



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**NEGOTIATING POWERLESSNESS :EVERYDAY FORMS OF
RESISTANCE AMONG FILIPINO DOMESTIC WORKERS IN
MALAYSIA**

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FEM 2004 6



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OF RESISTANCE AMONG FILIPINO DOMESTIC
WORKERS IN MALAYSIA**

By

LINDA ALFARERO LUMAYAG

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

May 2004



DEDICATION

In loving memory of my parents, Papa Pisto and Mama Peding,
for giving me life and love.

To Frankie and Mae,
for being my constant companion, my pillar of strength,
and my love.

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Faculty: Human Ecology

The international migration of labour is an important feature in the world economy today. Malaysia is a typical example of a country that heavily relies on foreign workers to fill in jobs in the services sector. With this, Malaysian homes also employ foreign domestic workers to carry out the social reproductive functions performed earlier by Malaysian women who now actively participate in the labour force.

This is a study of power relations between actors of transmigration and the Filipino domestic workers in Malaysia. It looks at the issue of powerlessness of women workers in the domestic employment, and examines the daily forms of resistance against conditions of powerlessness. The central argument that runs through this study is that powerlessness is embedded in the socio-cultural structure of society which stifles their interests as women. This qualitative study



involves 64 Filipino domestic workers who have been working in Malaysian households. Observations are drawn from a year-long immersion and interview with domestic workers, five employers and four employment agents and embassy staff as well as informal conversations with those who are involved in migrant issues. A triangulation of interview, observation and focus group discussion was used to gather information from the informants.

Findings revealed that globalisation has intensified the movement of Filipino workers, especially women, across countries where domestic employment is available and made women more visible in the international division of social reproductive labour. Such visibility is viewed in terms of their physicality but is not translated in terms of their increasing empowerment as social actors in migration. Filipino women's propensity to migrate is gendered and is reflective of the subordinate position they are placed in Philippine society. This study also shows that women domestic workers are powerless right from the beginning of the migration process, when they start their domestic work in Malaysia, and until their eventual return in the home country. The condition of powerlessness is pervasive at the level of relations with employers and the society at large, made worse by the fact that they are foreign domestic workers. This condition of powerlessness also made them aware of the conscious resistance that has become the workers way of life thereby employing strategies and tactics to surmount whatever personal and employment-related problems.



This study concludes that Filipino domestic workers are conscious of the different realms of powerlessness they experience through their own social network to the extent that daily forms of resistance are not developed on their own but shared collectively by the social network. Patterns of resistance are simply reactionary measures against exploitation and abuse and they do not feature transformative ways in order to subvert powerlessness; although, at the same time, these may empower them. More often, the daily forms of resistance tend to reinforce and strengthen their own powerlessness they actively participate. Legal protection for foreign domestic workers should be a concern of the Malaysian government in order to protect the interests of all related parties.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Doktor Falsafah

**NEGOSIASI KETIADAAN-KUASA: BENTUK TENTANGAN HARIAN
PEKERJA DOMESTIK FILIPINA DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

LINDA ALFARERO LUMAYAG

Mei 2004

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Migrasi antarabangsa pekerja merupakan satu ciri yang penting ekonomi dunia hari ini. Malaysia adalah contoh biasa negara yang sangat bergantung kepada pekerja asing untuk memenuhi kekosongan pekerjaan dalam sektor perkhidmatan. Isirumah di Malaysia turut mengambil pekerja domestik asing untuk menjalankan fungsi-fungsi reproduktif sosial yang pada awalnya dilakukan oleh wanita-wanita Malaysia sendiri yang sekarang mengambil bahagian secara aktif sebagai tenaga pekerja.

Kajian ini adalah mengenai hubungan kuasa di antara mereka yang terlibat dalam transmigrasi dengan pekerja domestik Filipina di Malaysia. Ia meneliti isu ketiadaan-kuasa pekerja wanita di dalam pekerjaan domestik, dan mengkaji bentuk tentangan terhadap keadaan ketiadaan-kuasa. Tumpuan utama kajian ini adalah mengenai ketiadaan-kuasa yang wujud dalam struktur sosio-budaya masyarakat yang mengganggu kepentingan mereka sebagai wanita. Kajian

kualitatif ini melibatkan 64 orang pekerja domestik Filipina yang telah bekerja untuk isirumah di Malaysia. Pemerhatian telah dibuat dari setahun pergaulan dan temuramah dengan pekerja domestik, lima majikan, empat agen pekerjaan dan kakitangan kedutaan, serta juga perbualan tidak formal dengan mereka yang terlibat dengan isu-isu migran. Gabungan temuramah, pemerhatian dan perbincangan kumpulan telah digunakan untuk mengumpulkan maklumat.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa globalisasi telah meningkatkan lagi penghijrahan pekerja Filipina, terutamanya wanita, merentasi negara-negara di mana terdapat pekerjaan domestik dan menjadikan wanita lebih menonjol di dalam pembahagian antarabangsa tenaga reproduktif sosial. Penonjolan ini dilihat dari segi kewujudan fizikal mereka, tetapi tidak dilihat dari segi peningkatan pendaya upayaan mereka sebagai pelaku sosial dalam migrasi. Kecenderungan wanita Filipina untuk berhijrah adalah berdasarkan gender dan ini tercermin pada kedudukan subordinat mereka di dalam masyarakat Filipina. Kajian ini turut menunjukkan bahawa pekerja domestik wanita adalah tanpa kuasa sejak dari permulaan proses migrasi, apabila mereka memulakan kerja domestik mereka di Malaysia, sehinggalah mereka kembali ke negara asal. Keadaan ketiadaan-kuasa yang wujud pada peringkat perhubungan antara majikan dan masyarakat keseluruhannya menjadi bertambah buruk kerana hakikatnya mereka adalah pekerja domestik asing. Keadaan ketiadaan-kuasa ini juga menjadikan mereka sedar akan tentangan yang telah menjadi cara hidup



pekerja, dan dengan itu menggunakan strategi-strategi dan taktik-taktik untuk mengatasi apa juga masalah peribadi dan yang berkaitan dengan pekerjaan.

Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa pekerja domestik Filipina sedar akan pelbagai keadaan ketiadaan-kuasa yang mereka alami melalui jaringan sosial mereka, sehinggakan bentuk tentangan harian tidak berkembang secara bersendirian, tetapi dikongsi secara kolektif oleh jaringan sosial. Corak tentangan adalah tindakbalas ke atas eksploitasi serta perlakuan kasar dan ia tidak menonjolkan cara transformatif untuk mengekang ketiadaan-kuasa; walaupun, pada masa yang sama, keadaan ini mungkin akan memberdayakan mereka. Seringkali, bentuk tentangan harian akan meningkat dan memperkukuhkan ketiadaan-kuasa di kalangan pekerja tersebut. Perlindungan sah untuk pekerja domestik asing seharusnya menjadi perhatian kerajaan Malaysia bagi melindungi kepentingan semua pihak berkaitan.



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- Figure 1. Diagram showing the link between domestic work, powerlessness and resistance in transmigration

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DOLE	-	Department of Labour and Employment (Philippines)
FSC	-	Filipina Service Committee
FSS	-	Filipino Services Secretariat
FWRC	-	Filipino Workers' Resource Center
IC	-	Identification Card
KL	-	Kuala Lumpur
LO	-	Labour Office (at the Embassy of the Philippines)
NOHD	-	National Office for Human Development
OWWA	-	Overseas Workers Welfare Administration
PDOS	-	Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar
POEA	-	Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
SFX	-	St. Francis Xavier
STP	-	Skills Training Programme



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

Transmigration of labour, i.e. crossing national borders, is a historical phenomenon that has drawn public attention in recent times. The International Labor Organisation (ILO) reveals that in 1995, between six and seven million Asians were working abroad, with some two million leaving their countries legally each year (as cited in Jones, 2000). The unprecedented exodus of peoples from different countries to a host country for various reasons creates a new dimension in the migration literature as opposed to looking at migration within the national border. Within the framework of a capitalist economy, transmigration of labour is not without a cause, which means it is very much reflected in the way economic policies are shaped, processed and tailored for the production of goods for profit for the global market (Battistella, 1995; Chin, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2001). Saskia Sassen (1993) asserts that migrations, in general, are produced and patterned, and are embedded in specific historical phases. Since globalisation and industrialisation of economies have facilitated the people's movement, the exodus of peoples crossing international borders has also intensified. Ulf Hannerz also asserts that, "the contemporary work of globalisation involves the globalisation of work" (as cited in Parreñas, 2001:9).



Malaysia is home to migrants since time immemorial. As mentioned above, the movement into Malaysia is predesigned by economic as well as political forces. To put it concretely, during the British rule, Indian workers were recruited as indentured labourers to work in plantations while the influx of Chinese labourers was to provide labour in the tin industry (Gullick, 1958; Dorall, 1989). On the other hand, the local Malay population took care of the agricultural or padi sector of the economy. As Malaysia progressed and developed its economy towards exportation, newer policies (e.g. National Economic Plan) were implemented, among others, to respond to the changing conditions of the country. The implementation of the National Economic Plan (NEP) in the 1970s, and the different economic blueprints thereafter, saw the emergence of an industrialising country (Dorall, 1989; Heyzer and Lycklama, 1989) destined to pursue an export-led economy to advance Malaysia into the global market (Chin, 1998). The industrialisation programme has created employment market for both men and women, thus, increasing the labour-force participation of the women sector. In Lin Lean Lim's (1996) study, rapid migration transition in Malaysia is clearly linked to rapid economic progress and, it further states,

For the period 1987-1993, Malaysia's GDP (at 1978 constant prices) grew at an average annual rate of 8.8%, as compared to 4.4% for the 1980-86 period. It is also interesting to note that Malaysia went through its transition when its GNP per capita was only about US\$1800 (since 1987, however, GNP per capita has risen rapidly to US\$3,140 by 1993).



The rapid industrialisation strategy adopted by the Mahathir government has created employment opportunities for both men and women; in effect, giving women who, once remained unwaged for some reasons, were now engaged in productive work outside the domestic front. Positively, industrialisation ushers in the participation of untapped women labour in the economy thereby forging visibility of Malaysian women in the country's economy. On the other hand, middle class women's participation in waged work has left a vacuum in the domestic front – the place Malaysian women once occupied. What happens next is Malaysia's pressing need to address the problem of who will replace the domestic responsibilities that are supposedly handled by women. It is interesting to note that the Mahathir government needs to maintain the "image" of a "caring family" as part of the vision of the current establishment, at the same time acknowledges that there is a need to recruit women from other countries to work in Malaysian households. Malaysia opens its doors to bring in foreign domestic workers from the less industrialised neighbouring countries of Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

Within the international labour migration circle, it is argued that the process is exploitative and oppressive, especially on paid domestic work, with arrangements more characteristic of slavery, feudalism and despotic control (Glenn, 1986; Parreñas, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001:169). Manifestations of oppression start right from the highest international mandate to contract foreign labour to the nation/state policies on immigration; the recruitment procedures and the role of

