; the use of the term spread as women themselves used it. Expanding the available range for the "self-enforcing category" (Sacks, 1979) can open opportunities for domestic workers to feel empowered

## Conclusion

As illustrated above, women from Indonesia and the Philippines who are employed as domestic workers in Singapore encounter strict legal and institutionalized constraints and are exposed to exploitative structures. Against many odds, this study has shown that to some extent, domestic workers turn their "weakness" into a resource in dealing with their situation. American historian, Linda Gordon, author of the book *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, which reviewed the history of family violence, elaborated on how single mothers utilized a variety of strategies to overcome their fate and protect themselves and their children. Some single mothers were successful in soliciting aid from welfare agencies by utilizing "the status of victims" (Gordon, 1988). This study demonstrates that domestic workers are doing all they can to survive, albeit some are less successful than others.

Not all of the strategies used by domestic workers are commendable and their acts of resistance may be considered as having negligible impacts. These strategies are limited because they do not challenge policies that frame the daily existence of domestic workers. However, considering their marginalized status in a foreign country, these strategies are available to them and can be employed in their daily lives. In the same way that Gordon describes single mothers as heroes of their own lives, migrant domestic workers in this study also emerge as actors aspiring to secure a better life under hostile conditions.

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