

# IS WORKING AN EMPOWERMENT TOOL FOR WOMEN? CASE STUDY INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRAK

Media baik di Indonesia maupun Malaysia seringkali menyajikan berita mengenai penganiayaan terhadap pekerja domestik Indonesia di Malaysia. Tulisan ini berupaya untuk melihat sejauh mana bekerja sebagai pekerja domestik dapat memberdayakan wanita Indonesia melalui perspektif feminisme. Studi ini menemukan bahwa bekerja sebagai pekerja domestik tidak sepenuhnya menuju pada pemberdayaan tapi juga tidak sepenuhnya mengarah pada eksploitasi. Hal ini ditunjukkan melalui pengalaman positif dan negatif yang dialami oleh para pekerja domestik. Studi ini menitikberatkan pada pencapaian yang diperoleh oleh perempuan yang bekerja di luar negeri tidak begitu saja diiringi oleh perubahan pada norma-norma budaya, terutama dalam kaitannya dengan gender.

**Kata Kunci:** *Pemberdayaan, Perempuan, Peran Gender, Pekerja Migran*

## ABSTRACT

Media in both Indonesia and Malaysia often present news about the mistreatment of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. This paper seeks to look at the extent to which work as a domestic worker can empower Indonesian women through a feminist perspective. The study found that working as domestic workers are not fully lead to empowerment but also not completely lead to exploitation. This is demonstrated through the positive and negative experiences suffered by domestic workers. This study has focused on the achievements of women working abroad, which is not just accompanied by changes in cultural norms, particularly in relation to gender.

**Keywords:** *Empowerment, Women, Gender Roles, Migrant Workers*

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## BACKGROUND

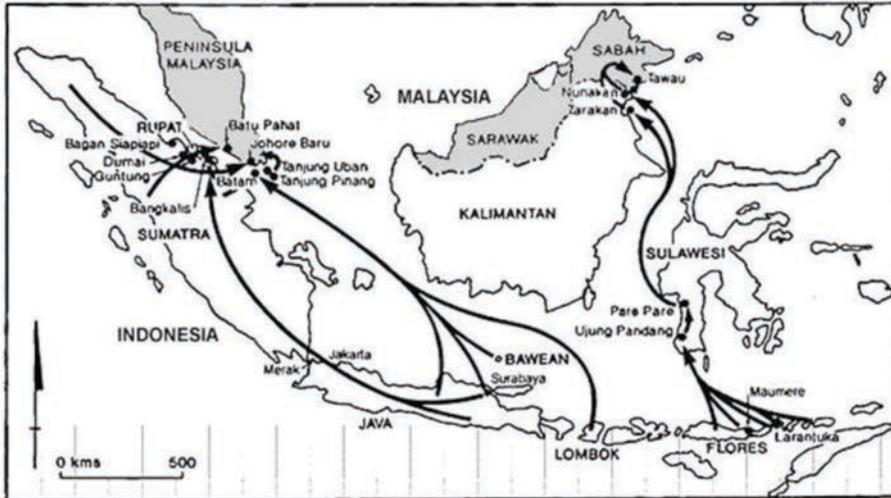
The liberal feminist conception believes that women's participation in the workforce can result in women's empowerment. The participation of women in paid work means women gain personal freedoms, female companionship, and are treated as individuals, rather than as supplementary to men (Prieto-Carron 2008: 6). Meanwhile, as family members, they also gain a higher status in society through their independence and increased financial power. Liberal feminists argue that women could gain a more equal position within households as a result of their participation in employment.

However, the participation of women in paid work is not as simple as what the liberal feminists claim above. Ida (2010: 31) argues that work has different meaning for women from the lower and upper socioeconomic classes. For working class women, work is an essential part of their life struggle, while for upper class women, work is a symbol of self-actualisation and social status. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that class segregation provides women in the upper classes with education and skills to participate in professional work, while working class women with low education and low skills participate in undervalued forms of work, for example domestic work, cleaning, factory work and even childcare work, which are all low-paid, low-skill jobs. In developing countries, paid domestic work has offered women with low skills and education to enter the workforce, but this form of work is low-paid, low security and mostly unregulated.

The availability of domestic work for women seems naturalised, since it is conducted in the domestic sphere and entails both house work and care work (Moors 2003: 389). Moreover, domestic work relies on biological essentialism, positioning women's work as always attached to domestic and care work (Sim 2009: 5). Furthermore, Sim points out that domestic work is always linked to women since it constructs women as 'good' or 'natural' performers of emotional labour (2009: 5). Therefore, domestic work and care work has become an available form of work for women who do not have other skills or are uneducated. However, these forms of labour are not valued socially, and are construed as 'unreal' work against the 'real' work of professional women. Professional women means, women who involve in skilled and educated form of work and have quality to compete with their male work partner.

As part of the global phenomenon of the rise of working women, domestic workers experience the paradoxical position that they have to work to support their families but, at the same time, they also have to meet social expectations that they are ‘good’ mothers and ‘good’ wives. In addition, Williams and Widodo (2009: 137) state that transnational domestic workers experience some transformation, as most shift outside from marginal roles as daughters and wives to roles as principal breadwinners, investors in family education, nurturers, competent housekeepers and decision makers. However, these dual roles and double locations need to be analysed within the intersection of Indonesian culture and gender relations. However, women’s experience as working women separated from their families has contributed to women’s increased power within their families, and provides better living standards, not only for women themselves but also in improving their families’ access to education and health services and overall family income, which could be considered a form of empowerment.

**Figure 1: Flows of Migrant Workers from Indonesia to Malaysia**



Source: Hugo, 1995: 280.

This study focuses on Malaysia, because Malaysia has become one of the most popular destination countries for Indonesian domestic workers, due to socio-cultural similarities such as language and religion. Asian Century Institute (2013) states that over the past twenty years, the number of foreign workers

in Malaysia rose by 340% to reach 1.8 million in 2010, where half of these migrant workers come from Indonesia. Figure 1 shows the flows of migrant workers:

## METHODOLOGY

This study addresses the following research questions. Firstly, it investigates to what extent the idea of women's participation in the workforce enables empowerment, particularly for transnational domestic workers. Then, it provides an overview of domestic workers' experiences when they are in Malaysia to analyses whether their paid work in Malaysia leads to empowerment. Furthermore, domestic workers' experiences on return is analysed for indicators of women's empowerment. By analysing women's experience, both while they are in paid work, and after they return, a clear picture emerges about the capacity for paid domestic work to empower women.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Rettler (1992: 752) states that historically, women's participation in paid employment was conceptualised differently than men's since their income was only supplementary. Based on that common social perception, she argues that women's work refers to "a career with fewer responsibilities and flexible schedules, since women are still responsible for the majority of childcare" (1992: 752). Furthermore, "domestic work is one of the oldest and most important occupations for women around the world" (ILO 2010: 1). Contemporary domestic work has become a vital market for women's employment as a result of the massive incorporation of women in workforce (ILO 2010: 1). The increase of work opportunities provided by domestic work cannot be separated from the effect of globalisation.

Globalisation is not a simple "concept that can be defined and encompassed within a set time frame, nor is it a process that can be defined clearly with a beginning and an end" (Al-Rodhan 2006). In addition, globalisation leads to transnationalism, which is defined as "the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (Al-Rodhan 2006). Transnationalism has been strongly connected

to domestic workers with the emergence of transnational domestic work, which is defined as people who work in domestic work outside their own countries but still have strong connections with their home countries.

In this study, these connections are related to the ideological construction of motherhood, which in Indonesia, is called *Ibu-ism*. *Ibu-ism* is a concept from the Javanese culture about womanhood (Ida: 31). Ida argues that *Ibu-ism* constructs the ‘ideal’ woman as a mother to her children and a housekeeper (2010: 31). In addition, she emphasizes that the ideology of *Ibu-ism* came from the existing class structure in Indonesia, in which social status is very important, as becoming rich and educated for women means they demonstrate higher social status.

## WOMEN AND UNPAID WORK

The idea of work for women is nothing new. Historically, women have always worked, given that the social construction of labour sees domestic and care work assigned to women (Sim 2009: 5). This notion derives from biological essentialism, which structures dominant gender roles in most societies. However, Beasley argues that women’s unpaid work at home is undervalued since it is closely related to their reproductive role, rather than being considered productive work (1994: 25). Domestic work, including care for family and children is never counted as ‘real’ work for women.

The undervaluing of domestic work is related to patriarchy, which traditionally positions men as providers for the family, while women were housekeepers (Rettler 1992: 4). Moreover, Sim argues that domestic work remains undervalued because women are seen as housewives rather than ‘real’ workers (2009: 5). Costa in Custers contends that domestic work could be seen as productive work since it produces a special commodity, namely ‘labour power’ (1991: 83). It seems that by changing people’s perspective on domestic work, the undervaluing of this kind of work can be diminished.

Moreover, challenges to the undervaluing of domestic work have come from liberal feminists, for example Friedan, who argues that women who perform domestic work are trapped in the traditional triangle, as prisoners to children, kitchen and church (Genz 2009: 31). She calls this “the unhappy housewife myth” (Genz 2009: 31), and offers the idea that women have to leave the

domestic trap and join paid employment to challenge the dominant ideology of patriarchy and to achieve a new identity as equal partners with men.

## WOMEN AND PAID WORK

The idea that women in paid employment have a tool to achieve empowerment is based on two counts. First, paid work offers financial independence and second, an escape from domestic life (Sim 2003: 110). However, many women only have access to limited resources and opportunities, which leads them into low-wage employment.

Bennett argues that rather than achieving empowerment, most women are trapped in occupations that conform to dominant gender-ideal and traditional roles, such as becoming nurses, teachers, factory workers, or domestic worker (Ford and Parker 2008: 11). Moreover, Sethuraman argues that work segregation between men and women is caused by three factors:

1. The low levels of physical and human capital invested in the enterprises in which women work and own;
2. Gender-based discrimination in both the labour and other markets;
3. The characteristics of informality, which contribute to women's invisibility and hence vulnerability (Hill 2010: 27).

Bespinar argues that limited employment opportunities in the workforce lead women to participate in low wage employment as essential survival tool (2010: 525). In the case of working class and poor women, work becomes a significant tool not only for empowerment, but also for survival. It is clear that for these women, any kind of work, even higher risk work, will be taken as they have no other choice.

However, women's participation in the workforce also leads to ideological conflict, as women have to maintain the social construction of gender alongside individual careers (Soeprobo and Wiyono, 2004: 8). Devasahayam and Yeoh (2007: 21) argue that women's involvement in paid employment has not been accompanied by shifts in cultural and social norms that produce the dominant ideology on gender roles, where women always associated with domestic world. Moreover, Sherry in Campo (2009: 106) argues that the participation of women in the workforce only forces them to take a 'double loads', where they

still have their responsibility for domestic work in addition to their contribution in paid work. Dawson (2008: 49) argues that it is caused by the common gender ideology that domestic and child raising work are central to women's sense of identity.

### DOMESTIC WORK: A REAL WORK?

The participation of women in paid employment has led to paradoxical and troublesome debates about the role of work for women. Friedan argues that women are trapped in the idea of 'Superwomen', trying to be the 'good mother' while also excelling at work (Genz 2009: 121). The role of men seems to be invisible in the case of household work.

Two approaches to diminish the double burden for working women are often suggested. Firstly, men have to share in the household work. In this case, rather than forcing women to take up paid employment along side their responsibilities in domestic work, men have to contribute to the domestic duties. Secondly, for some middle and upper class married women, living in the dominant ideology of being 'good' women requires them to hire other women to do the domestic work they are unable to do (Duffy 2011: 38).

In the context of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia, economic growth drove Malaysian women out from the house to follow their career aspirations. Therefore, they need someone to deal with their domestic tasks, such as taking care of the household and looking after the children. At the same time, the lack of employment opportunities in Indonesia has inevitably encouraged women to migrate from their homelands, either to other areas of Indonesia, or to other countries. The attraction of working overseas is higher wages compare to local wages for similar form of job. Since they lack formal education and skills, most could only participate in the informal sector, such as domestic work, factory work, etc. Entering domestic work has become the most common form of work available to poor and uneducated Indonesian women.

## STORIES OF THE INDONESIAN WOMEN MIGRANT WORKER: 'OPPORTUNITY' OR 'DISASTER'

At first glance, working as transnational domestic workers seems to offer great opportunities for Indonesian women to gain economic independence from poverty and escape from their own domestic traps. However, Friedman and Schulermandl (2011: 192) state that transnational domestic workers seem trapped in patriarchal construction, whereby they still have to deal with their own family commitments even while they are absent. Transnational migrant workers cannot meet the ideal concept of 'women/mothers' or *Ibu*-ism, where they have to present at home and responsible for all domestic works, since they are not physically present for their partners and children. Transnational domestic workers are caught in a double bind, where on one hand they can achieve some financial power and gain social status as they become breadwinners in the family, while on the other, physical separation threatens their own relationships inside the family and with their children.

Parrenas (2001: 149) argues that a central paradox for transnational domestic workers is that their increased economic security goes hand-in-hand with increased emotional *insecurity*. Moreover, Gamburd in Gardner and Osella (2004: xxiii) argues that transnational domestic work has generated significant changes in family structure, gender ideology and class relations, but also gives rise to moral panics about the consequences of women's protracted absence from their families. Transnational domestic workers are often rural women who have low levels of education and skills, and most come from poor families. Most are strongly attached to their own domestic work as it is socially constructed as women's work. Their work as transnational domestic workers is very similar to their everyday duties in their own houses. It includes preparing meals, cleaning, mopping, vacuuming, cleaning windows, and dusting, taking care of children, washing the car, washing the entire household's clothes by hand, and ironing (Varia 2004: 38-39).

### THE PROCESS OF RECRUITMENT AND DEPLOYMENT

The migration of transnational domestic workers in Indonesia is managed by the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration (*Kemenakertrans*). The Ministry, through its Overseas Worker Placement Agency, regulates the

recruitment, placement, training, deployment and return of the workers<sup>2</sup>. Potential migrant workers are obliged to go through a number of stages involving recruitment agents, travel providers, government officials, and trainers, who mostly charge fees for their services (Hugo 2005: 71). The process takes several months and stories of mistreatment in the training centre are often heard. Varia reports the account of Fatma Haryono (30 years old), a returned domestic worker from Lombok:

The agent came to my house and promised me a job in a house in Malaysia, where I would earn two hundreds ringgit [U.S.\$52.63] per month. I would not have to pay anything, they would prepare my passport and would cut my salary for the first four months. I wanted to get the experience and to earn money. The agent promised to send me to Malaysia in one month, but [kept me locked in] the labor recruiter's office for six months. I couldn't go out. Many people, even if they got hurt or wanted to leave, weren't allowed out. I think one or two hundred people were there. The food wasn't enough, they gave it twice a day. The gate was locked. I wanted to go back home. There were two or four guards and they carried big sticks. They would just yell. They would sexually harass the women. There were lots of girls there too [who suffered the same treatment] (Varia 2004: 20-21).

Kusmirah Parinem (21 years old) tells a similar story of her departure to Malaysia:

The agent had promised we would travel to Malaysia by plane, but instead we went on a thirteen-person boat. From Jakarta to Batam, I went by plane, and we stayed there for three days without food. From Batam to Malaysia we traveled by boat. I can't remember how many hours but I was very frightened (Varia 2004: 25).

As this story illustrates, "the mistreatment of migrants begins before they ever set foot abroad by their agents" (Hugo 2005: 73). There is also evidence that migrant workers are not provided with the training they have paid for, are compelled to work for agents while working for deployment, and exposed to dangers of many kind of abuses

Anggraeni argues that there are 'actors' responsible for the dispatchment of Indonesian domestic workers to Malaysia, namely the sponsors, agencies in

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Labour and Transmigration Decree no PER-18/MEN/IX/2007 about procedure placement and protection Indonesian migrant workers overseas.

Indonesia, agencies in Malaysia and the employers themselves (2006: 164). A sponsor is a third party who lives in rural areas and connects the Indonesian agency to potential domestic workers from their areas. They are also known as field officers. Agencies in Indonesia are companies the Indonesian government has assigned to conduct the domestic workers' departure, also known as *PJTKI, Perusahaan Jasa Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*, while agencies in Malaysia are official companies who link the agency in Indonesia with employers in Malaysia. Lastly, the employers are those who will employ the workers to take care of their domestic chores.

In order to be able to work overseas, domestic workers have to go through a number of stages, and at each stage they have to pay fees. Anggraeni (2006: 165) points out that during the administrative process, many domestic workers experience financial losses. Firstly, the sponsor asks domestic workers for money as payment for their service, while the agency in Indonesia also charges them a certain amount that they will deduct from their salary. Moreover, some agents in Malaysia also deduct fee payments from their salaries for pre-departure costs and training in Malaysia. Even worse, some migrant workers report that some employers refuse to pay their salary until their contract ends.

#### WORKING AWAY FROM HOME: A NEW EXPERIENCE

The exploitation of the Indonesian domestic workers continues when they arrive in Malaysia. Human Rights Watch (2004) states that there are a number of reports of migrants who have experienced abuse in Malaysia, including overt physical and sexual abuse of Indonesian transnational domestic workers. Jones states that domestic workers are highly vulnerable to exploitation because they live in employers' houses, and most are not allowed to leave those houses (Hugo 2002: 29). Besides, they do not have support networks and contact with other domestic workers is limited as a result of being confined to their employers' house. Furthermore, domestic workers are not protected by local labour laws in Malaysia. Malaysian police are unable to help domestic workers if they have no legal identity papers, which these are sometimes confiscated by employers. Finally, most domestic workers do not have witnesses when they have experienced abuse (Hugo 2002: 29-30).

There are many arenas for exploitation of domestic workers, including:

## Sexual Harassment, Abuse or Assault

One returned domestic worker, Nur Hasana Firmansyah (21 years old), told of being sexually harassed and abused by her employer:

The man [employer] teased me with money. He offered me 50 ringgit [U.S.\$13.16] and threatened to rape me. He said he would give me the money and I would have to serve him. I didn't do it and he kicked me. With 50 ringgit he wanted to rape me but I refused because I came here to work, not to perform sexual favours. (Varia 2004: 49).

The illustration above is only one account of sexual harassment experienced by domestic workers, who report experiencing sexual assault and abuse from their employers or employers' relatives. In some cases, domestic workers were raped by their employers and became pregnant (Varia 2004: 48). However, the legal provisions governing domestic worker contracts means they will be sent home if they are pregnant and employers can terminate the contract without payment (Varia 2004: 96).

## Limits on Freedom

In addition, Rianto has found many cases where migrants were prohibited to leave the house at any time (1996: 242). Latifah Dewi (20 years old), a returned migrant, had to escape from her employer's house:

There is an auto-lock for the front gate and if someone jumps over the gate, the alarm should ring.... The employer had told me not to run because the house has a camera and alarm. The employer made me afraid but I wanted to run away (Varia 2004: 3).

Some domestic workers were locked in while their employers worked. Many homes have security surveillance systems or security at the front desk, that make it hard for domestic workers to leave their working places even for emergency cases.

### **Long working hours and Poor Conditions**

There are also many reports of overwork experienced by domestic workers. Some employers believe that domestic workers do not need to rest and do not give domestic workers a day off as they argue they will get pregnant and bring men to the house, justifying their abuses. Varia states that many domestic workers have to work more than 18 hours per day (2004: 39). As 23 year-old Nyatun Wulandari states:

I worked for five people. The children were grown up. I cleaned the house, the kitchen, washed the floor, ironed, vacuumed, and cleaned the car. I worked from 5:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. every day. I never had a break; I was just stealing time to get a break (Varia 2004: 3).

Commonly, Indonesian domestic workers work 16 to 18 hours per day, seven days a week and have no holidays (Varia 2004: 38).

#### **Underpaid works**

Other common experience among domestic workers is of being underpaid or not paid at all. Wulandari's story illustrates this,

"I was paid just one time, 200 ringgit [U.S.\$52.63]. I just ate bread, there was no rice [for me]. I was hungry. I slept in the kitchen on a mat" (Varia 2004: 3). Not as lucky as Nyatun Wulandari, Arianti Harikusumo (27 years old) told her story of being refused payment, "If I asked for my salary, the employer hit me. I never got my salary, the employer didn't give me money. The employer never gave even one ringgit" (Varia 2004: 42).

Some employers argue that they do not pay domestic workers to prevent them from running away or cheating them before the contract ends. Moreover, some employers also argue that they will give the domestic workers their whole salary at the end of their contract to ensure the workers save the earnings for their families, as this is 'safer' than trusting them with a salary every month (Varia 2004: 42).

Some migrant workers also experience religious abuse, particularly when they work for employers of a different religion. Most Indonesian domestic workers are Muslims, who are required to perform five daily prayers at stipulated times, but many are not allowed to do so by their employers. Silvani Setiawan (24 years old), returned domestic worker told Varia her experience:

They didn't allow me to fast or to pray. I asked them if I could pray, but they said only twice a day. I had to handle pork and their three dogs...I wouldn't go back to Malaysia because I wasn't allowed to pray and I felt very sad. When I returned I went through a ritual cleansing by my family because I had touched pork. If I go back to Malaysia, I will get dirty again (Varia 2004: 44).

Exploitation and abuse of Indonesian domestic workers both prior to departure and during their employment happens due to the poor law enforcement of legal protections for this type of workers in both host and home countries. In this sense, both host and home countries seem only to take advantage of domestic workers without assuring the protection of legal provisions and regulations. Going forward, there is a need to make the migration process more transparent, specifying the costs migrant workers will have to pay in order to eradicate the widespread practice of illegal deductions. It is also important to ensure that prior to departure, candidates for domestic work must be given sufficient information about their rights and responsibilities, as well as knowledge they will need during their tenure, and an understanding of cultural differences to reduce the risk of abuse and exploitation.

### **Marriage Problem**

Besides the exploitation and abuses that they experience in the workplace, many domestic workers also feel their relations with family deteriorate. According to Soeprobo and Wiyono, the rate of divorce among migrant workers has significantly increased (2004: 137). Hugo contends that international migration can lead to marital instability and the consequent permanent break-up of the family unit. Hugo argues, based on research on women from East Flores, who migrate to Sabah in East Malaysia that divorce or marriage breakdown is increasingly common (Hugo 2002: 25). Mirsenah (27 years old) told her story:

Yes, I do regret it (transnational domestic work) at times, especially when I was having problems with my husband. Moreover, a mother is the one who should be responsible for the child's development. A mother is one who should shower the child with love by being with him (her son) and taking care of his every need. A mother should be with him all the time. But, when I think about money and how my husband and I cannot afford to give our child

a decent future, I had no choice but to be apart from him and my husband (Friedman and Schultermandl 2011: 197).

Rianto states that many transnational domestic workers suffer loneliness and their sexual needs are unfulfilled (1996: 261-261). In the long term, this leads to separation or extra-marital affairs, which affect not only their relationship with their partner, but also with their children. Suwarni (42 years old) shared her experience:

I do regret leaving my family to earn a living overseas. This is because it will be inevitable that my children will not feel close and bonded with me. It is only natural for them to be close and bonded to one who has taken over the tasks of caring them and attending their daily needs (Friedman and Schultermandl 2011: 190).

Siti (33 years old) also told Friedman and Schultermandl (2011: 204) that distance had weakened her relationship with her child:

I left when he was about six...of course we don't have a close relationship. When I came back from Malaysia after serving the three year contract he would not even come near me, let alone let me kiss him. Although he knows I am his mother, his actions show that he doesn't recognise me as his mother. I feel sad and hurt as he does not respond when I call him. He sticks to my sister-in-law, who takes care of him while I'm away, and calls her 'Mother'. He even refused to sleep in my house when I was there (Friedman and Schultermandl 2011: 204).

Most transnational domestic workers' children live with relatives. Wahyuni states that in her village in Central Java, most domestic workers' children lived with their grandparents while their parents were working abroad (Hugo 2002: 36). Their roles as mothers and as nurturers, caregivers and housekeepers is replaced due to their engagement in paid employment elsewhere.

#### Communication with family at home

The guilt that domestic workers feel regarding their absence from their families is inseparable from the dominant notion of motherhood in Indonesian culture. Friedman and Schultermandl contend that the guilt felt by domestic workers

indicates that the “cult of domesticity” and *Ibu*-ism remain strong even when women are overseas (2011: 191). However, domestic workers’ being overseas does not automatically change their cultural beliefs and their desire to be good mothers.

One of the main ways that domestic workers negotiate these conflicts is to maintain regular communication with their family. Most transnational domestic workers spend some of their earnings on communication through mail, telephone, and text messages. Communication plays an important role since it also allows women to feel a sense of responsibility as mothers, taking care of the family at home, despite being far away. Von Der Borch (2008: 203) suggests most migrant workers feel the loss of their direct role as mothers. Ratna (38 years old), told her story:

Well, I keep in touch, through letters, telephone calls and these days by sending SMS. Bringing up the children is indeed a mother’s responsibility but if I remain at home, what happens to their future? My husband is not responsible and I don’t think he can afford to send his children to school. So over here, I always make sure that I pray for their wellbeing. The SMS never stop flowing. I call them at least three times every month so that I can bridge the distance between us (Friedman and Schultermandl 2011: 206).

Working overseas and leaving their family behind places migrant domestic workers in a paradoxical position. On one hand, they view this work as a way to help their family while on the other hand, they feel guilty for being absent from their family. However, they have no choice but to keep working overseas and send money to their family as compensation for their absence and to reduce their feelings of guilt.

### REMITTANCE OR PITTANCE?

It must be noted that transnational domestic workers experience feelings of achievement while they are away, particularly related to sending remittance money home to their families. Remittance is the most tangible form of achievement as it contributes to family income and can improve status for the family and in the community. According to Sukamdi, Satriawan and Haris (2004: 158), most migrant workers use their remittances to fulfil subsistence

needs, such as household, food, clothing, education and health expenses. If there is any income left, this can be spent on non-subsistence items such as expensive consumer goods such as refrigerators, televisions, radios, motorcycles and cars.

They also found that some domestic workers have invested their earnings in household trade activities such as small-scale industry and agriculture, although most of these are reliant on the partner's decision (Sukamdi, Satriawan and Haris 2004: 160). For example, Sarjuni, the husband of an Indonesian domestic worker in Malaysia, started a furniture business in Bantul, Yogyakarta after receiving five million rupiahs (around AUD\$ 500) from his wife. Sarjono, the husband of another domestic worker, used fifteen million rupiah of his wife's remittance monies to purchase livestock, and saved the rest (Sukamdi, Satriawan and Haris 2004: 160). Tan and Gibson state that many domestic workers prefer to invest their earnings on accumulating fixed assets, rather than on personal development, such as education and courses to improve their own skills and education (2010: 13).

Although it seems that domestic workers achieve increased financial power as family wage-earners, the decision-making power about how to spend their earnings is still reliant on their partner or extended family. As the example above shows, some domestic workers' partners use the remittance to start businesses and become successful, but the decision has not come from the domestic worker herself and therefore, it could not be considered a form of women's empowerment, despite the capital she has contributed. Moreover, these remittance payments do not help women to gain better life outcomes, such as more skills or education, as it is their families who become the most immediate and direct beneficiaries of women's labour, which is more likely to be called as pittance.

## WOMEN WORKING OR WOMEN'S WORK

The concept of work for Indonesian women is nothing new. As Sen in (Blackwood 2008: 18) argues, the Indonesian government began to promote the 'new' image of women as professional workers as a symbol of modernity during Suharto's New Order era (1968-1998). At that time, 'work' was defined as labour conducted outside the home, and women were encouraged

to participate in paid employment. Moreover Sen contends that the common belief of women as housewives is still strong, but that the new perception of working women gradually replaced the traditional gender paradigm for young women in Indonesia with their involvement in outside-home-work (Blackwood 2008: 17).

However, Hugo (2005: 82) said that working as transnational domestic workers results in women's disempowerment. He shows that many Indonesian domestic workers experience exploitation, since most live with employers in their houses, are not protected by local labour laws, and possess no support networks or contact with their fellow workers, and have no witnesses if they are mistreated (Hugo 2005: 82). The experiences of women workers clearly reveal that they have contested patriarchal values by finding empowerment in their role as financial providers for the family. At the same time, they also fall short of performing woman/mother roles in keeping with the prescribed interactions of daily life. Their efforts are curtailed because they are not physically present with their children. Sukamdi, Satriawan and Haris emphasize that the existing patriarchal culture in Indonesia cannot be easily changed through women's financial empowerment as they move into paid work, or 'real' work (2004: 161).

### CHALLENGES AFTER RETURNING HOME

On their homecoming, transnational domestic workers still continue to experience mistreatment, particularly in the repatriation sector. The Indonesian government recognised that domestic workers need to address re-entry requirements upon their return, and constructed a special zone for repatriation in Terminal III of the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, Jakarta. This regulation is enacted in the Ministry of Labour Decree No. 204/1999 inaugurated in 1999 (IOM 2010: 35)<sup>3</sup>.

These measures are designed to enable the repatriation process to proceed smoothly. In practice, however, there are a lot of negative stories about the service. This special gate forces migrant workers to return to Indonesia via

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<sup>3</sup> Labour Decree no 204/1999 about special zone for TKI returnee. Since 31 August 1999, Terminal III was decided as Special zone for Indonesia migrant workers returnee, with aim to give better service for them.

Jakarta, no matter where they depart from. Moreover, officials must return migrant workers to their home, as stated in their passport. Workers who have needed to use falsified documents, or whose families have moved while the worker was away face many difficulties. In addition, they have to pay for their belongings to be returned, and must exchange their earnings at the lower rate of exchange offered in the airport. These processes are time consuming and there have been many reports of fraud and extortion (IOM 2010: 35). Anggraeni states that this special gate is also known as the “collect toll”, where illegal fees are extracted from returning migrant workers (Orange, Seitz and Kor 2012: 5).

### ADAPTATION TO HOME ENVIRONMENT

The bad experiences do not end in the airport, but continue after migrant workers return to their homes. This mostly affects migrant workers who have experienced violations in their workplace. Wickramasekara states that many returning migrants suffer mental and physical stress, while a significant proportion have also experienced sexual harassment, violence and abuse in the workplace (2000: 25). Some have also experienced work injuries as a result of physical violence, which can lead to disability or even death (Wickramasekara 2000: 25). Some domestic workers attempt suicide due to the ongoing effects of depression and stress experienced during their contract. Riena Sarinem (30 years old), told her sad story as domestic worker:

I tried to kill myself, because I couldn't stand my employer. When that happened, she called the agency and the agent took me from the house to the agent's house. The agent asked whether I wanted to continue working or go back to Indonesia. I said Indonesia. The agent said if you go back, you get no money. The agent said he would send me home...but when we arrived in Kuala Lumpur, he said that immigration would only let me leave Malaysia on March 19, 2004 [much later]. Now I know that is actually the expiration date for the visa, not [a government requirement, but I didn't know that then].... I was never paid throughout the entire fourteen months (Varia 2004: 50-51).

Due to the abuse they have experienced and their inability to remedy their suffering, many migrants become distressed or mentally ill when they return to their villages. IOM (2010: 38) states that many migrants choose to remain silent. Moreover, IOM (2010: 39) claims that being silent result from lack of

knowledge about their rights. Yasidi, a domestic worker's father told Hadiman the story of his daughter:

My daughter never told me what she had experienced while working overseas. She was ashamed to return home empty-handed. When she returned she was afraid of heading home directly. She spent two days at Terminal III (of Jakarta Airport), as she was fearful of returning home. From there she took public transport and headed to the PJTKI. She only telephoned me after she had spent seven days there. I immediately collected money to fetch her from Jakarta (Hadiman 2005: 89).

One of the most famous cases that illustrates the aftermath of abuse resulting from transnational domestic work in Malaysia is Nirmala Bonat's case. As reported by the *New Straits Times* and recounted by the IOM, this case illustrates that the Malaysian and Indonesian governments failed to provide appropriate protection to domestic workers:

Nirmala Bonat, the daughter of subsistent farmers from West Nusa Tenggara, was sent to Malaysia in 2003, aged 19 years. Nirmala's employer, Ms Yim Pek Ha, began abusing her a few months after commencing employment. After accidentally breaking a mug, Yim threw boiling water on her. Following this, each time Yim seemed displeased with Nirmala, she was attacked, using any nearby object, such as a clothes hanger and an iron mug. The most serious physical attacks that Nirmala was subjected to, however, were scalding with boiling water and being burnt by a hot iron on her breasts (IOM 2010: 50).

Tejani (2011) states that in 2011 this case had not yet been finalised. Domestic workers in Malaysia must negotiate many complex bureaucratic processes to claim their rights. Nirmala Bonat was unusual in that she was assisted by NGO and KBRI in bringing the case to court, no doubt due to the severity of her injuries. The role of the media was very important, in that they monitored and reported on the progress of the case.

Transnational domestic workers also commonly experience financial losses because employers withhold their wages. Human Rights Watch shows that of 51 domestic workers surveyed in 2004, 26 did not receive their full salary, 12 received no salary at all and many were still waiting for their salary to be paid (Varia 2004: 42). As a result of financial losses, many workers feel ashamed to return home because they did not earn anything for themselves or their family.

On top of this, the community's expectation that returned migrants will bring a great amount of money adds to the burden of shame. Taryati, one of returned domestic worker told her story:

It is just devastating that you return from working overseas empty handed. They often said I have worked too far away from home but returned penniless. My house remains the same. I worked abroad in hope that I would be able to send my younger siblings to school but it turned out that my labour didn't even seem to generate a penny (Hadiman 2005: 89).

Domestic workers not only feel distressed about these financial losses, but also suffer high social expectations about the rewards of their work. Many domestic workers expect that when they return, they will bring large amounts of money, without even considering the hardships they might have experienced overseas. Moreover, the inability to fulfil these social expectations creates further difficulties for domestic workers when it comes to reintegration.

Moreover, some domestic workers experience conflict with their own family when they attempt to manage their own income. The social expectation, particularly from the extended family, that domestic workers must help their own family first before helping themselves. In Indonesian culture, family is the top priority, and this influences women's spending. Based on his research, Rianto (1996: 250) told the story of an informant's experience after return:

..with about 14 million she has from her work, she had planned to renovate her parents' house, pay off her father's debts, buy furniture, and open a small shop. But after 3 weeks, her mind was confused: she only has 4 million left while the renovations to the house are not finished. Her mother, sisters and brothers continually give their opinions on the renovations of the house... to change this or to use that. Everyday Titin can not stop the requests of her mother and sister/brother about what they say are "important needs" to buy a colour television, a bicycle, clothes, shoes, cosmetics, a motorcycle, a wrist-watch, a jacket, even to hire a minibus to picnic together. After seven weeks, she only has a few hundred thousand rupiahs left, while the small shop is not realised yet. Finally, she decided to back to work with her 17 year old sister (Rianto 1996: 250).

Failure to reintegrate and the inability to meeting the raised expectations of family and society encourage domestic workers to engage in circular migration, meaning that they will become transnational domestic workers again (Ford 2005: 14-15).

However, some of domestic workers achieve some increased financial empowerment upon their return. The house has become the most tangible symbol of success among domestic workers. Sukamdi, Satriawan and Haris argue that the house has become the symbol of transformation in the shift from traditional customs to modern (2004: 159). Aquilar contends that migrant workers' achievements not only improve their individual social status, but also their family's social status, as they become more confident, and appear more cosmopolitan (Von Der Borch 2008: 207).

In regard to the relationship with partner and family, some domestic workers experience change in gender roles, while for some other the traditional value of gender roles is still persistent. Ukwatta argues that some domestic workers experience enhancement in the decision making power within their families, which means the formerly absolute role of the husband is slightly decreased (2010: 235). Moreover, she also claims that some domestic workers have more economic independence through remittance and the power to decide what they want to do with that money (2010: 235). In addition, some of them also gain confidence, and new household management skills, such as cleaning, cooking, etc (Ukwatta 2010: 236).

Parrenas (2005: 163) argues that gender relations between husband and wife remain the same after domestic worker's return. Some of them maintain traditional gender roles, and absolute decision-making power is still held by their husbands. This is consistent with the strong traditional perception of *Ibu-ism* that cannot be changed easily. In general, Ukwatta (2010: 236) contends that after return, it is impossible to conclude whether domestic workers experience change in their gender relation or not, since it depends on their family condition, some have experienced change, while some other have not experienced yet.

## WORKING, EMPOWERMENT AND INEQUALITY

Firstly, I argue that the narratives of domestic workers suggest that transnational domestic work is not an empowering form of work, but a gendered form of labour. Domestic work and care work has become a popular form of paid work for women who have low skills and low education. However, this type of work is not highly valued by society and is not thought

of as ‘real’ work. Changes in domestic work as a form of paid employment have resulted as the participation of educated and middle class women in professional employment increases. Domestic workers simply perform in other people’s households what they used to do in their own households. This kind of work therefore reinforces the idea that domestic work is a ‘natural’ task for women. In addition, it reproduces economic and class inequalities between women.

Secondly, I agree with Friedman and Schultersmandl argument, where existing patriarchal values prevent domestic workers from achieving self-empowerment. They point out that married migrant workers suffer disempowerment because they are unable to perform the socio-cultural expectations of what ‘good’ women should be (2011: 192). Williams and Widodo argue that women’s roles in Indonesia are linked to the value of femininity enshrined in *Ibu-ism* (motherhood), which places women at the centre of the home (2009: 129). Having said that, home also serves as the boundary for women, even if they work. In support, I argue that the women position in Indonesia culture and the concept of *Ibu-ism* that can be an obstacle for women to empower themselves, although they have already involved in work environment.

In addition, Parrenas (2001: 109) states that transnational domestic workers fail to meet the concept of ‘ideal’ women on three grounds:

1. the maintenance of the employer’s household diverges from traditional expectations of cohabitation among spouses and children;
2. they do not meet the traditional division of labour in the family, as transnational mothers do not maintain social expectations in which women are to perform domestic chores in their own home, for their own family;
3. they move away from traditional practices of socialization in the family. Geographic distance in transnational households mars the ability of mothers to provide direct supervision to their children (Parrenas 2001: 109).

As a result, transnational domestic workers are not considered ‘good’ women, mothers or wives as they fail to meet the socio-cultural expectations that construct the ideal woman/mother. Most suffer guilt because they have had to leave their families and children behind. Parrenas (2001: 116) argues that guilt

is reproduced by the dominant social construction of women, where they are expected to be nurturers responsible for the emotional needs and expectations of other family members.

Thirdly, I contend that domestic workers cannot be considered to have achieved empowerment, because their aspirations are not entirely consistent with the kinds of individual ideals most strongly associated with discourses of empowerment. Transnational domestic workers direct most of their remittances to their families, rather than spending on themselves. This has something to do with the culture in Indonesia, where family business is considered more important than one's own business. However, these never-ending family expectations can lead women to re-engage in circular migration. Domestic work can trap women in a vicious circle between unpaid and undervalued domestic work in their own homes, and underpaid and under-regulated work in someone else's home.

As Margolis (1993: 394-395) points out, the universal participation of women in paid work seems to lack a deep understanding, of the complexity of women's conflicting roles as actual or potential wage-earners and as mothers. I argue that feminism has to integrate an understanding of motherhood to ensure that mothering becomes truly enjoyable and socially valued, particularly for working mothers. Moreover, class divisions reveal that middle to upper-class women exploit lower class women in the context of paid domestic work. An intersectional approach is required if gender equality and women's empowerment through participation in paid work is to be achieved. Intersectionality aims to address the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women (Symington 2004: 2).

In conclusion, the idea that work can empower women and bring equality to their relations with men is not as simple as it appears. Feminists seem to ignore that there is class segregation between forms of work. Strong patriarchal ideologies simply reproduce women's lower participation levels in work, and at lower levels of work, suggesting that 'work' itself is gendered. Factory and domestic work is both classed and underpaid form of work. Women's participation in the workforce also leads to conflict in the dominant gender ideology, as women have to balance their role at work and within their own families. The involvement of women in the workforce has not been followed by a shift in gender roles, which has led to working women shouldering a

double load. The critical debates about transnational domestic work as a vehicle for women's empowerment must take account not only of the intersections between class, race and gender.

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