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SINGAPORE WOMEN AND FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS

Negotiating domestic work and motherhood

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Feminist geographers in recent years have increasingly drawn attention to the 'home' as an 'unbounded space', which is simultaneously influenced by broader social discourses on gender, family and motherhood and, at the same time, represents an important site where gendered ideologies are elaborated, sedimented and occasionally challenged (Dyck 1990; Johnston 1993; Gregson and Lowe 1995; Buckley 1996). The complexity of these negotiations is further compounded by the crisis in household reproduction, in countries where there is a rapid influx of women into the formal economy, and where paid reproductive labour has been introduced as a means to alleviate (one set of) women's domestic burden, often by transnationalizing it to (im)migrant women. Foreign domestic workers have been used as a lens to investigate how the 'other' is socially and spatially inscribed, within the 'interlocking, relational systems of difference, especially gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, immigration/citizenship status and language' (Stiell and England 1997: 339; see also Bakan and Stasiulis 1995; England and Stiell 1997; Pratt 1997; Stasiulis and Bakan 1997; Yeoh and Huang 1998). Interestingly, transmigrant women as domestic workers have also been used as a reflexive and refractory mirror in order to examine constructions of 'self', as embedded in issues of 'nation', 'race' and 'gender', from the perspectives of both countries of origin of the diaspora ('homeland'), as well as in the countries where diasporas sojourn and break their journeys as 'exilic communities' (in 'host societies') (Aguilar 1996a). Indeed, at the national level, van der Veer (1995: 6) has argued that definitions of 'self' and 'other' are 'structurally interdependent' and that 'nationalism (which has its basis in the control of space or territory) needs this story of migration, the diaspora of others, to establish the rootedness of the nation'.

While others have argued that the 'copresence' of 'migration' and 'nation', of 'guests' and 'hosts', and of 'outsiders' and 'the established', provides double-

sided mirrors bouncing off images, which are then worked into constructions of 'national self' and 'international identities', we would like to argue here that negotiations of social identity also occur at other levels below the national. Specifically, we examine the negotiations between women – between employers and foreign domestic workers – over gendered notions of 'domestic work' and 'motherhood'. In doing so, we wish to focus not so much on the way employer–employee relationships are negotiated around concepts of *difference*, constructed through the filters of 'race', 'class' and nationality, and rooted in webs of asymmetrical power relations (an important theme which has recurred in recent work on migrant women in domestic service: see Rollins 1985; Glenn 1992; Romero 1992; England and Stiell 1997; Stiell and England 1997; Pratt 1997; Stasiulis and Bakan 1997), but to examine how *shared* notions that place women at the centre of the home are negotiated *between* women. As has been pointed out, women's participation in paid work has not detracted from their being assigned the domestic role of reproducing the family through household work (WGSG 1997: 122). The ideology of domesticity and the association of women with housework, childbearing and childrearing in the private sphere, appear to be 'endemic cross-culturally' and 'remarkably resistant to macro-level economic circumstance' (Sanchez 1993: 454). Neither the maid nor her mistress – both of whom have taken up paid work – has escaped the bind of domesticity: the maid has removed herself from 'home' only to further entrench herself in another domestic world in a foreign country, while the mistress may have shifted some of the physical burden of domestic work onto another woman, but continues to fulfil a supervisory role over the domestic arena, as well as the moral and emotional weight of reproducing the family. As Dyck (1990: 464) argues, 'the primary responsibility [and this can be in literal and/or symbolic terms] taken by women in the domestic sphere of activity will frame experiences and understandings of their lives in and outside the home'.

In attempting to understand the complex negotiations of gendered identity between employer and employee, we draw on Mary Louise Pratt's (1992: 7) definition of a 'contact zone' (situated in the context of colonial encounters in her work) as 'an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect'. A 'contact' perspective 'emphasises how subjects are constituted in, and by, their relations to each other.... not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power'. Paid domestic labour has often been interpreted as complicity on the part of female employers in 'simply perpetuat[ing] the sexist division of labour by passing on the most devalued work in their lives to another woman' and 'escap[ing] the stigma of "women's work" by laying the burden on working women of color' (Romero 1992: 131). What has been given less attention, is that far from the unilateral transfer of one woman's immutable burden to another, the nature of that 'burden' undergoes translation in the context of

copresence, as each woman repositions and redefines herself within the web of domestic practices *vis-à-vis* their own worlds and each other's. Contrary to the idea of 'home' as a place of 'stability, oneness and security', treating the home as a contact zone where gendered norms and domestic practices are constantly negotiated between women – between 'self' and 'other' – shifts the perspective to one of seeing 'home' as a place 'where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference' (bell hooks, quoted in Massey 1994: 171). While the women operate within a framework of dominant and pervasive cultural and largely patriarchal norms which shape understandings of home and associated practices of domestic work and motherhood, these notions, as Dyck (1990) has shown, are also reaffirmed, re-evaluated and redefined on a day-to-day basis as women relate their social identities to the particular material contexts in which they find themselves.

The Singapore context

As a labour-short city-state without a hinterland, Singapore has had to depend on both drawing more women into the waged economy (the female labour force participation rate crossed the 50 percent mark in 1990), as well as on foreign labour of all classes, skilled and unskilled (foreigners constitute some 30 percent of the country's work force, the highest in Asia), in order to sustain its aspirations to attain 'superleague' status (Perry *et al.* 1997). Singapore women's participation in the formal economy, which took off in the 1960s with the move to export-oriented manufacturing, has continued in the 1980s and 1990s as Singapore moved beyond its manufacturing base to consolidate its role as a major financial and communications centre. In response to the developing crisis in the reproductive sphere, inextricable from the state's exhortation for women to enter the work force (and exacerbated by the dwindling of traditional stocks of paid substitutes such as black-and-white *amahs* and local servants, as well as by the decline of the extended household and shrinkage in help from extended family members to share out domestic work) (Huang and Yeoh 1994, 1996), the state, in 1978, finally granted work permits to allow a limited recruitment of domestic servants from Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Within two decades, the number of foreign domestic workers has reached 100,000, three-quarters of whom are from the Philippines, one-fifth from Indonesia and the rest, mainly from Sri Lanka (*Straits Times*, 5 November 1997). At least one in every eight Singaporean households employs foreign domestic help as a means to resolve the crisis in household reproduction (Wong 1996: 128). A recent study, based on the 1990 population census, found that foreign domestic workers are evenly spread between households living on landed properties and those in public housing flats, concluding that 'this phenomenon may be interpreted as a dependence on maids, or that the maid culture has become a way of life in Singapore' (Toh and Tay 1996: 48). Fears that the development of a 'maid dependency syndrome' in Singapore will undermine

the virtues of hard work and self-reliance – values perceived to buttress Asian immigrant society – have been ventilated in public discourse, particularly concerning the 'insidious influence' of foreign maids on the young (Yeoh, Huang and Gonzalez 1999: 127). The anxiety that the presence of the trans-national servant may sap the vigor and verve of the nation's young, and hence its future, brings under scrutiny women's moral and social role in the family, as mothers not only of individual lives, but ultimately, as 'mothers of the nation' (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Within the context of a strong demand for the labour of women-citizens in the workforce, and the national dilemma of trans-nationalizing reproductive work onto increasing numbers of immigrant women, we focus on the perspectives of mistress and maid, women most intimately caught up in tussling with the 'self/other' divide in (re)structuring the burden of the household reproductive sphere and (re)constituting women's identities.

Methodology and sample profile

The research is based primarily on a random questionnaire survey of 162 pairs of foreign domestic workers and their employers. This was followed by in-depth interviews with 15 employers and 30 foreign domestic workers, some of whom paired. Interviews generally lasted between 2 to 4 hours each. Of the 162 domestic workers, over half (53.1 percent) were Filipino, 27.8 percent were Indonesians, 12.4 were percent Sri Lankans, and 6.8 percent belonged to other nationalities (Indian, Thai and Burmese). In general, most of the maids were in their twenties and thirties, single rather than married, and had some formal education. Most had worked before coming to Singapore and had held jobs in the informal sector (usually as domestic helpers, itinerant hawkers or unpaid family labour), or they had worked as production workers, or in the sales and service industry (Table 17.1). Of the one-third who have ever been married, almost all (96.2 percent) have left children mainly in the care of the children's grandmothers, aunts or fathers in the countries of origin.

In contrast, most employers were older (in their thirties and forties), married, and with at least a secondary-school education (Table 17.2). The majority worked in the formal sector, mainly in management, executive, professional, administrative, secretarial or clerical positions; a quarter were housewives or had retired. It is not surprising that none of the employers held production or production-related jobs, or worked as hawkers or manual labourers. Although no official figure exists, it has been estimated that only those with a minimum yearly income of $30,000 are granted permits to employ foreign domestic helpers (this ensures that employers have the means to provide for upkeep of a maid) (*Straits Times*, 5 April 1992). More than two-thirds (69.8 percent) have children – 67.3 percent have pre-school children, 58.4 percent have children in primary school, and 28.3 percent have teenagers.

Table 17.1 Sociodemographic characteristics of foreign domestic helpers in Singapore

Characteristic	*Filipino n=86*	*Indonesian n=45*	*Sri Lankan n=20*	*Others n=11*	*Total n=162*
AGE (in years)					
<20	1.2	15.6	5.0	—	5.6
20–29	45.4	66.7	60.0	45.5	53.1
30–39	39.5	11.1	25.0	56.6	30.2
40–49	13.9	6.6	10.0	9.1	11.1
MARITAL STATUS					
Single	67.4	64.4	75.0	72.7	67.9
Married	17.4	24.4	20.2	18.2	19.8
Widowed/Divorced/ Separated	15.1	2.2	5.0	9.1	12.3
EDUCATION					
No education	-	2.2	5.0	18.2	2.5
Some Primary	3.5	2.2	—	18.2	3.7
Completed Primary	5.8	46.7	35.0	27.3	22.2
Secondary	22.1	31.1	25.0	36.4	25.9
Vocational	5.8	—	—	—	—
Pre-Univ./High School	54.7	17.8	35.0	—	38.3
University	8.1	—	—	—	4.3
PRIOR OCCUPATION*					
Never worked before	23.3	31.1	40.0	54.5	29.6
Domestic worker	14.0	28.8	5.0	18.2	17.3
Informal reproductive labour	14.0	22.2	10.0	—	14.9
Production worker	24.4	13.3	45.0	27.3	24.7
Sales and services	19.8	15.1	5.0	9.1	16.0
Clerical/secretarial	17.4	2.2	10.0	9.1	11.7
Administrative/ supervisory	3.5	—	—	—	1.9
Teachers/tutors	4.7	4.4	5.0	—	4.3
Nurses/midwives	5.8	—	—	—	3.1
Farming/agricultural work	1.2	2.2	15.0	9.1	3.7
Other Occupations	1.2	—	—	9.1	6.8

* Percentages add up to more than 100 percent because respondents provided multiple responses.

Source: Authors' field survey, 1995–96

Employing a maid: Singapore women and the negotiation of domestic work and motherhood

As more Singapore women have chosen to enter the formal economy, the demand for replacement reproductive labour has become more pressing. The maid provides the most 'complete' substitute for the wife/mother's reproductive labour on many counts, as is clear from the following testimonies:

Table 17.2 Sociodemographic characteristics of employers surveyed

AGE (in years)	%
<20	—
20–29	7.4
30–39	40.7
40–49	34.0
>50	17.9
MARITAL STATUS	
Single	9.9
Married	84.0
Widowed/Divorced/Separated	6.1
EDUCATION	
No formal schooling	1.9
Primary	4.9
Secondary	29.6
Pre-Univ./Junior College/High School	19.1
Polytechnic/Vocational	8.6
University	26.5
Post-graduates	6.8
Other	2.5
OCCUPATION	
Housewife	25.3
Managerial/Executive	13.0
Professional	26.5
Administrative	6.2
Secretarial/Clerical	11.7
Business	4.3
Sales	3.7
Technical	1.2
Service	3.7
Others	1.9
Retired	2.5

Source: Authors' field survey, 1995–96

I wanted to go back to work [after stopping work to look after her two children when they arrived] ... actually I felt I needed the adult company. After a while with the children, you can only do baby talk.... We needed a maid because my second was too young to be put into a childcare centre. The other alternative was to shuttle them up and down to my aunt's place but that is very hectic, very tiring. And at the end of the day, you still have to come back and do the housework and the necessary.

(April, full-time manager with two young children)

When my first child came, I didn't have a maid. We [husband and wife] would bring her down in the morning [in her husband's car] to my mother-in-law's place and then I'll take a bus to work. And in the evening, I'll take the bus to my mother-in-law's, meet my husband there and we'll go home after dinner with the baby.... When the second child came along, we had hoped to be able to cope.... After ferrying my first child to and fro for almost two years, I would say that things were working out all right except that it was quite taxing for the child. She had to wake up very early and sometimes by the time we get home, she'll be very tired, and probably didn't get enough stimulation. So for a sense of permanence, and roots for the child, we decided it'll probably be better if my in-laws moved in with us, especially when my second child was born.... I told my mother-in-law that if she thinks she can't cope, to let me know, and we'll go hire a maid. None of us really wanted a maid because we all like to preserve our privacy, but on the other, hand you know, the everyday routine [suffers]. How to do ten-thousand-and-one things all at the same time? I used to do most of the housework on weekends or wake up early to do the housework before going to work. But it's not the same, because you have to cook special meals for the baby, and a two-year-old is quite a lot to handle because my mother-in-law believes in cooking 'proper' stuff for the children. Nothing came out of a can. Everyday, we'll have to go to the market for special fish and vegetables and all that. It just wasn't working out, running back and forth. So we had to get a maid.

(Polly, full-time professional with two young children)

Polly's experience with the first maid was disastrous, culminating in the maid running away. However, by then, the family had progressed up the socio-economic ladder and domestic labour was required, not only to care for two young children, but a large house and garden. Having a maid around the house had become indispensable:

We had to have a maid! My mother-in-law could not cope! By then we had moved to a big house [from a flat]. A big house! There was so many things to do, and on top of that there was the garden to tend to as well. So we agreed we were going to have a maid, and I went to look for one. In the interim period, I did all the work. I got up at three in the morning and went to bed at midnight. Did everything on top of a full-time job – wash toilets, wash the plates, did the laundry, did the ironing, did the mopping, and because the children were young, we had to mop the floor everyday because they'd be crawling all over the place on their hands and knees, picking up things from the floor to eat and what have you. They threw their toys all over the place and every once in a while you must pick up, or the house would be accident-

> prone.... After the first week, my husband says that the quality of life had decreased substantially. There was no way we can do without a maid.
>
> (Polly).

The crux of the argument as to why foreign domestics are indispensable to dual-career households, is best summarised in a letter from a working mother to the forum page of the daily newspaper, entitled 'Child-care centres cannot replace maid's service: Maid can do other chores besides caring for children' (*Straits Times*, 7 November 1997). In the letter, the following reasons were given as to why 'placing children in child-care centres is not an effective substitute for employing a maid':

- Working parents have little time to spend with their children. Therefore, they need to spend quality evening hours with their children after returning from work, and not spend time on housework;
- The operating hours of child-care centres are rigid. If the working parents are on split shift or they have last minute meetings, there will be no one to take their children home in the evening;
- Child-care centres demand that parents take care of their children at home when they are ill. This means that working parents have to take urgent leave from work. This will disrupt work. Furthermore, there are extra holidays such as Children's Day, Youth Day and Teachers' Day which will exhaust most parents' annual leave entitlement;
- The cost of sending two children to a child-care centre can be a financial burden. Working parents will find that employing a maid is value for money because she can also help them in housework;
- Few child-care centres are willing to take [children under the age of two];
- For children of school-going age, a maid can be used to take them to ECA (extra-curricular activities). She can also take babies for immunisation at a polyclinic and go to the market. No child-care centre can provide these services;
- Working parents have to rush their half-asleep children to child-care centres early in the morning before they proceed to work. They need to endure the inconvenience of using public transport in the evening when they take their children home. These activities are time-consuming and tiring;
- The conducive environment at home and home cooking are always better for a child than an institution such as a child-care centre.

The presence of a housemaid perpetuates traditional cultures of domesticity, which valorises the 'home' as a site of physical, emotional and moral nurturing for the family, and as a safe haven for children (providing a sense of 'permanence' and 'roots' as Polly puts it) (Gregson and Lowe 1995). This is in contrast to non-home-based options, such as institutionalised childcare, babysitters (both

options involving travel and stress on the mother and child), or using commercially prepared food ('proper' food is home-cooked and does not come 'out of a can'). Once secured, the maid's replacement labour is also highly flexible. It is expandable to fill the domestic vacuum at no extra cost. Not only can the daily specifications of work include a multitude of tasks, from housework, childcare (including children too young for institutionalised childcare), care of the elderly, cooking, marketing, car washing, to walking the dog or taking the child to the clinic or school activities, but, in addition, the live-in maid's service is continuously available to meet every contingency (from ministering to a sick child, to holding down the fort when parents work late or during 'extra holidays'). The labour provided by the maid is also accommodating of the Sisyphean logic which characterises domestic work. Employers, for example, often equate the presence of the maid with the maintenance of the house in a perpetual state of orderliness: constant 'picking up' becomes an unwritten job description.

The 'need' for a maid is not just about ensuring that specific jobs around the house get done; it is also about maintaining a decent 'quality of life' (as Polly's husband puts it) – symbolised by a 'big' house in spick and span order, or the ability to 'do ten-thousand-and-one things all at the same time' – and the luxury of having contingency plans to fall back on by securing another person subservient to self to pick up the slack (which otherwise falls on the wife/mother as, for example, when Polly temporarily went without a maid). As purchasing the maid's labour actually involves securing the maid's constant presence and availability (particularly crucial in view of parents' absence and limited availability at home), rather than just paying for the performance of specific, divisible and definable tasks, the act of multiplying the 'tasks' (e.g. increasing the number of children under the maid's care or stretching the hours of work at the beginning or end of the day to cover 'emergencies') entails no further financial outlay. That the 'stretching' of the boundaries of domestic work, without financial compensation, does not normally cause concern among employers, is partly due to the way domestic work is evaluated as the 'natural' labour which women perform: after all, the maid is already being paid to perform what was formerly the employer's unpaid 'labour of love'. It should also be noted that the maid's replacement labour does not necessarily free her female employer from all domestic concerns, but simply modifies them, as Kaladevi (full-time professional and mother of a pre-schooler and a teenager) observes:

> Without a maid, you're so stressed up for so many reasons, so many things to do. If you keep a maid in the house, it's not that your stress level really goes down either. Yes, physically it does go down to a certain extent, but mentally the stress [is still there]... you still have to keep track of what's happening at home and sometimes when things go wrong, you're like trying to solve problems long distance. It's not always easy.

However 'complete' the maid's replacement labour is, she is seldom perceived to amount to more than an appendage of the employer, who remains inextricably linked to the domestic realm, even at 'long distance'.

As Romero (1992: 100) puts it, 'employers hire persons to replace labour, at once considered demeaning and closely identified with family roles of mothers and wives'. Such contradictory and ambivalent demands on the hired persons continue to shape everyday practices, as employers tussle with defining the 'place' of the maid *vis-à-vis* themselves. In turn, these practices, often underpinned by gendered and racialised categories, both modify and reaffirm understandings of women's identities as embedded in domesticity and motherhood.

As Pratt (1997: 173) has argued, one of the most psychologically taxing issues to come to terms with for employers (as a result of the insertion of substitute reproductive labour in the household), is the 'fraught terrain of motherhood', which lies uncomfortably at 'the crossroads of anxieties about sameness and difference'. For households with children, childcare is ranked by the majority of employers (82.3 percent) as one of the maid's duties, and by half of employers (49.6 percent) as the maid's main duty (this contrasts with 'adults-only' households, where 'general housework' is the main work priority). The maid's role as substitute childcare giver is hence a significant one which, as Pratt (1997: 169) notes, produces a whole set of 'ambivalences' for women's identities as mothers. Mothers such as Ellen (full-time administrator with three young children and two maids), who have come to the conclusion (after lengthy exploration of other options) that relying on the maid as substitute caregiver is the only 'solution' to negotiating the demands of home and work, still continue to wrestle with the everyday implications of the 'solution':

> My maid used to sleep with my first child when he was a baby... she was so attached to the baby that the baby didn't want me, you see. So I said, no, no, no! No matter how, I'll stay up at night and do the night feeds. I'll do it, you know. I'll do it, I'll do it! Then you have the first child, and then the second, now the third, you're so tired, *aiyoh*, you just want the added sleep *lah*, so I would rotate with her [the maid], you see, alternate nights with the baby. Then since I had the second maid, *aiyah*, since I'm paying her so much, I shouldn't be wasting my nights, sleepless nights you know, let her look after [the baby] *lah*! So for the last few months, I have not been [sleeping with the baby], only like on Friday nights, once a week.... But I feel that I'm neglecting him [the third child]. You see, with the [addition of the] second maid, it becomes inevitably 'Minda [one of the maids], can you please look after the baby?' I feel that I just want more time to myself, and then when I evaluate [what's happening], *aiyah*, what is this *lah*, I'm neglecting him!

In Ellen's case, the tensions over the way night-nursing is scheduled, become emblematic of the contradictions between the divisibility of mothering work and the notion that motherhood is inseparable from the personhood of the 'real' mother. Ellen fluctuates between fears of being supplanted should the baby bond better with the maid, pangs of maternal guilt hinged on the idea that 'time out' for 'self' amounts to a form of neglect, and the consciousness that having paid for a double share of substitute labour, she is not getting value for money.

Employers strive to preserve an 'ideal sphere' (Simmel's term, quoted in Goffman 1956: 481) around themselves which attests to the inviolability of their social identity as mothers, even as they abdicate responsibilities and share out mothering time with the maids:

> You see, my maid has been taking care of my boy since he was a baby, so for instance, when he wants to sleep, he tends to want Meera [the maid] to get him to bed, but... when I reach home, I'm the preferred person, and sometimes he wouldn't even let me go, so I would say that I feel that this kind of reaction is not at all unnatural. I think it is to be expected given the background.... Weekends, for instance, I would be the preferred sort of companion, but when we are at work, then he's quite happy to spend time with the maid.
> (Li Ying, full-time professional and mother of two young children)

> My youngest child is very spoilt by the maid because she gives in to him. She looked after him as a baby so I suppose she pays extra attention to him.... He is really very attached to her... I take it that it is a natural bonding he has with her because he can see that she loves him, so I just accept it... But, well, blood is thicker than water, after a while he'll still come back to me. Now and then, he comes in between us [the maid and self], but for certain things – like when he is in pain – it's still back to me.
> (Cheng Ee, involved in home-based part-time work, and mother of three young children)

> Actually I prefer the children not to bond with the maid. Previously, I thought it would be good to have the maid get close to the children but, you know, when the maid goes off after two years, the children will get affected. They miss her, and would cry more and be more demanding. So now I try to get them separate from the maid. The maid is actually to do the housework.... [In a later part of the interview].... I was actually hoping more for the maid to like the children, not so much for the children to like the maid, you know, because if the maid likes the children, then she will take good care of them because they are so young, so dependent on the maid.
> (April)

While most accept the inevitability of a degree of bonding between the maid and the children, and some perceive it as desirable (since bonding simulates motherhood more closely and enhances the quality of care), others try to enforce a certain distance between the maid and the children. Of employers living in households with children, 17.7 percent indicate that their maids are not involved in childcare at all. Alternatively, they restrict the maid to the sphere of housework (while childcare is apportioned to a more trusted caregiver such as a grandmother) or simply believe that there is no reciprocity of attachment in the children's relationship with the maid. Employers also assure themselves that their 'place' as the 'real' mother is secured by ties of blood and nature. Key incidents – either crisis moments (e.g. when the child is in pain) or special occasions (weekends and holidays) – rather than the recurrent practices of everyday care, are seen to provide the litmus test of true motherhood. The ideal mother substitute is also one who operates within clear, if unwritten, space–time coordinates:

> She [the maid] took care of my children as if they were her own. However, as soon as I set foot inside the house, she would stop what she was doing, leave me with my children, and go to her room. Many times, I complained that Prima does not even give me time to put down my purse, or to change and freshen up from work. Initially I resented her for that. I soon realised that Prima did this to allow me 'quality time' with my children.... My high-profile career failed to impress her. As far as she was concerned, I had to do the 'mothering' during weekends.... After almost six years with us, Prima went home to the Philippines. It was time for her to start her own family. She will make a beautiful mother.
> (One Singapore employer's testimony, published in *Tulay Ng Tagumpay*,[1] 1993a: 4–5)

Prima's ability to switch between providing a motherly presence in her employer's absence and immediately withdrawing such a presence the moment the 'real' mother puts in an appearance, so that she can spend 'quality time' with the children, endears her to her employer as the ideal maid whose own motherhood is safely located in a different time and space.

Anxieties over the substitutability of motherhood can also be discerned in the debate over whether it is maids who are older, married mothers or young, single women, who make better caregivers for young children. Some employers associate qualities of trustworthiness and maternal responsibility with an intersecting matrix of racial type (Indonesians being more 'homely' than more 'sociable' Filipinas), age and marital status (older, married maids being both more experienced, and more earnest about making a living, and therefore undertake their childminding responsibilities more seriously):

> For my first maid [Filipina], ... she was quite a young girl, I think in her early twenties, I believe, and, she wasn't married.... It didn't work out because she socialised quite a bit, you know, she's quite fun-loving.... I felt that she was too young to handle the responsibility of looking after children... she was quite spendthrift. She would spend all her wages the moment she got hold of the money.... I thought she wouldn't be suitable for looking after young children, not quite appropriate, so I sent her back to the agency after four months.... I was not comfortable with somebody with this kind of values.... [As for my current maid,] I have deliberately chosen an Indonesian this time round. As a rule, Indonesians are simpler in outlook [compared to Filipinas], especially if you choose the older, married ones [her maid is in her late thirties and is not only a mother but a grandmother as well] who are quite earnest about earning a living and will take responsibilities seriously. And they [a second Indonesian maid, also married with children, was later employed when the second child was born] have shown themselves responsible people who are experienced in looking after children.
>
> (Li Ying)

Others prefer the malleability associated with the young and single, precisely because the maid's lack of personal experience in mothering allows her to be molded to fit into an 'ideal' extension of the employer. This is achieved by embodying the latter's notions of good mothering practices:

> We don't want somebody old, who has too much experience, because I thought that that means I can't teach her what I want to teach her. I don't want somebody who's married, has a kid, because they come with their ideas of bringing up a child, and it may not be the ideal, so I wanted somebody who can be trained.
> (Kaladevi, who has employed five maids in succession, all of whom young and single, as primary caregiver for her young daughter)

Although the relationship between employer and maid, stretching across the contact zone, is mainly characterised by domination/subservience, this does not altogether rule out the sense of empathy which women, and mothers in particular, may share across other lines that divide. Employers who themselves feel the contradictory pulls of home and work are also conscious of their maids' struggles as *working mothers*. In the following editorial published in the *Tulay Ng Tagumpay* (1993b: 1), in the form of a mock letter from a Singaporean mother to her neighbour's Filipina maid, the nobility and sacrifice of the maid's binational motherhood is celebrated:

Every night, you and I pray for our families. When my son wakes up from a nightmare, I am there to comfort him. How do you feel rocking your employer's baby to sleep, dreaming about the little boy or girl you left behind in the Philippines?

Even though you are far away, your loved ones think about you as much as you do them. They know you have gone away to give them a better life. They will never forget the mother, auntie or cousin who sent them much needed money for food, clothing, shelter and school fees.

On your Day Off I listen to the little boy downstairs crying and calling your name. I know his mother scolds him, but he loves you. He will always remember the 'tita' who comforted him when he was scared, who stood in the hot sun or pouring rain waiting for his school bus to arrive, and who taught him to use the potty.

Now we are worlds apart [but] I have to tell you that I admire your strength and sense of purpose. The next time you are overwhelmed with work, stop and remember how important you are. You serve two families and will always be remembered by both.

These sentiments are seldom expressed in such exalted tones in real life, although occasionally, a shared understanding of motherhood has been a means of guiding women's actions, as seen in the following instance:

> I usually go for a single maid because I don't want them to come here and start thinking about their children. I prefer someone young with no family commitments.... All my maids have been single except Putri [the current Indonesian maid]. I chose her more out of pity, sympathy. She was a transfer maid, was sent back to the agent by her previous employer. When I saw her face to face, I had a kind of sympathy.... She was pleading, 'please take me', and I asked the reason why she had come to Singapore to work when she already has a child. Her answer was, 'I don't want my son to have the same fate as me. I need the money to support him'. I asked how old he is and who's taking care of him. And she said that actually what happened was that her husband has abandoned them. She sounded genuine and I told myself, okay, let's give her a try.
>
> (Julia, a full-time secretary with two children)

In general, however, empathy stemming from a common identity as mothers, does not necessarily translate into bridges that span the women's 'worlds apart' with any degree of permanence. Employers are still primarily concerned about negotiating an appropriate space for their maids as substitute mothers within their own homes, rather than their maids' other lives as real mothers with real families. In fact, employers often fear that the maid's maternal longings may interfere with her childminding abilities:

> My first maid was married.... She very poor thing.... She cried and cried when looking after my son... she had children about the same age as mine [pre-school]. That time we did not have a maid's room, so she slept with my kids, and she would cry. So my kids said, '*Aiyoh*, mummy, why she cry?' She stayed for two years... but it wasn't good for the children. After that, I didn't want to employ married maids. My next three were all single.
>
> (Mui Yan, full-time manager with three children)

Becoming a maid: migrant women and the negotiation of domestic work and motherhood

Drawn into the realm of domestic service, migrant women who become housemaids, like their employers, constantly (re)negotiate the way they frame their identities as workers and mothers, although the material conditions that circumscribe these negotiations in their case are rather different. As noted in Table 17.1, about a third of the maids surveyed (32.3 percent) have been involved in domestic labour (as paid work [17.3 percent]; as an informal arrangement [14.9 percent]), prior to their arrival in Singapore, while the majority (72.2 percent) have been engaged in a wide range of occupations including production work, sales and services, and clerical and secretarial jobs. Domestic service is perceived to be a job of very low social standing – undertaken only by the poorest – even in labour-exporting countries. Most migrant women felt that they would not be working as maids had they remained in their home countries. Some, like Rita (an Indonesian maid in her mid-twenties), had gone as far as concealing the nature of her overseas job from her family:

> All my family members are professionals – my father is a police officer, my sisters are all teachers and nurses. I'm the youngest.... I have gone to high school and have done office work in a hospital. I wanted to work in Singapore to earn more money. I told my family it is to do office work, not as a maid. My father and mother would be very unhappy if they knew I was working as a maid.

Only a very small minority of the maids surveyed (7.0 percent) actually felt that being a maid is 'all that they know how to do;' most (91.9 percent) see themselves driven to overseas domestic service primarily for the economic benefits. They argue that the reasons why they, rather than a husband or a brother, have resorted to overseas work as a maid, is simply because such work is more easily available than jobs for men, and also pays far better than any available job at home. Many, at the start of their migratory journey, see a stint as an overseas domestic worker as a temporary stop-gap measure; few relish domestic work as the vocation of a lifetime or even feel any 'natural' inclination or aptitude for such work. For some, becoming a foreign domestic

worker actually serves as their first introduction to domestic work. For example, Gita (formerly a clerk in Sri Lanka), comes from a middle-class household where the cooking and cleaning are done by a 'poor woman' whose husband had divorced her. Gita's mother had questioned her ability to do housework:

> My mother says I can't work in Singapore [as a maid] because I didn't work at home. She told me, 'You only eat and sleep. You can't work. You don't go.'

Similarly, Kalliya (in her early twenties), who had worked in turn as a cashier, an accounts clerk and a telephone operator in Sri Lanka, has little experience of domestic work:

> I told the [recruitment] agent that I don't know how to look after sick person, I don't know how to look after children... [but] he said, 'No experience is okay, you can look after sick person, small babies also'.... Actually, my mother very scared to send me [out as a maid] because she knows actually I didn't do housework [at home]. After that, come here, so many mistakes [laughs]. Now [six months into her contract] also sometimes I can't manage [the housework] but my madam's really kind to me although sometimes she scolds.
> (Kalliya, whose work entails household chores, cooking and looking after a pre-schooler)

Domestic work is seldom the preferred vocation; indeed, for the young and single in particular, domestic work does not come 'naturally'. Indeed, the growth of the 'maid trade' can be better explained by the intersection between the development of a transnational hierarchy of work and the 'genderised mode of labour substitution' (Heyzer and Wee 1994: 39), rather than any innate affinities that women have for domestic work. Most migrant women who enter domestic service see it as an economic passport to better things, although not all are successful in using it as a 'bridging' occupation and they may actually remain locked into overseas domestic service for longer than they first anticipated. The low status of the job itself is balanced by its value as 'a form of secular pilgrimage in a quest for economic bounty and life experience' (Aguilar 1996a: 114). Women such as Gita and Kalliya, for example, are planning to work for the duration of one contract (two years) in order to save up enough to get married to their boyfriends at home, buy land and build a house, and start a business. Attitudes towards domestic work itself may differ considerably. Kalliya looks upon it as an apprenticeship under an older, more experienced woman, that will equip her with domestic skills which will stand her in good stead:

> I didn't know how to cook [when she first came], not even Sri Lankan food. My madam taught me everything....[It is okay] if she scolds, then I know and can [correct] my errors, then if I do something like that next time, I'll remember. My mother and my boyfriend very happy that I now know how to clean house and cook.

Others like Dora (a Filipina maid in her mid-twenties) see 'enforced' domesticity during her contract in Singapore as the quickest means to an end:

> I only come here to work as a maid because it was the only way to save enough money to go to America.... No way I want to do [domestic] work all my life.... It's the hardest work... better to start a business... it's very fast to earn money.

Within the duration of their contracts, however, few maids exert control over the type of domestic work they take on,[2] or indeed over any change in the scope of work during the contract, as a result, for example, of a move to a larger house or the arrival of a new baby. Only the more assertive – usually those who have accumulated some work experience overseas – are able to exercise some degree of control over the nature of domestic work they undertake. This is illustrated in April's account of the succession of maids (seven in total) she employed over a period of six years:

> [When the second maid left,] I got a replacement for her – this was the time my second son was born – but this third maid didn't want to look after babies, so after two months she changed employer. The boss [of the agency] himself highly recommended her and said that she was very good with children and she speaks very good English, and that she has never been to Singapore before, but when we collected her, she told us that she had already worked in Singapore for two years and didn't know she was going to look after children, so for that reason, she didn't want to work for me. She didn't want to look after babies at night.... I think in her previous employer's place she had to look after a baby so she knows the work involved. You know, after coming out for one contract, they are more fussy, they pick and choose what kind of household they want. She requested for a transfer and after that we had to go for about six weeks without a maid... [relates her experiences with her fourth and fifth maids].... My sixth maid stayed with me for one year. I think I treated her too nicely.... I allowed her to go to my church [Filipino] fellowship, and she got to know Filipino friends there and found out that there were other employers who could give her every Sunday off, whose kids were all grown up and offered a higher salary. It so happened that her friend [another maid] was going back to the Philippines and recommended her [to

> the employer], so she transferred to the other side.... I don't believe in holding on to the maid when she is no longer interested in working for you.

In the same way that the daily specifications of reproductive labour constituting motherhood often present the Singapore employer with dilemmas of ambivalence, so maids also have to constantly confront their identities as 'mothers' as they grapple with issues of childcare. This may be the care of their own children in their natal homelands, or playing surrogate mother to their employers' children, or both. Often, it is precisely the desire to give their children a better future – in terms of an educational headstart or material security that spurred the women on to seek domestic employment overseas, and to persevere in what sometimes turns out to be a long haul away from home. For example, Lucy, a high-school graduate, was a housewife when her husband passed away in 1980, leaving her with two children aged 9 and 5. She then worked as a clerk in Manila (she was paid the equivalent of about S$60 a month) but in 1986, decided to leave her children with her mother in order to take on domestic work overseas:

> I don't have enough money, *lah*. I need to earn money because, ah, I'm alone. I'm the father, I'm the mother, and then how, if the children grow up, I have no money. *Aiyah*, then now, my son is in school already, then high school already, then *er*, college, then what to do? I'm thinking of the education. Every time I think of going home after finishing a contract, my children say, 'Very expensive, all the things here'. Then, my money is only so much in the bank, then when [they] finish schooling, then how? That's when I think I can come back for another two years *lah*.... So another two years more! [laughs] Twelve years now [since first starting out as a foreign domestic worker]!

Having overcome her own feelings of anxiety concerning her children, and her extreme homesickness, Lucy recalled (with great amusement and some condescension) the story of her sister-in-law who left after three months in Singapore because she had become:

> so homesick, ya, cannot *tahan* [local colloquialism for 'tolerate' or 'withstand'] already. Wanted to climb the window and then jump! I said, 'Okay, lah. Go home'.... But I, when I [used to] thinking and thinking like that, I lie to myself, *lah*. I think how is my children's education, the schooling. Must be practical, *lah*!

The strength of mind and 'pragmatism' needed to countenance leaving one's children in the hands of others in order to undertake domestic service abroad (which may, ironically, involve caring for the children of others) define acts of

motherhood in heroic terms, investing them with all the pain of self-sacrifice and toil. At the same time, migrant women are well aware that transnational motherhood has to withstand the distancing effects of space and time; the fear that the emotional (as opposed to material) ties that bind children to their mothers, may gradually unravel, is thus a real one (which, paradoxically, parallels their employers' fear of being displaced). Mothers like Lucy do not regret their decision to seek overseas employment, but lament the gradual yet inexorable erosion of communication with their children through the years:

> [When the children were small], I telephone, telephone, always twenty dollars, ten dollars, five dollars. 'How are you there? Are you okay?' When I see the typhoon, 'How is the typhoon there?' Now, no more already. Telephone stop.... Also very few letters... only on special occasions ... my birthday, Christmas, Mother's Day. My daughter says, 'No, I'm very busy, I'm studying.' Then my son says, 'I'm working'... [laughs].... Okay *lah*, never mind, they don't want me anymore [laughs to hide her embarrassment]

Others, like Alice, who came out to Singapore as a domestic worker 12 years ago, in order to put her children through school, struggle to live up to their mothering ideals long distance:

> Sometimes I regret that I have neglected my duty to my family, especially my children, they grow up without me. But it also helps because they become independent themselves.... Sometimes I have to spend $60 on a phone call.... They must tell me what they feel. I must tell them what I feel. I tell them what I do, or 'I'm angry with you because you do like this, you do like that.' They joke, 'oh come on, do not make sermon over the phone!' But I have to. Being a mother, we have to discipline our children whether far or near. Because it is our duty to motivate our children. It is not easy to be a mother far away, you know.

'Long-distance' mothering anxieties have also been given substance by stories of betrayal and rejection at the end of the maid's economic pilgrimage and on homecoming, such as the following which appeared in the *Tulay Ng Tagumpay* (1993c: 5):

> Gwendolyn writes that after four years as a Domestic Help in Singapore, she returned to Manila for a vacation. She looked forward to rejoining her husband and her two children, for whom she had sacrificed so much. She was disappointed when there was no one [sic] at the airport to meet her. With a heavy heart, she made the long journey to her province.

> Her home, she noticed, had been quite improved. In fact, it looked quite remarkable amongst the little *nipa* thatches and *barong-barong* in the *barrio*. She went inside and found another woman in her newly renovated home. Gwendolyn's husband had introduced her into the home over eighteen months before. Not only had this woman won the affection of her husband, but that of her two children as well, who now looked upon this intruder as their own mother.

The fear of displacement and being rendered dispensable that underlies transnational motherhood, is further complicated for domestic workers, who have to negotiate the shift from being 'mother' to becoming 'surrogate mother' to their employers' children. Newly separated from an unfaithful husband, Rhoda left the Philippines for domestic work in Singapore to support her three preschoolers, entrusting them to her sister's care. Ironically, she finds herself working for a divorcee with three young children whose former husband 'has got another girl'. The relationship between employer and employee is tense and uneasy ('no big trouble but we argue') and at the same time bound by a sense of empathy for each other's circumstances ('ma'am has her moods but I treat her like my sister'). Rhoda relates her struggles with binational motherhood:

> [When I phone home,] my three children would be fighting, 'I want also to speak to mama!' I cry after I talk to them. And my sister sends me pictures of them, my children. I miss them. I always send them my picture [so that] they know, 'My mamma there in Singapore, she's working'....
>
> [My employer's children,] I treat them like my own children. [The elder two girls] are very wild, very rude, they say, 'You're our maid! My mother pay you every month! You have no right to scold me, to teach me, because she maid, the maid, only pick up the house'... but I scold them, I treat them like my own children. I don't want them to be rude because I also got three children.
>
> This little baby [the youngest of her employer's children] is quite good... we sleep together in one bed. If he saw me cry in bed in the evening, he [would] wipe my face ... I didn't do to my children what I did for him. When he got fever, I'm very worried. But with my own children, I'm relaxed only.

At the same time as striving to maintain her place as mother in her own children's lives, Rhoda also draws on a stock of motherhood ideals in caring for her employer's children: she resists relegation to being seen as 'just the maid' by the two older girls while asserting some degree of moral authority over them, and develops emotional rapport with the youngest boy.

In Lucy's case, her attachment to her employer's youngest son, whom she had cared for from birth, finally tipped the balance in her decision to stay on with the family despite a better financial offer from another family:

> I decided *lah* to stay because I [would] miss John [the child]. He is still very small. If I change employer, then John how? I [would] feel very sad. John [would] miss me. If he feels sick, how *lah*? Never mind, salary is not important.

As Romero (1992: 125) has argued, 'some domestics willingly exchange certain types of emotional labour for respect, status, and influence, for instance by manipulating traditional 'feminine' qualities attached to housework. By being "motherly", they support and enhance the well-being of others, while eliminating many negative and harsh attacks on their self-esteem. The search for respect and dignity in domestic service leads most household workers to trade additional physical and emotional labour for psychological benefits.' The quality of 'being motherly' has thus become an important strategy for maids in negotiating their identities *vis-à-vis* their employers. Even young, single women such as Kalliya, who are thrust into a position of playing surrogate mother, try to win over their young charges, not simply to please their employers but also for a sense of emotional well-being:

> sometimes I feel like mother, sometimes like sister.... Sometimes she's [the child] is not well, that time, I try as hard as I can to feed her by telling stories. She likes it, she wants somebody around. So when I'm very close to her, she is also very close to me.... When I told her I have to go back after two years, she started to cry. Before, I [used to] think it's only a job, ... now I'm not thinking it's my job, now I'm like part of the family, a precious relationship.

Conclusion

It has often been observed that the phenomenon of the 'maid trade', as a retrogressive, non-modern form of domestic work, has further entrenched the gendered nature of domestic and mothering work, and, as a consequence, the often unquestioned patriarchal underpinnings of society. Aguilar (1996b: 5), for example, argues that 'the plentiful supply of migrant workers from the Philippines [and other labour-exporting countries] has made possible the retention of archaic, slave-like forms of domestic labour in Singapore, which has propped up customary patriarchal relations in family and society'.

While this is clearly the case, it should also be noted that domestic and mothering practices, while seldom crossing the gender divide, are constantly being (re)negotiated, as women – both employers and maids – interpret their identities in relation to the particular context in which they find themselves,

and in the 'copresence' of each other. As a 'contact zone' providing a 'space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations' (Pratt 1992:4), the home provides a lens through which to examine the way women of different cultures, nationalities and class, interpret and play out interlocking understandings and practices of domestic work and motherhood. While employers and maids are 'worlds apart' in many ways, they also participate in negotiations around similar issues: both sets of women often justify resorting to 'substitute mothering' in terms of seeking material betterment for their families; both have removed themselves physically from the reproductive burden of their own households, but do not entirely escape the multiple ties that bind women to the domestic world; both struggle with 'distance mothering' (although this occurs on different scales). Examining how employers negotiate their positions in the domestic realm *vis-à-vis* their maids, not only contributes to understanding their anxieties about 'difference' and 'sameness', but also helps explain the often excessive degree of control which employers exert over their maids, as well as the demand for clear structures of deference as a means of distinguishing 'self' and 'other'. At the same time, from the point of view of the foreign domestic worker inserted into the employer's household as replacement labour, the nature and boundaries of domestic work and motherhood become blurred, taking on transnational and binational dimensions. It is clear, however, that ambiguities and negotiations notwithstanding, women – be they middle-class Singaporeans or migrant Filipina, Indonesian and Sri Lankan workers – remain firmly committed to the ideals of 'good' domestic and mothering practices.

Notes

1 A magazine published by the Philippine Pastoral Ministry in Singapore, targeted at, and circulated among Filipina domestic workers.

2 While potential employers usually have a lot of choice in who they pick as their maid (often sieving through dozens of bio-data files and video clips before a choice is made), as well as considerable power to replace their maid 'in the event the Servant does not work out;' as one employment contract puts it (in fact, some placement agencies advertise 'unlimited replacements' as a sales gimmick), maids have very little corresponding choice as to who they work for. Most have no information regarding the type of household they will be working for when they sign the employment contract, and have to accept the situation on arrival in Singapore. Their only recourse is to terminate the contract voluntarily, in which case they have to pay for their passage back home and, if insufficient notice is given, forfeit a portion of their salary.

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