Geographica 12
Patricia Yocie Hierofani

“How dare you talk back?!"

Spatialised Power Practices in the Case of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Malaysia
Dissertation presented at Uppsala University to be publicly examined in Hörsal 2, Ekonomikum, Kyrkogårdsgratan 10, Uppsala, Friday, 9 December 2016 at 13:00 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The examination will be conducted in English. Faculty examiner: Professor Linda McDowell (University of Oxford, School of Geography and the Environment).

Abstract

By taking the experiences and narratives of Indonesian women in Malaysia as the empirical material, this dissertation offers an analysis on spatialised power practices in the context of paid domestic workers. Family survival prompts these women to work abroad, but patriarchal norms shift their economic contribution as supplementary to the men’s role as the breadwinner. The interviews reveal that these women chose Malaysia as their destination country after having listened to oral stories, but despite the transnational mobility involved in their decisions, they are rendered immobile in the employers’ house.

Furthermore, the analysis shows an intricate ensemble of power relations in which gender, class and nationality/ethnicity interact with each other, inform and reproduce spatialised domination and labour exploitation practices by the employers. Immigration status of the workers, meanwhile, puts them in a subordinated position in relation to the employers, citizens of the host country. Without the recognition from the state on this particular form of embodied labour, the employers are responsible for defining the working conditions of the workers, leading to precarious conditions.

Findings on several resistance practices by the workers complete the analysis of power practices, where resistance is treated as an entangled part of power. Contributing to the study of gendered geographies of exploitation, the study identifies the home and the body as the main levels of analysis; meanwhile, practices at the national level by the state, media and recruitment/placement agencies and globalisation processes are identified as interrelated factors that legitimate the employers’ practices of exploitation.

Finally, the dissertation contributes to feminist geography analysis on gender, space, and power through South-South migration empirics.

Keywords: feminist geography, paid domestic work, Indonesia, Malaysia, gender, migration, space, power, resistance, intersectionality

Patricia Yocie Hierofani, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Box 513, Uppsala University, SE-75120 Uppsala, Sweden.

© Patricia Yocie Hierofani 2016

ISSN 0431-2023
urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-305651 (http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-305651)

Cover illustration by Peter Jacobsen
This preface was one of the hardest part to write. I sat in front of the laptop for almost an hour, just staring to the blank page as my mind recalled the winding path in the research process. It was a tough research to do, and I could not count how many people suggested me to quit on numerous occasions on account of the stress I experienced. Precarious work situation faced by these women domestics was an emotionally exhaustive topic. At the same time, I felt so close to the topic in many different ways, from a personal concern about the situation of domestic workers, to a recognition of the difficulties as part of a migration process, being a migrant myself. The concern on migrant domestic workers originated from a previous work experience at the Indonesian National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan), where I learned about the human rights abuses experienced by Indonesian domestics. It motivated me to bring up their experiences in the academic discourses, both through the Master’s thesis and now the Doctoral dissertation.

This dissertation would not be possible without migrant domestic workers who were willing to share their experiences to me. I am extremely grateful for that. I am also indebted to mbak Tati Krisnawaty for the mentoring when I was in Komnas Perempuan and for facilitating the fieldwork in Karawang. Thank you, mbak Tati and Paul, for the friendship and for welcoming me in your house. Terima kasih juga untuk mbak Dewi dan Fitri yang telah mencarikan kontak mantan TKW Malaysia di Karawang dan menemani wawancara—sekaligus menerjemahkan bahasa Sunda ke bahasa Indonesia sewaktu wawancara. I am grateful to Shazana for making the fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur less terrifying with the presence of a friendly face. Thank you to Susanna George for helping me to find contacts in Kuala Lumpur. This dissertation benefits from insightful discussions on its initial stage with Maria Platt (Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore), Diana Wong (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), Shanti Thambiah (University of Malaya) and Sharuna Verghis—thank you! I am also grateful for the funding from the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG), through Vega Fund and SSAG Fund,
which allows me to carry out the fieldworks in Indonesia and Malaysia and to attend an international conference to present the results.

I cannot say thank you enough to the two wonderful supervisors, Aida Aragao-Lagergren and Irene Molina, for their continuous support. I always felt inspired every time we had a supervision meeting—from the brilliant suggestions in analysing the materials, to lifting up the spirit and making me believe in myself again whenever I doubted the work. I truly appreciate it.

Thank you to Brett Christopher, Rhiannon Pugh and Susanne Stenbacka as members of the reading group for showing interests on my work and for your invaluable comments on the final manuscript. For Ann Rodenstedt, Taylor Brydges, Su-Hyun Berg, Marat Murzabekov, Anna-Klara Lindeborg, Sofia Cele, Ann Grubström, Tsegaye Tegenu, David Jansson, Johan Jansson, Danielle van der Burgt and Brian Hraes, thank you for your inputs through Doctoral Forum or discussions during fika breaks. The inputs help shaping the manuscript along the way.

I would like to thank all colleagues at the Department of Social and Economic Geography, especially the wonderful group of fellow PhD students. Thank you, John Guy Perrem, for starting the PhD, being an amazing officemate for three years, and now going through the last PhD phase together. I would like to thank Tina Mathisen, Gabriella Hinchcliffe and Karin Backvall as the original PhD batch starting the adventure with me; Chiara Valli, Sara Forsberg, Andreas Alm Fjellborg, and Kati Kadrik, for all the fika, lunches and happy hours over the years; Sofia Joose for the interesting discussions through Dutch colonialism; and Julia De Gregario for being a great officemate in the last year. Thank you also to Pamela Tipmanoworn and Lena Dahlborg for being always patient in helping me with the administrative stuffs. Special thank you for Taylor Brydges and Rhiannon Pugh for keeping me sane, especially during the hectic times in the last 1.5 years!

Outside the Department, but still within the professional contexts: Thank you to mbak Kamala Chandrakirana for the friendship and support along the way. Thank you to ibu Sjamsiah Achmad who introduced me to migrant domestic workers’ issues in the first place through Komnas Perempuan, and who encouraged me to pursue further studies in Sweden. Thank you to Anders Uhlin, Nicola Piper and Stefan Rother for the support on different stages of the Doctoral study. I truly appreciate the wonderful support from my family. Terima kasih banyak untuk Papa, Mama dan Giovanni! Aku bisa mencapai S3 ini karena doa, impian, harapan dan dukungan dari Papa dan Mama. Terima kasih, Gio, atas sharing-nya, via whatsapp maupun obrolan.
larut malam sewaktu di Jakarta. Björn Jacobsen, I feel thank you is not enough to express how grateful I am of your support throughout the PhD. Thank you for your patience in hearing me out as I sorted out the chaotic analytical thoughts, for enlightening discussions on theories (and life!), for picking me up when I felt my work was insignificant, and for being such a wonderful life companion! Thank you for the new family in Sweden—Ellen Gustafsson for your interest and support on the work and for useful tips on dealing with the stress, and all the Jacobsens for always welcoming me in the annual summer gathering even when I had to bring work because I simply would not want to miss the fun!

I am particularly grateful to my father-in-law, Peter Jacobsen, for developing the idea for the cover together and making such a fantastic drawing on the cover. It is a powerful illustration which represents the topic of the dissertation well through various symbols of gender, class, control and resistance. I and the artist hope that the picture is inspiring as an introduction to follow the stories of migrant domestic workers in experiencing domination and exploitation practices and in resisting these practices.

Silverstaden, October 2016
List of terms in Indonesian/Malay language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emak</td>
<td>Mother (Indonesian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibu/Bu</td>
<td>A formal way to address an older woman, a married woman, or a mother (Indonesian); similar to Mrs in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakak</td>
<td>A way to address a slightly older woman, or an older sister (Indonesian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maghrib</td>
<td>One of the five praying times in Islam, at sunset, around 6 p.m. (Indonesian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyonya</td>
<td>A deferent way to address an older woman (Indonesian/Malay); similar to Madam in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puan</td>
<td>A deferent way to address an older woman (Malay); similar to Madam in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasbih</td>
<td>Beads on a rope, to be used for praying in Islam (Indonesian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuan</td>
<td>A deferent way to address an older man (Indonesian/Malay); similar to Master/Sir in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ya-sin</td>
<td>One of the chapters in Quran</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Contents

Preface ......................................................................................................................... 5

List of terms in Indonesian/Malay language .............................................................. 9

I. The home as a space of domination/resistance: An introduction ................................................................. 15
   Research focus ........................................................................................................... 18
   Outline of the dissertation ....................................................................................... 20

II. Conditioning Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia: The state, media and agencies ................................................................. 21
   Lack of recognition by the state ............................................................................... 22
   Fragmented realities by the media ........................................................................... 26
   Commodification by placement agencies ................................................................. 28
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 30

III. The multiple faces of paid domestic work – theoretical and conceptual frameworks ................................................................................................. 32
   (Paid) domestic work ................................................................................................. 34
   Defining domestic work ............................................................................................ 34
   Deferece in domestic work ....................................................................................... 36
   Spatiality of domestic work ...................................................................................... 38
   Intersectionality for analysing domestic work ........................................................... 39
   Power relations in the context of domestic work ....................................................... 41
      “There exists no single power, but several powers” .............................................. 41
      Exploring domination and exploitation power ..................................................... 43
      Resistance as entangled with domination ............................................................... 52
   Paid domestic work in the globalisation context ....................................................... 59
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 62

IV. Carrying out feminist research .................................................................................. 63
   Reflexivity: “Who speaks with whom?” ...................................................................... 64
   Qualitative methods: the first “how” question ........................................................... 68
      Visiting the field ...................................................................................................... 68
      Interviews and group interviews ............................................................................ 69
      Observation ............................................................................................................. 73
      Media monitoring and document study ................................................................. 74
Analysing and presenting the narratives: the second “how” question ................................................................................................. 75
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 76

V. Migration at the nexus of family survival, patriarchy and geographical imagination ................................................................. 78
Family survival in the face of patriarchy ........................................ 78
Geographical imagination: why Malaysia? .................................. 84
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 87

VI. Spatialised domination practices by employers in constructing deference ................................................................................. 89
Disciplining the gendered ‘Other’ ...................................................... 90
Immobility and isolation in the home of the employers ............. 97
Surveillance to create self-discipline ............................................... 105
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 112

VII. Spatialised techniques of labour exploitation by employers .......................................................... 113
Exhaustion of labour ........................................................................... 113
“Part of the family”: an example of maternalism ...................... 122
When the employer is a man: a paternalism technique ............ 130
Heaping blame on undocumented migrant domestic workers ... 134
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 138

VIII. An entangled part of power: spatialised resistance and accommodation ................................................................................... 140
The exceptional story of Ita: open resistance .............................. 141
Running away as a spatialised resistance ........................................ 144
Spatial resistance to immobility and isolation .............................. 148
Accommodation as deferential performativity ............................. 151
Space of respite ...................................................................................... 154
Other forms of resistance ................................................................. 155
Collective mobilisation by civil society .......................................... 155
Working as live-out workers and working outside the legal system ................................................................. 157
Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 160

IX. Paid domestic work and a geography of exploitation ............ 161
A geography of exploitation in paid domestic work: the interrelated power practices ................................................................. 162
The home as a place of undervalued financial remuneration and unequal social relations ................................................................. 165
Vulnerable body: migrating body, working body, resisting body ................................................................................................. 168
Migrant domestic workers in the eyes of the host state .......... 171
The “female underside of globalisation” ............................... 173
Conclusion .......................................................................... 176

X. Dominated workers, resisting workers: conclusions ........ 177
Reproduction and contestation of power inequality .......... 177
The geography of exploitation in paid domestic work ...... 181
Enriching the conceptualisation of space and power .......... 183
  Contributions on space ..................................................... 183
  Spatialising power ............................................................ 185
Looking into the future ....................................................... 186

Appendix: details of the interviewees ................................. 188
  Migrant domestic workers ................................................ 188
  Employers ........................................................................ 191
  Other informants ............................................................... 191

Bibliography ........................................................................... 193
I. The home as a space of domination/resistance: An introduction

Well, that’s what happens if living together. Sometimes [the employer] is fussy, sometimes not. Sometimes [the employer] is checking the work carefully, sometimes not. So [the employer] does not check the work every day. Sometimes, maybe when [the employer] has something in mind, if [the employer] sees the work is not done correctly, she can get angry. [The employer] may not check the work every day, whether it is clean or not. But sometimes when something occupies her mind, well, we receive the consequences, she checks whether we really clean the stuffs or not. (Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

The citation above is an introduction to understanding the spatialised unequal power relations in the case of Indonesian women domestic workers and their Malaysian employers, which is the central topic of this dissertation. Although unequal power relations are inevitable in most employer-employee relations, they are particularly problematic in this form of embodied work due to the spatiality of the workplace.

Every day Indonesian women from rural areas migrate to richer countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia, as a means of surviving the pressure of poverty in their villages. Despite this transnational mobility, these women experience immobility once they enter the home of their employers. The home of the employers becomes both their workplace and their living place as they dedicate their embodied labour to the employers and their family. At the same time, the home is still the embodied living space of the employers and their family. The lack of recognition from the state of this form of work leaves the employers with the power to determine the working conditions, while the home itself is excluded from the kind of labour regulation and monitoring that are commonly found in other workplaces. This results in precarious working conditions like the one described in the quotation above: sometimes the

\[^{1}\text{I intentionally use the term “woman domestic worker”, “woman employer” and “man employer”—rather than “female domestic worker”, “female employer” and “male employer”—as a way to emphasise the gendered identity.}\]
employer does not check the work, while at other times the worker suffers the consequences if the employer is in a bad mood. At the same time, the immobility in the home limits the forms of resistance available for these workers to improve their working conditions.

This dissertation analyses spatialised power relations in paid domestic work. The precarious working conditions per se are not the focus of the study since previous studies have shown evidence of precariousness (for example, see Sargeant, 2014; Fudge, 2012a; Standing, 2011; Dyer, McDowell and Batnitzky, 2011). Instead, this study focuses on the spatialised power practices which reinforce the precarious conditions in paid domestic work. This research investigates spatialised domination and exploitation practices by employers, spatialised resistance practices by workers as an entangled part of power, and the way these home and bodily practices are related to structural power relations at national and global levels. In discussing these practices, however, the precarity of these women is inevitably an integral part of the analysis.

The quote “How dare you talk back?!” used in the title represents the power relations between an employer and a domestic worker. It is a common response from an employer when a worker challenges the exercise of power by the employer, as will be shared by one of the workers participating in this study. From the stories of migrant domestic workers later, we will see how the employers exercise power and reinforce the unequal power positions while at the same time diminishes the resistance of the worker.

Nelson and Seager (2005: 7) suggest that one of the most important contributions of feminist geographers to feminist theory is our analysis of the embeddedness of multiple oppressions in material and symbolic space and place. A study of spatialised power relations in paid domestic work offers precisely such an analysis because it investigates the structural power inequality as embedded in the home (as the workplace) and the body (as the source of labour). The workplace is still the private space of the employers. The workers serve the employers and their family with bodily and emotional labour; an intimate labour which is traditionally provided through family ties. The proximity to each other’s bodies in the limited space of the home exposes the workers to the habits and lifestyles of the employers, while at the same time rendering their bodies vulnerable to the employers’ power.

Employing a domestic worker is not only a matter of acquiring their services for care and domestic work. It is also a status symbol. While, during colonial times, slaves were brought in to do domestic work, migrants now perform this work. Domestic work is always
filled in by the “inferior Other”, whether those of a lower class or of a marginalised racial background. As McDowell argues,

"Paid domestic work within the home not only challenges the socially accepted meaning of the home and its association with the private and the familial, but also makes plain the complex intersections of domesticity, class position and racial difference that distinguish women and create divisions between them. (McDowell, 1999: 83)"

The employment of migrant domestic workers from poorer countries, such as Indonesia, to serve employers in richer countries, such as Malaysia, therefore involves a politics of gender, "race"/ethnicity and class. In the home, structural inequality based on gender, class and "race"/ethnicity is reproduced and thus positions an employer and a domestic worker differently in terms of power relations. The fact that the employer is a citizen of the host country while the worker is an immigrant also puts the two in an unequal position in the eyes of the law (Anderson, 2000: 193). A domestic worker is in an even more vulnerable position if she does not have the immigration document required to enter the host country or the work permit to allow her to take up paid employment.

By taking the experiences of Indonesian women in Malaysia as the empirical focus, this dissertation examines the issue from a South-South migration context. Most studies of migrant domestic workers argue that racial differences play an important part in the work relations – whether the worker is used as a status symbol which differentiates the superior position of the woman employer from the worker based on their respective “race”, or to create racial hierarchy among migrants (see for example Rollins, 1985; Stiell and England, 1997; Pratt, 1997). In the case of Indonesian women in Malaysia, this argument about racial differences is challenged because both Indonesia and Malaysia are situated in the global South with similar racial appearances and cultural backgrounds. In this empirical context when the workers are often of the same Asian “race” as the employers, i.e. Malay, racial differences are less visible, but they interlace with nationality/ethnicity and reproduce racial relationships similar to those in colonial relationships. At the same time, the argument of language and cultural similarity which is often stated as the reason that Indonesian migrant domestic workers are highly sought after in Malaysia is also challenged in this dissertation.
Research focus

As mentioned earlier, the focus of this research is spatialised power relations between Indonesian migrant domestic workers and their Malaysian employers. While there is a recently increasing trend for Indonesian women to be employed part-time by cleaning service agencies, domestic workers in this study come to Malaysia through individual employment contracts. Some of them come to Malaysia through a recruitment/placement agency, but their contract and work permit are directly tied to one employer. These domestic workers do their job and live in a very specific place – the home of the employers – and thus share the same living place as their employers. With such proximity to each other, the employers enforce control and discipline not only to ensure the efficiency of the workers in doing their job, but also often in a manner that is extended to their body, behaviour, habits and emotions to create deference. On the other hand, migrant domestic workers also contest and resist domination and exploitative practices from their employers, although their resistance practices are limited due to the spatiality of their workplace.

This study explores these different spatialised practices of power relations, from domination and exploitation to resistance. The home and the body are the main levels of analysis, but they are positioned in relation to the structural powers at the national and global levels; the migration of these women is after all a result of structural economic and gender inequalities.

The main question guiding this study is as follows: in the employment of Indonesian women as domestic workers in Malaysia, how do spatial power relations determine the work relations between the workers and the employers? To answer this major question, an exploration of the following sub-questions is required:

- What kind of spatialised exercises of power by the employers can be identified in the context of paid domestic work?
- What kind of spatialised resistance practices by the workers can be identified to contest the exercise of power by the employers?
- How do the intersections of gender, nationality/ethnicity, class and immigration status inform these power practices?
- In which way are the analyses of paid domestic work on the home and body levels interrelated with the analyses on the national and global levels?
With this research, the study aims to contribute to the global literature on migrant domestic workers through the empirical data on the experiences of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia. The study not only highlights voices from outside Anglophone countries, but also provides unique empirical data on the South-South migration.

The study also aims to contribute to the theoretical discussions in feminist geography and post-colonial literature, particularly feminist Foucauldian analyses on gender, space and power. One of the strengths of this research is the intersections of different social categories such as gender, “race”/ethnicity, class and immigration status in influencing the power relations between these Indonesian women and their employers. While feminist analyses on gender and power are flourishing in feminist geography literature, this study offers a feminist intersectional analysis of power relations in the context of paid domestic work. By presenting resistance practices as entangled with domination and exploitation practices in paid domestic work, this study also contributes to feminist Foucauldian theoretical discussions on the spatiality of power.

Lastly, with this study I also hope to contribute to the political commitment to improve the position of migrant domestic workers by bringing up the power practices in the context of paid domestic work. Without social protection or recognition of their work, women migrant domestic workers are among the most vulnerable group as a result of their gender, class, immigration status and the particular spatialised embodied work they do. It is easy to dismiss their work as women’s “natural” skills, carried out in a private space, the home. However, this viewpoint ignores the fact that these women contribute to the economic productivity of the host country through their services, as well as to the welfare of their family through the remittances they send. By relating the analysis of the power practices on the home and body levels to the national and global levels, this study aims to identify the various power subjects involved in this labour migration process to contribute to the improvement of the situation. As Nelson and Seager (2005) suggest,

Feminism is defined by explicit political commitments (against oppressions, or to making visible the workings of social power), and feminist geography is unapologetically marked by this agenda. (p. 6)
Outline of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters. Following this introductory chapter (Chapter I), Chapter II explores the role of the host state, media and placement agencies in Malaysia in conditioning the work relations between Indonesian migrant domestic workers and their employers. The chapter also serves as a contextualisation chapter to provide a background on the overall situation of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. Chapter III and IV respectively elaborate the theoretical frameworks which guide the analysis and the feminist methodology and qualitative methods used in collecting and analysing the empirical data.

Chapters V-VIII are the main empirical chapters, which present the narratives of these women. An investigation into the reasons for migration reveals a geographical imagination which motivates these women to choose Malaysia as a desirable destination country for work migration (Chapter V). Chapter VI discusses the spatialised domination practices by the employers which target the body, habits, behaviour and emotions of the workers to create deference. Here we will see the construction of the body of the workers as a subjected body. Chapter VII discusses various spatialised exploitation practices in which the body of the worker is treated as a productive body. Chapter VIII presents the stories of migrant domestic workers in contesting and resisting the dominating and exploiting power of the employers. This chapter should be seen as interwoven with the previous two chapters on the power practices utilised by the employers, due to the Foucauldian theoretical framework used in this study, in which power is to be seen as entangled with resistance.

Chapter IX redirects the analysis of the empirical data to the theoretical frameworks as a way to relate these home and bodily practices with the structural power practices on the national and global levels. Lastly, Chapter X is the concluding chapter, in which the main findings, arguments and contributions of the study are revisited and a few suggestions about possible research developments are included.
II. Conditioning Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia: The state, media and agencies

The migration of workers of ethnic Malay background from Indonesia to Malaysia can be traced back to the British colonial period (Widyawati, 2008; Anggraeni, 2006; Chin, 2003). In the 19th century Malaysian autocrats used the migration of Indonesians to Malaysia as a demographic buffer against the British policy of importing Chinese and Indian labour, and it is still used politically to maintain the numerical superiority of the ethnic Malay population over the Chinese and Indian communities in the country (Widyawati, 2008). The politics of “race” become important in post-colonial Malaysia, with the Malay majority often clashing with ethnic Chinese and Indians – the other big ethnic groups – in the struggle of power. The similarity of ethnicity between Malay Indonesians and Malay Malaysians is often used as the basis for the importing of migrants from Indonesia. The difference between migration policy during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Malaysia is that, during the latter, the state consistently prevents migrants from settling permanently in the country (Chin, 2003: 58).

The growing economy in Malaysia from the 1960s onwards caused labour shortages in the plantation, construction and manufacturing sectors, including in domestic work since greater numbers of women were participating in the labour market. In 1985 Malaysia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Philippines to bring domestic workers into Malaysia. This was later followed by similar arrangements with other neighbouring countries, including Indonesia. While Indonesian men are mostly employed in the plantation and construction sectors, Indonesian women work in the domestic or services sectors.

Assumptions about ethnic similarity – and thus language and cultural practices – cause Indonesian workers to be widely sought after in Malaysia. However, the stories from migrant domestic workers later in this work will challenge these assumptions (see Chapter VI).
There are no definite data on the number of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia; the number itself also fluctuates according to changes in the economic situation of the two countries and political relations between the two. As an estimate, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Indonesia calculated that Indonesian workers constitute 1,215,000 out of 1,849,600 migrant workers in Malaysia in 2006, and about 24% of that number are domestic workers; the number did not include undocumented migrant labour which was estimated to amount to at least 700,000 workers (IOM, 2010).

The state, media and recruitment/placement agencies are identified as major actors in the labour migration process at the national level; for this study, the focus is more on the host state (Malaysia), rather than the migrants’ origin state (Indonesia). In this chapter, we will see the roles of these major actors in conditioning the work relations between employers and migrant domestic workers.

Lack of recognition by the state

Malaysian policy on labour migration changes over time, depending on the needs, concerns and interests of various national actors. One noticeable feature of the policy, however, is the repeated cycle of opening and curbing entry for migrants (Pillai, 1999: 184), which allows the market to recruit the necessary labour and to shift to another labour source when problems escalate. This dynamic is no exception in the case of migrant domestic workers.

Civil society activists who were interviewed in this study criticised the absence of a comprehensive migration policy, particularly on migrant domestic workers (interview with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014; Al-Rashid, CARAM Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 9 October 2013). The Ministry of Home Affairs, under which the Immigration Department is situated, is responsible for the immigration-related policy, including processing work permits and visas. The Ministry of Human Resources oversees the implementation of labour law and policies. The Foreign Workers’ Medical Examination Monitoring Agency (FOMEMA), meanwhile, is responsible for the mandatory medical checks of migrant domestic workers.

The Employment Act 1955\(^2\) refers to the domestic worker as a domestic servant, rather than a worker. It defines a domestic servant as

---

“a person employed in connection with the work of a private dwelling-house and not in connection with any trade, business, or profession carried on by the employer in such dwelling-house and includes a cook, house-servant, butler, child’s nurse, valet, footman, gardener, washerman or washerwoman, watchman, groom and driver or cleaner of any vehicle licensed for private use” (source: Employment Act of Malaysia, 1955). “Foreign domestic servant” is the term used in law to refer to “a domestic servant who is not a citizen or a permanent resident” (source: Employment Act of Malaysia, 1955).

By referring to domestic workers as servants, the law excludes domestic workers from most of its stipulations. Other than medical expenses, which fall under the responsibility of the employers, migrant domestic workers do not receive any social security coverage, including holiday/annual leave or overtime, during their employment in Malaysia.

With the exclusion of migrant domestic workers from most stipulations in the labour law and the absence of a comprehensive policy, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which is signed with each country from which migrants originate is the only “standard” for the employment of migrant domestic workers and therefore creates varying work standards between migrant domestic workers of different nationalities. The MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia on Indonesian domestic workers was signed in 2006, and recently reviewed in 2011. However, the MOU deals mostly with the recruitment and placement of Indonesian domestic workers, rather than providing the necessary standard of working conditions.

The MOU states that a potential Indonesian domestic worker should be between 21 and 45 years old, have sufficient knowledge of the laws, culture and social practices in Malaysia, good communication skill in the Malay language and/or English, should have fulfilled the immigration procedures, have been certified fit by the related authorities and must not have any criminal record. The employer is responsible for the safekeeping of the domestic worker’s passport, and for giving the passport to the Indonesian Embassy/Consul if the worker has absconded or passed away. According to the MOU and the standard contract, no family member or other person is allowed to stay with the domestic worker in the workplace without permission from their employer.

While the Immigration Act 1959 does not specifically regulate migrant labour, the regulation issued by the Immigration Department specifies the requirements for employing migrant domestic workers, or Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDH) to use their term. A potential worker should be “female”, between 21 and 45 years old, confirmed fit by an appointed medical centre and should reside in one of the approved source countries (Immigration Department website, 2016). The approved countries are Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam and Laos. In order to employ a “helper”, the employer should prove that he and his spouse have children under 15 years old or sick parents. In addition to care work, the employer should “make sure that the FDH is assigned to domestic chores (not including car wash)” (Immigration Department website, 2016).

Migrant domestic workers are given temporary visas and work permits which need to be renewed annually. The work permit is tied to one employer. Although the contract is usually for two years, migrant domestic workers may be employed for longer period because the work permit can be renewed indefinitely. They, however, are not eligible to apply for permanent residency or citizenship. Until 2013, it was legal and recommended for the employer to retain the passport of the worker, and this is still a common practice now. The MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia allows such practices as were mentioned earlier. The employer is responsible for reporting to the Immigration Department if the “helper” is deceased, missing or has absconded from the workplace. The employer is also responsible “for the conduct and discipline of the FDH while she is in Malaysia” (Immigration Department website, 2016).

A migrant domestic worker is not allowed to migrate with nor reunite with her family in Malaysia. The employer is also responsible for making sure that the worker does not marry while in Malaysia. In addition to the medical upon entering Malaysia, a migrant domestic worker is required to go through an annual medical examination during the first three years of their stay in Malaysia. Those who are certified unfit in the medical examination, including those found positive for sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, or who are pregnant, are subject to deportation.

---


5 Here I keep the term “female” because it is the original word used by the regulation, but I add quotation marks on the word to suggest the discursive nature of the term.
These regulations limit – and construct – what kind of migrants are to be employed as domestic workers. The ideal image is a single (no family attachment) “female” migrant from a poorer country in her healthy (re)productive years who will stay in the country temporarily (permanently) to do (gendered) care and domestic work.

The requirement that the potential domestic worker should be women sends a clear message that care and domestic work continue to be highly gendered tasks; an extension of woman’s motherhood duty as a citizen (see Anderson, 2000: Chapter 10). The care and domestic work these women support the reproduction of the employers and their family; however, migrant domestic workers are denied their own reproduction. The age requirement of a potential domestic worker and the restriction on getting married or reuniting with her family member in the host country ignore the sexuality and reproduction of migrant domestic workers. Requirements such as compulsory medical checks and denial of reproduction indicate the power of the state over the bodily integrity of migrant domestic workers. The list of approved migrant origin countries also reflects the structural economic inequality and dependency within the region, the global South. These migrant origin countries are generally poorer, have high labour supplies and lower employment opportunities.

At the same time, the state transfers most of the responsibility to the employers to define the working conditions, from allocating domestic chores and disciplining the workers to paying for medical expenses. Since the visa and work permit of migrant domestic workers are tied to the employers, it puts migrant domestic workers in a vulnerable position and prevents them from seeking help against abusive employers, including seeking better employment. In the case of violence against migrant domestic workers, the courts often side with employers and agents (IOM, 2010: 47).

Without a comprehensive policy to regulate the working conditions of migrant domestic workers, the state takes ad hoc measures to deal with each crisis, particularly when dealing with high numbers of undocumented migrants in the country (Piper, 2006). Migrant origin countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia, have each banned their citizens from migrating to Malaysia whenever cases of abuse of migrant domestic workers have escalated. In 2004, a severe case of the abuse of an Indonesian migrant domestic worker triggered angry responses from the public, leading to a temporary ban on the migration of Indonesian domestics to Malaysia. In 2009, another ban was issued by the Indonesian government, which lasted for two years and ended after a review of the MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia.
was signed. Rather than dealing with such demands, Malaysia often looks for alternative sources of migrant labour. In the case of 2009 ban by Indonesia, Malaysia embarked upon an agreement with Cambodia; however, due to high numbers of cases of abuse of their citizens, the Cambodian government also issued a ban in 2012.

The state also fragments the public support for migrant workers by “delimiting what can be considered legitimate space for Malaysian NGO advocacy on migrant labour rights” (Chin, 2003: 51). Migrant domestic workers are prohibited from forming a labour union, participating in a labour union or taking a collective action. Any public action by migrant domestic workers may lead to deportation. At the same time, politics in Malaysia also shows a mix of democratic procedures and authoritarian practices, because the state systematically limits the political space of civil society (Uhlin, 2002). The 13-year trial of Irene Fernandez, the founder of Tenaganita, one of the most prominent civil society organisations advocating women migrant’s rights, is an example of the curbing of civil society activism by the state. Irene Fernandez was accused of maliciously publishing false news by the state after her organisation published a report on the extreme situation of migrant detention centres in 1995. We will see a few other examples of civil society advocacy on migrant domestic workers at the end of Chapter XIII.

### Fragmented realities by the media

News stories about migrant domestic workers in Malaysia are dominated by abuse of or violence committed against migrant domestic workers, crimes committed by migrant domestic workers, absconding migrant domestic workers and in the last few years the shortage of migrant domestic workers (e.g. Anbalagan, “Cops investigating if Indonesian maid raped by employer”, *The Star Online*, 5 June 2014; Phung, “Video of woman abusing baby goes viral on social media”, *The Sun Daily*, 18 May 2015; Shahrudin, “Abducted girl found safe and sound, Indonesian maid arrested”, *New Straits Times Online*, 20 April 2016; “18,800 maids fled Malaysia last year”, *New Strait Times Online*, 22 June 2011; “We have to look elsewhere”, *New Straits Times Online*, 26 October 2014). A study of major Malaysian newspapers by Widyawati (2008) also finds that Indonesian women migrant domestic workers are often represented as either victims of violence or perpetrators of violence or crime.
When reporting the abuse, the media usually give meticulous details about the abuse experienced by migrant domestic workers (see, for example, Jayamanogaran, “Abused maid recounts eight months in torture ‘chamber’”, Malay Mail Online, 24 December 2014). The media often report the reasons given by the employers for abusing the workers (see, for example, Mageswari, “Former Indonesian maid was found sleeping naked in guest room, court told”, The Star Online, 24 February 2014). The study by Widyawati (2008) finds that one of the reasons commonly constructed in the media is that the employers are not satisfied with the quality of work of the domestic workers (Widyawati, 2008). By providing the reasons for the abuse, the media shift the attention of the public from the abuse of migrant domestic workers to the seemingly logical reasoning of the employers for abusing the workers. By justifying the reasons why the employers abuse the workers, the media take part in “heaping blame” (Ås, 2004) on the victims – implying that the workers themselves bring on the abuse.

Furthermore, the media often provide only a fragmented reality of the abuse – for instance limiting it to physical abuse – while in reality migrant domestic workers experience multiple violations simultaneously. What is seen as physical abuse is usually only the tip of the iceberg, ranging from food deprivation, sleep deprivation, unpaid wages and home confinement to verbal or psychological abuse. According to the information given by a civil society organisation advocating migrant’s rights, the top violations experienced by women migrant domestic workers seeking shelter at the organisation between February and August 2014 were unpaid wages, long hours of work, no days off, no contract and sexual abuse (interview with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014). By focusing only on physical abuse, the media shift the attention away from exploitative working and living conditions of migrant domestic workers, under which physical abuse is a normalised part of the domestic workers’ every day experience.

The media, particularly newspapers, sometimes also politicise attention by relying on the physical element in presenting the news. For example, a civil society activist interviewed in this study criticised how the news about a migrant domestic worker who died from being deprived of food by the employer took up only a small column while at the same time a large column told the story of a domestic running away with the employer’s valuable jewelleries, therefore bringing the attention of the public to the latter story and dismissing the earlier one.

---

6 Heaping blame is one of the five “master suppression techniques” described by Ås (2004). For further theoretical discussion on these techniques, see Chapter III.
(interview with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014). By providing more space for news about crimes committed by migrant domestic workers, the media direct the public’s attention to the problems caused by migrant domestic workers rather than the dire working conditions of migrant domestic workers in the country. However, this dissertation does not go deeper in investigating the role of the media elite in creating discourse as it is beyond the scope of this study (for examples of theoretical discussions on the power of the media or the role of the media elite in constructing racial discourses, see for instance van Dijk, 1995; van Dijk, 1992).

Commodification by placement agencies

Agencies as private actors involved in the employment of migrant domestic workers abroad can be divided into recruitment agencies and placement agencies. Recruitment agencies are located in the country of origin of the migrant, while placement agencies are located in the destination country. The role of these agencies in the labour migration process can no longer be denied. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Indonesia and Malaysia even specifies the responsibilities of recruitment agencies in Indonesia and placement agencies in Malaysia, including providing a replacement if the worker runs away or is certified unfit from the medical examination.

Here the study primarily focuses on the role of placement agencies because the employers deal with them directly when they want to employ migrant domestic workers. While employers are also allowed to recruit migrant domestic workers directly in their origin country, most employers use the service of agencies due to limited knowledge of the procedures regarding employing migrant domestic workers as well as limited networks and resources for recruiting them directly.

A previous study by Chin (1997) concluded that Malaysian placement agencies tend to treat migrant domestic workers as a commodity, such as by referring migrant domestic workers as stock, providing ‘refunds’ if employers are not satisfied with the workers and leaving the salary of migrant domestic workers to the ‘market’. The discourses found in the Malaysian media in the last few years also give similar messages (“We have to look elsewhere”, New Straits Times Online, 26 October 2014; Ahmad, Zolkepli and Meikeng, “The maids may be here soon”, The Star Online, 27 December 2013).

Public opinion in Malaysia on placement agencies is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, there is a sense of dissatisfaction with place-
ment agencies because of their exorbitant practices, including charging a very high price to use their services and not processing the work permit and visa properly (Chin, “Cutting maid costs by cutting out agencies”, *The Star Online*, 22 December 2013; “Employers at the mercy of agents”, *New Strait Times*, 26 October 2014). On the other hand, employers rely on placement agencies in recruiting migrant domestic workers, understanding the procedure of employing them as well as getting tips on managing them (interview with the director of a placement agency, Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013). A survey conducted by a regional network of non-governmental organisations, CARAM Asia, reveals that the placement agencies are the primary source of information about laws on migrant domestic workers, followed by the media and the Immigration Department of Malaysia (CARAM Asia et al., 2010). This shows the dependency of employers on placement agencies regarding different aspects of employing migrant domestic workers.

As the middlemen, placement agencies not only deal with employers, but also with migrant domestic workers. Before placing the workers in the home, placement agencies often shape migrant domestic workers to fit the expectation of the employers about the ideal worker. The MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia also stipulates that the recruitment and placement agencies are responsible to ensure that the workers fulfil the specification as requested by the employers. One example of common practices by agencies is changing the worker’s name, age and area of origin in their documents (Human Rights Watch, 2004: 29). Falsification of age is one way to present the worker as someone of productive age. Putting an area of origin other than the worker’s real area of origin is sometimes employed to avoid negative stereotypes which are often associated with domestic workers from a particular area. For example, domestic workers from the area where I carried out the fieldwork, Karawang, West Java, are stereotyped as lazy and flirty; meanwhile, the stereotype of domestic workers from the eastern part of Indonesia, such as Lombok or East Nusa Tenggara, are hard workers. Falsification of information—name, age or origin area—is often an indication of human trafficking. Not only this practice is illegal, but it also causes problems if any trouble occurs; for instance, if the worker dies while in Malaysia.

Preparing the workers to fit the employers’ expectations also means that placement agencies sometimes intervene in disciplining the work-

---

7 I only interviewed one placement agency in this study. To protect the identity of the participant, neither the participant’s name nor the name of the agency is provided. See also the discussion on methodology in Chapter IV.
ers, from the workers’ behaviour to their body. For example, a number of domestic workers interviewed stated that the agencies threw away their makeup and skin care products (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Although the workers did not understand the reason why the agencies threw away the products, this could be seen as a way to present the workers as desexualised and pose no (sexual) threat to the women employers. Furthermore, when a domestic worker runs away from the employer, a placement agency sometimes punishes and tortures the worker to teach her not to run away again (interview with Komariah, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014). These different practices demonstrate the significant role of placement agencies in the employment of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia. Placement agencies are not only dominant in creating the public discourse on migrant domestic workers in the media; they are also the one on whom the employers rely on to get a perfect domestic worker and to ensure that she does her job well.

Conclusion

As has been shown in several international contexts (Fudge 2010, 2012b), the lack of recognition from the state leads to the undervaluing of the work carried out by migrant domestic workers. Without any proper standard to regulate the work, the working conditions of migrant domestic workers are left to the employers. At the same time, practices such as requiring the employers to discipline the workers and report the absconding workers institutionalises the control of employers over migrant domestic workers.

Meanwhile, the politicisation of news stories by the media contributes to constructing the public discourses of migrant domestic workers as the victims of violence or the perpetrators of crime. Similarly, the practices employed by placement agencies also support the commodification of migrant domestic workers, from treating the workers as commodities, giving information on the employment procedures and the management of the workers, to shaping the workers to meet the requirements from the employers. These different practices in turn condition the employers to justify their practices in disciplining and controlling migrant domestic workers.

This is the starting point for the research topic of the dissertation. In the absence of the state, the work relations between an Indonesian

---

8 To protect the identity of the participant, a pseudonym is employed here. See also the discussion on methodology in Chapter IV.
migrant domestic worker and her Malaysian employer rely on individual negotiations. These negotiations in turn are supported by the politicisation efforts made by the state, media, and agencies. The transfer of the responsibility for the negotiation of working and living conditions from state institutions to the private sphere takes place under extremely uneven power conditions, creating an empty space in which every woman individually must find her own strategies for coping with her particular situation. The consequences of this contested field of negotiations will be discussed throughout the dissertation. Before going further, however, it is necessary to lay out the theoretical and conceptual frameworks which support the analysis.
III. The multiple faces of paid domestic work – theoretical and conceptual frameworks


Even outside the academic world, non-governmental organisations also produce reports on the conditions of migrant domestic workers based on surveys, research or their own work on the ground. Human Rights Watch, for example, has produced numerous reports on the precariousness of migrant domestic workers from all over the world. Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia (Human Rights Watch, 2004), Cambodian workers in Malaysia (Human Rights Watch, 2011a), Asian workers in Saudi Arabia (Human Rights Watch, 2008),
domestic workers in Oman (Human Rights Watch, 2016), Jordan (Human Rights Watch, 2011b) and the UK (Human Rights Watch, 2014) are among few examples of the reports produced by the organisation in this field.

The abundance of studies on migration and domestic work is among feminist achievements in challenging the notion of domesticity and the home as private matters (McDowell, 2002). By situating migrant domestic workers in the wider context, feminist scholars reject the separation of private and public as demonstrated by paid domestic work. What these studies on migrant domestic workers show is the lack of migration policies for domestic workers, the devaluation of domestic work even when it is done for wages, and precarious working conditions. Stories of long working hours, sexual harassment, physical abuse, labour exploitation, degrading treatment, poor remuneration, and emotional ties both to the employers and to the family they left behind are found everywhere in these studies on migrant domestic workers. These stories offered by feminists counter the stories of “successful” migrant domestic workers who send remittances home and save the local economy in their areas of origin, as promoted by the proponents of globalisation.

This dissertation benefits significantly from these previous studies. The abundance of the studies, however, also triggers a warning of yet another story of migrant domestic workers. A brief, passing comment by a senior feminist geographer in a conference upon hearing about the topic of this research indicates a similar exhaustion, that now we know a lot about the conditions of migrant domestic workers. Nevertheless, this does not stop the fact that these women are still exploited all over the world, and this dissertation aims to analyse the power practices which create, reproduce and reinforce these precarious conditions. The earlier studies were mostly carried out in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. The fact that similar situations are still found even today shows that the struggle for the recognition of this work and for the improvement of workers’ conditions is far from over. Rather than wondering what can be contributed by yet another study in the field, one should ask how it is possible that the precariousness of domestic work around the world persists. Ehrenreich voices the concern,

[Like busy professional women fleeing the house in the morning, [the feminists] left the project unfinished, the debate broken off in the mid-sentence, the noble intentions unfulfilled (Ehrenreich, 2002: 103).]

This dissertation does not claim to finish this long feminist struggle; rather, it is an effort to keep the fire burning. Previous feminist studies
on migrant domestic workers are the foundation on which the present study is built. Previous findings about the exploitation of migrant domestic workers provide the background knowledge to pursue this research topic; meanwhile, feminist perspectives on power relations based on the intersections of gender, “race”, class and other social differences guide the analyses. To recap the research focus as elaborated in the introductory chapter (see Chapter I), the power relations which are explored in this dissertation are domination and exploitation practices by the employers, resistance practices by the workers as an entangled part of power, and structural powers in which these power practices in the home and the body find their sources.

The current chapter will discuss the theoretical and conceptual frameworks which guide the analysis of the empirical data. Although a number of theoretical and conceptual ideas are borrowed from other scholars, they are discussed critically using a feminist perspective. This chapter starts by clarifying the definition of domestic work and presenting feminist critiques on domestic work. It is followed by a Foucauldian feminist discussion on power, particularly discipline, domination and exploitation, and its application to a paid domestic work context. A discussion of power relations also entails a discussion of resistance, which will be employed in identifying the resistance practices of Indonesian migrant domestic workers, despite their limitation as a result of the spatiality of their workplace. Lastly, the chapter situates paid domestic work in the context of feminist critiques on globalisation.

(Paid) domestic work

Defining domestic work

Due to the intricate nature of the work, feminists argue that it is hard to define domestic work based on what kind of tasks are performed (Anderson, 2000: 11). At least two types of work categories are often identified:

The first type of work includes basic, unskilled, low-level and repetitive tasks involved in keeping the home clean: mopping, sweeping, dusting, cleaning, washing up, providing meals every single day. The second type of work is different as it encompasses the sort of affective embodied work involved in caring for others: looking after children, partners and other dependents, consists not only of guarding the cared-for, in the sense of making sure that no harm comes to them, but also nurturing them – loving.
Lutz (2011) even uses the term “domestic/care work” to emphasise the duality of the work. For Lutz,

‘domestic/care work’ refers to duties performed in the private household involving caring, child-rearing, attending to daily object-related and person-related demands, and providing support and advice (Lutz, 2011: 7).

In Lutz’s definition, the demands in domestic work may arise from persons as well as from objects. Examples of person-related tasks are “social support and care services addressing the needs of children, the elderly and sick people”, while object-related tasks are “cooking, washing, cleaning, laundry, etc.” (Lutz, 2011: 7). While this division is used in the practices in Germany, Lutz criticises the division for ignoring the fact that the two types of task intermingle.

Domestic work covers all the tasks in the home, from the physical work such as cleaning, washing, and cooking, to mental and emotional work such as caring; and managerial skill is required to ensure the smooth running of the household (Anderson, 2000: 11-12). The ILO Convention on Domestic Workers uses a more general description of domestic work, namely the “work performed in or for a household or households” (ILO Convention No. 189).

In this dissertation, the term “domestic work”, rather than “domestic/care work”, is chosen to show the encompassing nature of the work. As Anderson (2000) and Lutz (2011) argue, the tasks undertaken by these domestic workers range from caring for the family members of employers to washing the laundry, and these tasks often overlap. Domestic work encompasses both hard physical work and caring emotional work (see McDowell, 2009: 86). The term “domestic work” is also preferable because it represents the locality of the work, i.e. the domestic space in the home of the employer. The workplace for these domestic workers is the living space of the employers, which embodies the employers’ lifestyle and social relations (McDowell, 2009: 83).

Lutz’s definition, which identifies object-related and person-related tasks, is also useful for the analysis in this dissertation. It is important to explore the interrelationship between object-related tasks and personal-related tasks as based on Lutz’s definition. Object-related tasks such as cleaning or cooking are surely needed to keep the home comfortable as a living place; however, in performing these object-related tasks, the workers are required to give attention to person-related tasks as part of this embodied labour. For instance, cooking the meal for the
employer may fall under object-related tasks, but the worker should care for the employer’s preferences by cooking the employer’s favourite meal. Or, when a domestic worker cleans up the house from the employer’s mess, the worker should remember where she puts away the things in case the employer is looking for them.

At the same time, performing care work for the employers’ family often leads the workers to relate to their own emotions. As we will see later in the narratives of the workers, taking care of the employers’ children sometimes triggers the workers’ memories of their own children who they have left behind in Indonesia. Here we can see the relations between this embodied labour provided by these workers and their embodied experience when providing the labour.

This is precisely what McDowell (2009) suggests with the centrality of embodied attributes in the market exchange in the service-based economy. McDowell argues,

transactions in the service sector depend not only on a cash exchange but also on a personal interaction in which the embodied attributes of both provider and clients enter into the relationship, however momentary or transitory it might be. […] The exchange is also an emotional one in which the tastes, predilections and attitudes of both parties to the exchange are part of what is going on in the workplace… (McDowell, 2009: 9).

Embodied attributes may be as basic as physical materials such as looks, weight and height, but they may also include attitudes and emotions such as femininity, caring and deference. The narratives of the workers will suggest that the employers discipline the body and embodied attributes of the workers to create deference. As we will see through the empirical material later, “deference” becomes one of the central concepts in this dissertation. It is therefore important to first understand the concept.

Deference in domestic work

“Deference” is a concept originating from sociologist Erving Goffman. It refers to a ceremonial activity conveyed by a subordinate to the superordinate to confirm each other’s position (for further discussions, see Goffman, 1956). Bringing up the experiences of young working class men in interactive service work such as shop, restaurants and fast food restaurants in the UK, McDowell (2009; see also McDowell, 2007) discusses the challenges experienced by these young men in negotiating laddish masculinity when respectability and deference are required in this form of embodied labour. There is a
tension between the macho masculine embodied attributes as the gender norm for young working class men and the respectability and deferential embodied performance as the normative attributes in interactive service work. Here McDowell discusses deference in relation to respectability and masculinity. One important point from McDowell’s discussion is the centrality of embodied attributes in the construction of deference. It is something that I will return to in the analysis later.

This dissertation particularly benefits from a concept of deference developed by the post-colonial sociologist Judith Rollins (1985), who applied Goffman’s idea of deference in the context of paid black domestic workers in the USA in the 1980s. Rollins (1985: Chapter 5) suggests that there are three most common forms of deference in the context of paid domestic work: language (linguistic deference), behaviour (gestural and task-embedded deference) and space (spatial deference).

Common examples of linguistic deference found in Rollins’ (1985) study are that domestics are called by their first names while employers are to be addressed by their last names; both employers and workers often refer to the domestics as “girls”, despite their age; and employers require the workers to address them with deferential terms such as “Ma’am” (p. 158). In terms of gestural and task-embedded deference, Rollins argues that the domestics are expected to adopt a subservient demeanour, such as practical yet unattractive clothes and controlled speech, and convey a work attitude which suggests that they are pleased to serve the employers (p. 167). Spatial deference, meanwhile, manifests in the unequal use of the space around each other’s body and the employer’s control of the use of space in the home (p. 171).

There are two main points of interest in Rollins’ conceptualisation of deference in paid domestic work. First, deference works to reinforce the superiority of the employers by contrasting it with the construction of the inferiority of the workers. We will see later in the stories of the workers how the employers confirm their superiority by constructing the deference of the workers, with the employers’ gender identities being defined through the construction of the workers as the inferior gendered “Other”. Second, deference suggests that it is a performance demanded by the employers, rather than the workers themselves believing that they are inferior. The workers provide deference because there is a risk of losing their job if they do not conform. This specific point of deference will be discussed again later, when the suggestion is made which combines Rollins’ idea of deference with Butler’s conception of performativity as an alternative perspective to
understand the accommodation of migrant domestic workers to the employers’ control.

**Spatiality of domestic work**

Feminist discussions on domestic work are often based on the critiques of the production/reproduction and public/private divisions as part of patriarchal capitalism (McDowell, 1999: Chapter 3; Anderson, 2000: Chapter 2; Rose, 1993: Chapter 6). Feminists argue that industrialisation as developed in the West caused spatial separation of work from home, and this division of labour was necessary for the patriarchal industrial capitalism.

Women’s domestic labour [...] reproduced labour on a daily and generational basis. Women kept men clean, clothed and fed and so ready to go out to work each day, as well as bearing and caring for children who would be the labour force of the future. Thus women, too, were exploited by capitalism, but it was argued, they were also exploited by individual men who appropriated their labours in the home. (McDowell, 1999: 81)

Although reproduction at home is closely linked to production as argued by feminists, the work at home remains undervalued. The association of care and domestic work with women’s natural skills removes their economic value. Even when domestic work is carried out for wages, it is poorly paid. While domestic work in general is devalued, affective embodied care work, according to McDowell (2009: 82), is harder to commodify than domestic work because its embodied attributes are not recognised in the traditional definition of work. The home being the workplace also means that it remains unregulated because it is considered as a “private space”.

These different tensions between public/private and production/reproduction as materialised in the home raise the concept of home as a “paradoxical space” (Rose, 1993). Rose suggests “paradoxical space” as a concept to refer to feminist efforts to trouble the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy. The space is paradoxical because it is “mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside” (p. 140). Although Rose originally uses this concept in the context of feminist works in challenging the hegemonic patriarchal discourse in the discipline, the concept has been adapted by feminist geographers in other different contexts (for examples of studies using paradoxical space concept, please see Mahtani, 2001; Nairn, 1997 in classroom; Valentine and Skelton, 2003 in lesbian and “gay” scenes).
In this dissertation, the concept of “paradoxical space” will be explored in relation to the home where the negotiations of, among others, production and reproduction, and public and private take place as suggested by the feminist critiques here. Paid domestic work essentially challenges the division of public and private spaces because the workplace of these migrants is a private space for the employers. At the same time, and as we will see later in Chapter IX, relating the practices in the home to the lack of recognition by the state and the invisibility of this reproductive work in the globalisation discourse strengthens feminist critiques of the public/private and production/reproduction binaries.

**Intersectionality for analysing domestic work**

Paid domestic work also brings class and racial differences into plain sight. The studies of domestic workers mentioned at the beginning of this chapter show that paid domestic work is mostly done by women of colour and of lower class; for instance, African-American women serving white middle-class families in the USA (Rollins, 1985), or Filipina migrants working for white middle-class Canadian families (Pratt, 1997; Stiell and England, 1997).

In studying how gender intersects with class, “race” and other categories, intersectionality offers a useful perspective. Crenshaw coined “intersectionality” to show that the issue of domestic violence against women of colour in the USA is marginalised in both feminist discourse and anti-racist discourse (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). It is the intersection of systems of capitalist, sexist and racist exploitation which shapes the distinct experience of violence encountered by these women (Crenshaw, 1991). Their distinct experience, however, is marginalised by the feminist movements and anti-racist movements.

Since it was coined by Crenshaw in the early 1990s, intersectionality has developed further, both as a theoretical concept and a methodology, through debates in gender studies, human geography and other disciplines in the social sciences (see, for example, Acker, 2012; McDowell, 2008; Davis, 2008; Valentine, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Hill Collins, 2000). In the context of paid domestic labour, intersectionality is used by Molina and Mulinari (2013) to challenge the assumption of women’s shared burden of domestic work when class and “race” are included in the analysis, as in the case of migrant domestic workers in Argentina and Chile. Molina and Mulinari argue as follows:
An intersectional perspective makes it possible to capture how both [the migrant domestic worker and the woman employer]: a) hold different social positions that are regulated on the basis of class, ethnicity and heteronormativity, b) how these positions are interwoven through the unequal distribution of economic and symbolic resources, and c) links between these social relationships and specific identities, meaning different forms of femininity (Molina and Mulinari, 2013: 232-233, own translation).

The example given by Molina and Mulinari in using intersectionality in the context of paid migrant domestic labour is useful for this study. As we will see later in the analysis of the empirical material, migrant domestic workers and employers hold different institutional power positions as a result of their gender, class, “race”/ethnicity and immigration status. By putting the employment of migrant domestic workers in the wider globalisation context, structural economic inequality across the world will be problematised.

While “race” has been used widely in the analyses of domestic work in the Western countries, the intersection of racial differences with nationality/ethnicity as found in the context of paid domestic labour in Asia has not received much attention. Studies on paid domestic workers in Asia mainly focus on the precarious working conditions in the home (Yeoh and Huang, 2010a; Huang and Yeoh, 2007; Huang and Yeoh, 1998; Lan, 2006; Constable, 1997); a few studies also discuss public perceptions of migrant domestic workers (Yeoh and Huang, 2010b) and the use of public spaces by migrant domestic workers (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). Unlike the studies on paid domestic workers in Western countries where visible racial differences play an important part in analysing the work relations, racial differences in the context of paid domestic labour in Asia are subtler, with “race” interlacing with nationality and/or ethnicity. For instance, Filipina domestic workers may be categorised as the same Asian “race” as their Hong Kong employers, but racist discourses in the Hong Kong public suggest construct derogative images of Filipina workers (Constable, 1997). In the context of Indonesian women in Malaysia, the workers often come from the same racial group, Malay, as their employers (remember also the discussion at the beginning of Chapter II); nevertheless, as we will see later, ethnic specificities can be used both by the employers to construct the inferiority of the workers and by the workers to create a space of resistance. This is something that this dissertation aims to contribute by highlighting experiences from the South-South migration.

9 In this study, I therefore use the term “race” interchangeably with nationality/ethnicity.
Nevertheless, the intersection of “race”, class, gender and other socio-economic categories in the context of paid domestic labour flags the emergence of stratified reproduction. Colen (1995), in a study of West Indian childcare workers in New York, coined the term “stratified reproduction” to understand how “physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished differentially according to inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migration status” (p. 78). As women migrants leave their country of origin to take care of the children of employers abroad, their own children are taken care by other women family members (for examples of studies on the children left behind, see Aragao-Lagergren, 2010; Parreñas, 2005). This dissertation does not discuss the children left behind, but it appears necessary to mention this research area in order to emphasise the spatial relations involved when the fulfilment of the reproductive needs of the host country is at the expense of those in the migrants’ origin country.

Power relations in the context of domestic work

Foucauldian feminist perspectives on gender and power inspire the analysis of power relations in this dissertation. This section attempts to clarify the key points which become the foundation of the analysis: (1) power is plural, rather than unitary (Foucault, 1978, 2007a); (2) modern domination power takes subtler forms (Foucault, 1977); and (3) resistance is entangled with domination (Foucault, 1978; Sharp et al., 2000). Understanding power as plural challenges the idea of absolute power, where power is interpreted as solely domination. Viewing power as emanating from everywhere (Foucault, 1978) allows us to recognise that resistance is an entangled part of domination power. This is the main theoretical foundation for exploring the relations between domination and exploitation practices, and resistance practices in paid domestic work.

“There exists no single power, but several powers”

The statement above is made by Foucault in one of his articles, “The Meshes of Power” (Foucault, 2007a). By stating that there is no single power, Foucault suggests an alternative perspective to the view of power as unitary. Rather, power should be seen as plural because “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1978: 93). The plurality
of power suggests that power only comes into play when it is exercised and therefore triggers a response – such as resistance.

Foucault’s notion that power is everywhere, however, triggers reactions from feminists. By suggesting that power is everywhere, Foucault creates a notion of power as productive; meanwhile, the oppression of women informs feminists that power – particularly the power of men – is repressive. The absence of gender in Foucault’s conception of power is the main cause of criticism by feminists. Ramazanoğlu (1993) frames the tension between feminists and Foucault on this particular issue as the following:

First, women’s experiences suggest that men can have power and their power is in some sense a form of domination, backed by force. Secondly, this domination cannot be seen simply as a product of discourse, because it must also be understood as ‘extradiscursive’ or relating to wider realities than those of discourse. (Ramazanoğlu, 1993: 22)

Hartsock (1990), for example, also argues that systematic unequal power relations are absent from Foucault’s analysis of power. As a result, Foucault fails to recognise the difficulty of the oppressed groups, such as women, in creating alternatives (Hartsock, 1990: 172). Resistance to this dominant power is just as impossible (Allen, 1996: 276-277).

On one hand, I agree with feminist critiques about the absence of the specific experiences of women – and other marginalised groups, for that matter – from this particular conception of power by Foucault. On the other hand, with the plurality of power, Foucault (2007a: 156) also suggests that we still need “to localise them in their historical and geographical specificity” when we analyse power. This indicates that Foucault advises specificity in our analysis of power, whether taking history, geography, gender, class, “race” or other socio-economic categories into account. Ramazanoğlu (1993) also suggests that feminists can still benefit from this particular notion of power:

By seeing power as everywhere and, at some level, as available to all, it can encourage us to overlook women’s systematic subordination of other women, as well as systematic domination by men. Using Foucault means acknowledging the multiplicity of difference, and claiming the end of ‘woman’ as a universal category. (Ramazanoğlu, 1993: 10)

As suggested by Ramazanoğlu, viewing power as everywhere allows us to investigate women’s subordination by other women. It is important for this dissertation topic because both the employers and the
domestic workers are mostly women, although later we will also hear a few experiences when the employers are men.

Mills (2007) takes this Foucauldian conception of power further. Inspired by Thornborrow, Mills suggests that we should distinguish between the institutional status of power and the local status of power. With the institutional status of power, Mills refers to the power given to you and which grants a position in a hierarchy; meanwhile, the local status of power is something you can negotiate, for instance using your verbal skills or quick-wittedness (Mills, 2007: 49-50).

Thus, for example, you may be relatively low in the hierarchy within an institution, but you may be able to locally negotiate a more powerful position for yourself because of your skills and ability. This distinction between two types of power is important in being able to assess which positions of power are negotiable and which are not. (Mills, 2007: 50)

Distinguishing the institutional power from local power is particularly useful in understanding why in certain situations migrant domestic workers can resist the exercise of power by the employers while in other situations they adopt deference and accommodation. By understanding power as emanating from everywhere, we challenge the imposing notion of power. This deconstructs the idea that power is solely held by the powerful – or, in this context, the employers – while the weak – the workers – are left as powerless victims. The idea also motivates the third key notion of power in this dissertation; the entanglement of resistance with domination. As we will see later in the analysis of the materials, domestic workers exercise some forms of power, although not on equal terms with the employers. It is important to recognise the power of domestic workers – regardless of how minor this is – as part of power complexities, in order to avoid victimising the workers. Before discussing the entanglement of resistance with domination as part of power relations, however, it is important to first understand different domination and exploitation practices.

**Exploring domination and exploitation power**

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) argues that the modern power developed in Europe since the 18<sup>th</sup> century is characterised by three elements: the *scale of control*, where the body is worked individually; the *object of control*, which aims for the efficiency of the body, and the *modality*, which takes place through the subtle yet constant coercion and supervision process (p. 136-137). Central to this Foucauldian understanding of modern power are the importance of the
The centrality of the body

While Foucault conceptualises the body as the scale and object of control through bio politics, feminist scholars prefer to conceptualise the body as a subject of power. By conceptualising the body as a subject of power, feminists add agency, which is absent if the body is constructed as the object of control, since control suggests top-down relations of power between the person in control and the person being controlled. In this dissertation, therefore, I adhere to the feminists’ conceptualisation of the body as the subject of power and I will use feminist work on Foucauldian notion of the body.

The body as a subject of power has been receiving growing attention from feminists, including feminist geographers, since the mid-1990s (Longhurst and Johnston, 2014). Foucault specifically contributes to feminism through the theorisation of the body and sex as social constructions and these are produced as effects of power (Ramazanoğlu, 1993: 7). In *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Foucault (1978) suggests that the body is a site inscribed by power through discourses on sexuality, which strategically form the knowledge on sex through a hysterisation of women’s bodies, a pedagogisation of masturbating child, a socialisation of procreative behaviour and a psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure (Chapter 3). The construction of women’s sexuality through normative discourses of hysterical women developed by Foucault peaks feminist interests, including feminist geography. It then leads to feminist theorisation of gendered subjects (Longhurst, 2005). Butler, among others, works closely with Foucault’s notion of the body as a site of cultural inscriptions and develops a critical reading to the underlying assumption about the existence of “the body” prior to inscriptions (Butler, 1989). Rather, Butler suggests that “the body” works as a productive and materialising effects of the regulatory power (Butler, 1993). An important point from Butler’s critical works is that “the body” not simply an object of power, but it also internalises and reproduces power. We will shortly see how this notion of the body is also found in feminist geographers’ works on the body and embodiment.

*BodySpace* (Duncan, 1996) is among the early collection of feminist geography works which criticises the Cartesian separation of the mind from the body, and how such dualistic thinking leads to a spatial
manifestation such as public/private division. Feminist geographers increasingly explore the relations between the body and space/place. For instance, Grosz (1998) with her analysis on bodies-cities relations as interface. The collection of essays edited by Nast and Pile in *Places through the Body* (1998), which reprinted Grosz’s essay on bodies-cities, explores how discursive practices, materiality and spatiality filter through one another, bodies which confine and bodies which are confined/restricted, an excess—and accommodation—of the body, and the inscription of meaning onto bodies and places through discourses. The works I mentioned here are only a few examples of the vast feminist literature on the body and embodiment. These different studies do not only problematize the body in space/place, but also challenge the construction of the body, whereby the body is a surface inscribed with values (Longhurst, 2005) and how the constructed body influences the surrounding environment (Grosz, 1998). It is the spatial notion of body, both body in space and body as space (see also McDowell, 1999), which will be explored in this study.

I argue elsewhere (Hierofani, 2016) that feminist theories on the body and embodiment enrich the labour migration literature by broadening the scope of globalisation narratives to include the migrant workers’ voices and linking the lived experiences of the migrants with globalisation processes. Silvey (2005), for instance, argues that feminist geography contributes in showing that migration is an outcome of gendered bodies, as well as a part of gender politics which constructs the migrant bodies and embodiment processes in particular places (p. 142). Wright (2006), for example, investigates how “the myths of disposable women” in the context of factory workers in northern Mexico and southern China construct the body of these women as a living industrial waste and at the same time as an invaluably productive body. In paid domestic workers, Pratt (1998) studies how the body of Filipina migrants in Canada is inscribed with domestic work and racial identities. McDowell (2009) also theorises “working bodies” in the context of service labour to refer to the labour these service workers do, as well as the work they do on their own body, and the role of emotions as required in their work.

As we can see, feminist discussions on the body and embodiment have flourished rather vastly, including Foucauldian feminist discussions on the body. I am, however, not going to delve deep into these discussions. This dissertation, rather, will situate feminist theorisation of the body in space and the body as space in the context of paid domestic work. In the empirical materials, I will identify the (im)mobility of the body of these Indonesian women from the global
space to the home. At the same time, the body is a subject of power in so many ways—from various bodily control by the employer to self-discipline by the workers themselves. Identifying the body as a subject of power, however, also means identifying resistance practices by the workers to challenge the spatiality of their body—both in the context of the body in space and the body as space.

Another concept from Butler (2014) regarding the body that will be useful in the analysis later is “bodily vulnerability”. Butler (2014) suggests the term “bodily vulnerability” to refer to a deliberate exposure of the body to power. There is an element of dependency relations between the body and the infrastructure, the body and the environment and the body and the institutional power. As Butler (2014) argues, “We are then not only vulnerable to one another – an invariable feature of social relations – but this very vulnerability indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency which changes the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject.”

Two main points from Butler’s “bodily vulnerability” important for this study are that the body is dependent on other powers, such as infrastructures, discourses and institutional power, and that the body is resisting through deliberately exposing itself to power. These two points will be useful to analyse the relations of the body to other structural powers at the national and global levels.

**Discipline as a subtler form of power**

Apart from targeting the body, the other characteristic of the modern dominant power, according to Foucault (1977), is that it takes subtler forms such as control and discipline. Foucault argues that subtler forms of power are efficient in increasing “the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and [diminishing] these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (Foucault, 1977: 138). This idea is something that I will return to repeatedly throughout the dissertation. As we will see later in the empirical materials, the employers discipline the workers to increase their efficiency in performing the work (productive body) and at the same time to shape them as obedient, deferent workers with limited power (subjected body). In this dissertation I use the term ‘deference’ as suggested by Rollins (1985), rather than ‘docile’ or ‘obedient’ as used by Foucault (1977), because deference indicates some form of power (see also the discussion on deferential performativity in the next section on resistance).

A previous study by Constable (1997) of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong shows that the workers respond more negatively to overt and harsh forms of power, such as beating or scolding, than to
modern, covert and subtler discipline, such as a list of duties or work-related regulations. For that reason, employers and agencies prefer Filipina workers from rural areas rather than from urban areas because they are more familiar with harsh forms of power, in addition to their lack of knowledge of their rights (p. 15). While it is possible to have reservations about Constable’s (1997) categorisation of subtle discipline and harsh forms of power, in general the stories of Indonesian domestic workers this study also show different forms of power, from scolding to unspoken requirements about domestic workers’ attitude and behaviour.

Through discipline, Foucault (1977) argues that individuals are subtly worked on and transformed to internalise the values to the point that surveillance is no longer needed, as the individuals resume self-discipline. To show his point, Foucault brings up Bentham’s Panopticon prison setting as an example. In this setting, the presence of the overseeing watchtower “induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977: 201). For the power to function automatically, power therefore should be visible – or as in the Panopticon prison setting, “the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon” – and unverifiable – where “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (Foucault, 1977: 201). At the same time, the placement of each individual in an enclosed and segmented space fixes the individual in that specific space, which allows each movement to be supervised (p. 197).

Foucault’s idea of the Panopticon offers a few points useful when analysing the materials in this dissertation. In addition to discipline as a form of domination practice by the employer, surveillance emerges as another practice – and here surveillance is to be linked with self-discipline assumed by the workers even when the employers are absent. Fixation of individuals in a confined space to enable supervision is also useful in identifying immobility and isolation practices by employers, where workers are rendered immobile in their workplace, including within the home.

**Other subtle forms of power: maternalism/paternalism and master suppression techniques**

To enrich Foucault’s notion of subtler forms of modern power in the context of paid domestic labour, this dissertation also benefits from feminist discussions on maternalism and paternalism. Judith Rollins (1985) is among the early feminists applying the concept of maternal-
ism in the context of paid domestic work. She argues that maternalism finds its origin in the paternalistic, traditional master-servant relationship commonly found in 17th and 18th century Europe (Rollins, 1985: Chapters 1 and 2). In paternalistic situations, the relation which is built is beyond contractual wage relations, as the “male” head of the family cares for the needs of servants and provides the servants with moral guidance and protection; in exchange, the servants serve the master with all of their time, offer total obedience and fidelity to the point of defending their master and his family (Rollins, 1985: 27-28). At the core of this relationship, according to Rollins, is patriarchal domination as shown by means including the use of – often severe – physical punishment for laxness or insubordination.

Maternalism, on the other hand, develops in the modern period when paid domestic work takes place in a context of women employers and women domestics (between women). Nurture, love and affection – typically constructed as women’s natural attributes – characterise maternalism. Expressions of maternalism can manifest in giving gifts, loaning money, meeting the workers’ friends, or representing the workers in the legal system (Rollins, 1985: 189). Through these expressions, the employers conceal the work relations between the employers and the workers:

> It is an overpersonalisation of employment relations and a refusal to properly acknowledge the employment relation, but presenting this overpersonalisation as a benefit, as friendship. (Anderson, 2000: 144)

We also need to remember that the basis of this maternalistic relation in paid domestic work is an assumption of superordinate-subordination relationships. Caring in maternalism, therefore, should be scrutinised:

> The “caring” that is expressed in maternalism might range from an adult-to-child to a human-to-pet kind of caring but, by definition […], it is not human-to-equal human caring. (Rollins, 1985: 186)

In applying maternalism, the employers reinforce their superiority and the workers’ inferiority. Since the employers have a higher power position in this relationship as a result of their class or racial superiority, the workers are expected to show gratitude and accept this maternalistic treatment if they want to keep their jobs:

> Employers may require from their employees deference, gratitude, and perhaps extra hours on duty. In the process, they gain not only unpaid services but also a sense of superiority and enhanced racial, class, and gender
Comparing maternalism and paternalism, Rollins (1985: 179) argues that, unlike paternalism which has an association to patriarchal domination, maternalism does not have a similar association to matriarchal authority because matriarchal authority does not exist in the Western world. I attest Anderson (2000) who disagrees with Rollins’ argument. The fact that the employers also reinforce their gender superiority through maternalism suggests that maternalism sustains patriarchal domination. As Anderson argues:

Unlike Rollins I would not characterise materialistic relations as fundamentally different from paternalism, for like paternalism, materialism ultimately serves to reinforce patriarchy, although it does so indirectly, by reinforcing differences between women. [...] Maternalism is particularly insidious because it seems to offer some kind of equality between domestic workers and employers as women, whereas in fact it is precisely that commonality which it works to deny, reinforcing superiority and inferiority. (Anderson, 2000: 144-145)

Both maternalism and paternalism are useful concepts for our analysis. We will see later in the interview materials that employers sometimes use the technique of maternalism as a way to control their domestics. In cases when the employers are men, the narratives of the workers suggest that they often adopt a technique of paternalism. The argument that maternalism and paternalism reinforce the employers’ superior power position in the gender hierarchy, as suggested by Anderson (2000), is, nevertheless, found in both narratives.

Another theory about domination practices which is also useful for this study is the “master suppression techniques” theory developed by Berit Ås. Based on her experience of being marginalised in meetings dominated by men, Ås (2004) suggests that men often employ five techniques to dismiss and suppress women. First, making invisible. Women in meetings or other formal settings are often overlooked, ignored and reminded that they are inferior, insignificant and have no influence. Second, ridiculing. Ridiculing often takes place in informal settings where men ridicule women’s efforts. Through ridiculing, women are constructed as incompetent in their work, except for fulfilling the sexual needs of men or doing housework.

Third, withholding information. Men often deny women’s access to information, such as by continuing a meeting after work, while at the same time disregarding women’s domestic efforts. Withholding in-
formation is a powerful suppression technique because it creates an ongoing systemic lack of knowledge where women are kept in ignorance to make it easier for men to retain their dominant positions. Fourth, damned if you do and damned if you don’t. Through this technique, men create double bind/double punishment situations for women. For instance, listening and being democratic when employed by women leaders are considered as evidences of weak leadership; meanwhile, when they are firm in their leadership, they are called cold and lacking femininity. Fifth, heaping blame and putting to shame. In applying this suppression technique along with double punishment and ridiculing, women are constructed as not good or competent enough. Whereas the causes are probably related to the fact that women often think and behave differently from men, or that women do not have access to information controlled by men.

Even though these techniques are developed on the basis of women’s oppression by men, they are still useful when applied in the context of other marginalised groups, such as migrant domestic workers. In Chapter II, for instance, we have seen how the media use the heaping blame technique to build public opinion that perceives abuses experienced by migrant domestic workers as their own fault. We will see more examples of heaping blame and withholding information techniques by employers in Chapter VI and VII.

The use of these different domination practices by employers comes down to the labour exploitation of migrant domestic workers. Foucault (1977) argues that the economic use of the body is only achieved through the construction of a productive body and a subjected body:

…it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection […]; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (Foucault, 1977: 26)

This dissertation will explore the application of these different techniques in creating the body of the workers as a productive body and a subjected body to ensure the maximum economic use of the body. Exhaustion, for instance, is one of the central principles in domination based on non-idleness (Foucault, 1977):

This means that one must seek to intensify the use of the slightest moment, as if time, in its very fragmentation, were inexhaustible or as if, at least by an ever more detailed internal arrangement, one could tend to-
wards an ideal point at which one maintained maximum speed and maximum efficiency. (p. 154)

In the stories of migrant domestic workers, we will see how the employers exhaust the labour of these women in various forms, from exhaustion of time to exhaustion of emotions. The exhaustion of labour, along with other power practices, ultimately contributes to the oppression of migrant domestic workers.

**Exploitation and precarity**

Young (2009) suggests that as a structural concept, oppression refers to systemic constraints, unquestioned norms, habits and symbols and everyday practices (p. 56-57). According to Young, there are five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. For this dissertation, Young’s notion of exploitation is important. Inspired by the Marxist theory of exploitation, Young suggests that “oppression [in exploitation] occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of this labour of one social group to benefit another” (p. 61). This notion of exploitation allows an interpretation of various forms of exploitation practices. As I will show through the narratives of the workers later, maternalism/paternalism and heaping blame on undocumented migrants also rely on the similar principle of Young’s Marxian notion of labour exploitation in the construction of class, i.e. a transfer of the labour of the workers to benefit another group. Young continues further in showing the structural aspect of exploitation:

> Exploitation enacts a structural relation between social groups. Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality. (Young, 2009: 61)

The notion of exploitation as a structural oppression is useful in understanding the process of labour transfer from migrant domestic workers to benefit those more powerful – the employers, the recruitment/placement agencies, the host state or capitalists. While in Chapter VII the study will argue that the exploitation of workers benefits employers (and agencies), Chapter IX will discuss the structural exploitation of the workers which will map out their geography of exploitation.

In Chapter I, I have argued that precarious working conditions are not the focus of this dissertation. It is, nevertheless, necessary to recognise that there is a growing literature on precariousness/precarity.
Standing (2011), for instance, argues that globalisation has caused global fragmentation of the old classes as a new class is in-the-making, if not a class of itself yet, and it is called the precariat (a combination of the word “precarious” and “proletariat”). Standing suggests that the precariat is characterised as people who are lack of seven forms of labour security: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security and representation security (Standing, 2011: 10). Migrant workers are among the groups identified as the precariat (Standing, 2011: chapter 4). Lewis et al. (2015) even claim that some migrants’ working lives can only be conceptualised as “hyper-precarious”, not just precarious, as indicated by deportability, risk of bodily injury along with restricted healthcare access and transactional relationships on necessities to sustain life.

Inspired by Anderson’s analyses of the nexus of precarious migration status and precarious employment, Fudge (2012a) develops a taxonomy to investigate the relations between employment and institutional insecurity in the context of migrant workers. The taxonomy includes the following indicators: conditions of entry (e.g. requirements of entering a country, duration of visa and spatial mobility across the border and within the country), employment relations (e.g. labour market mobility, terms and conditions of employment, legislative protection and labour union), and institutional insecurity (e.g. social benefits and family reunification scheme) (Fudge, 2012a: 9). Although I do not use precarity as an analytical tool, throughout the dissertation we will see these various indicators of precarious working conditions in the context of paid domestic work, from the construction of indefinitely temporary visa, the lack of protection from the state in the form of legislation, to the lack of social/health benefits. In Chapter II, we could already see some of these indicators, and these indicators will come up again when I discuss the geography of exploitation in Chapter IX.

**Resistance as entangled with domination**

**Spatiality of resistance**

Foucault (1978) suggests that resistance is an integral part of power: resistances, he says, “...are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite” (p. 96). Just as he argues about the plurality of power, Foucault also suggests that resistance is plural yet it is inscribed in power and thus forms a comprehensive understanding of power relations:
Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (Foucault, 1978: 96)

This notion of resistance as an inseparable part of power attracts the interests of human geographers. There are at least two rather different ways to conceptualise this Foucauldian notion of resistance in human geography literature, either to treat resistance as separated from domination or to see that domination and resistance are always entangled.

Pile and Keith (1997) suggest that we treat resistance separately from domination, at least at the conceptual level, not only as the reaction to domination. Pile (1997) clarifies, “This is not to say that domination and resistance have nothing to do with one another, but that there are distinct spatialised modalities of control, and that resistance might have its own spatialities…” (p. 2). Rather, Pile (1997) argues that resistance also involves feeling and dreams of something better.

Pile’s (and Keith’s) conceptualisation of resistance is very interesting. Pile makes a good point by suggesting that resistance carries these other elements, such as fear, anger, desire and hope, which are often brushed off in resistance literatures as being unpolitical. Recognition of these “other” elements of resistance has allowed the capture of the complexity of power relations in this study. However, Pile’s suggestion of separating resistance from domination at the conceptual level is problematic. In certain situations, resistance can be spatially differentiated from domination. In the context of paid domestic work in this study, however, resistance and domination are always spatially intertwined and they occur in the same place, i.e. the home of the employer. Treating resistance as separated from domination will therefore undermine their complex relations.

Rather than treating resistance as separated from domination, Sharp et al. (2000) offer a better approach, i.e. one in which domination and resistance are viewed as always entangled with one another, as part of the spatiality of power complexities. Rather than being separate, domination and resistance co-constitute in each other’s presence. Even Foucault (1978) himself, whose work inspired the conceptualisation of resistance employed by Sharp et al., says, “[R]esistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” With that in mind, therefore, resistance cannot be separated from power. Instead, they always co-exist with each other.

Sharp et al. (2000) suggest the terms “resistance within spaces of domination” and “domination within spaces of resistance” to show
that resistance and domination are never completely free from each other. In the context of this study, “resistance within spaces of domination” as suggested by Sharp et al. is particularly useful. As we will hear from the stories of the workers later, the resistance of the workers is within the employers’ space of domination as a result of the immobility of the workers in the home. It therefore shapes forms resistance which are particular to the context of paid domestic work, which are different from the resistance mobilised by civil society, for example.

Moss (1997) suggests to pair the concept of “space of respite” with “space of resistance” to understand the coping strategies of women, employed as franchise housekeepers in Southern Ontario, attempting to rebuild and rejuvenate themselves. While it is hard for these women to create a space of respite, Moss nevertheless noted some examples in the everyday lives of these women, such as a woman buying a pack of cigarettes to smoke for herself, going out at the end of the week or buying material things to remind herself that she is a valuable person. For domestic workers, these common, everyday things are rewards, rewards for going through the hard day of labour and maintaining their own home, rewards for surviving a physically demanding job and an emotionally draining relationship. Moss argues:

Though not central, such acts are still integral to challenging the social relations of labour, for by engaging in such acts women can in respite gain strength to re-engage later in contesting rules, resisting authorities, challenging ideologies, and building communities, both in the workplace and at home. (Moss, 1997: 183)

It is just as important to note these spaces of respite when we investigate resistance practices in the context of paid domestic work, because the two are interlinked. Since the domestic workers in Moss’ study return to their own home at the end of the day’s shift, it is possible for them to create spaces of respite — although Moss also noted that sometimes these domestic workers still cannot do this because of their hard day’s labour or because they have to provide a space of respite for their family members. In the context of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia, however, these women also live in their workplace. Just like their space of resistance, the space of respite of these women is situated within the domination space of the employers. This then puts their space of respite in a vulnerable position because there is a constant risk that the employers will invade their spaces of respite and expose them to the space of domination once more.
Everyday forms of resistance

To identify the resistance of migrant domestic workers, this dissertation adopts the concept of “everyday resistance” coined by Scott (1985; 1989). Scott uses the concept of “everyday resistance” to document the hidden forms of resistance by peasants in Malaysia. “Everyday resistance” is defined as:

the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. […] They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. (Scott, 1985: 29)

Scott (1989) argues that the everyday form of resistance is often undermined in researches on resistance because “it is not openly declared in the usually understood sense of “politics” … neither is it group action in the usually understood sense of collective action” (p. 33). While resistance by civil society tends to take the form of collective actions aiming for structural change, the spatiality of the employer’s domination distinctly shapes the resistance by migrant domestic workers. Everyday resistance equips the workers with a form of resistance which can be “as pervasive but never ventures to contest the formal definitions of hierarchy and power” (Scott, 1985: 33). The confinement of migrant domestic workers to the employer’s house as a consequence of their workplace character also makes it difficult for them to take collective actions as mobilised by civil society.

Previous studies on migrant domestic workers have also used Scott’s concept of “everyday resistance” to identify the micro-scale resistance by migrant domestic workers. Constable (1997), for example, captures the “hidden transcript” of jokes exercised by Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. Ueno (2009) documents the forms of sabotage, false compliance, dissimulation, pilfering, gossip, feigned ignorance and desertion by Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore. Ueno (2009: 498) argues that the resistance forms of migrant domestic workers in Asia are usually covert, passive and discreet, in contrast to the direct resistance of migrant domestic workers as often found in Western countries. Therefore, Scott’s idea of “everyday resistance” is suitable for investigating the resistance of migrant domestic workers in this study.
Deferential performativity

There is always a danger of researchers romanticising resistance. Cresswell (2000) notes that since the end of the 1990s resistance has become a central theme in social and cultural geography “to the extent that there is a danger that no area of social life will not be described as resistance” (p. 259). An article by Abu-Lughod (1990) is often referred to as a warning for academics to avoid romanticising resistance (see for example Pile and Keith, 1997; Sharp et al., 2000; Constable, 1997). The article is an ethnographic study of the resistance of inter-generational Bedouin women. While many of these studies which refer to Abu-Lughod’s article stop shortly after mentioning the article as containing a warning about the tendency of academics to romanticise resistance, the article itself actually offers a stronger message:

The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look into it for hopeful confirmation of the failure – or partial failure – of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power. (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 53)

Cresswell (2000) takes up Abu-Lughod’s suggestion of using resistance as a diagnostic tool to understand forms of power and how people are caught in power relations. Cresswell argues that the characteristics of modern power – which is usually indirect, invisible and constituted through practices – create the illusion of nature, which may also be the reason why researchers find resistance in almost every aspect of social life. Cresswell, therefore, suggests that we should use resistance as an indicator and diagnostic of this (indirect and invisible) power. It is important not only to identify different forms of resistance practices by the workers, but also to analyse the invisible powers which limit the forms of practices available to them.

One way to avoid romanticising the resistance of migrant domestic workers is to investigate the accommodation practices by the workers which may be understood as “deferential performativity”. The concept of “deferential performativity” is adapted from combining academic discussions on deference (adapted from Rollins, 1985) and performance/performativity (adapted from Butler, 1999).

Rollins’ idea of deference in the context of paid domestic work has been discussed above. Rollins (1985) argues, “What is important about deferential behaviour between non-equals is that it confirms the inequality and each party’s position in the relationship to the other”
(Rollins, 1985: 157-158). This means that in the context of the relations between employer and domestic worker, deference confirms the unequal power positions of employer and domestic worker. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the domestic worker believes she is inferior to her employer (p. 170). The deference of domestic workers is rather a performance, because “the employers, the more powerful member of these labour dyads, want them” (Rollins, 1985: 170).

Although deference is expected from migrant domestic workers, this expectation is also adopted by migrant domestic workers at some times and is destabilised at other times. Constable (1997), for instance, suggests that deferential behaviour by migrant domestic workers can be viewed “as both resistance, in the sense of cultural critique from which the performer derives pleasure, and as accommodation or acquiescence, in the sense that the behaviour complies with the employer’s objectives” (p. 205). To capture the complexity of performance/performativity, Gregson and Rose’s (2000) suggestion of coupling performance with performativity has been adopted, where:

- **performance** – what individual subjects do, say ‘act-out’ – and performativity – the citational practices which reproduce and/or subvert discourse and which enable and discipline subjects and their performances – are intrinsically connected, through the saturation of performers with power (p. 434).

Works using the concepts of performance and performativity have proliferated in the human geography discipline, particularly in cultural geography (Richardson, 2013). Two major theoretical ideas behind performance and performativity as used in human geography derive from Goffman’s conceptualisation of performance” and/or Butler’s idea of “performativity”. Richardson (2013) offers a more detailed review of the different uses of Goffman’s “performance” and Butler’s “performativity” in cultural geography, but a brief explanation of each theoretical strand is provided below.

Goffman (1956) suggests the application of theatrical/dramaturgical performance to analyse site-specific social interaction. Goffman (1956) argues that an individual (the performer) carefully selects information which the performer performs to the audience in order to give the impression necessary to lead them to act according to his intention. The setting of the stage and the appearance and manner of the performer are important parts of social front (p. 19).

Butler (1993; 1999), on the other hand, takes the idea of performance further by suggesting the concept of performativity, and this is the source of the conceptual root for this study’s analysis of the defer-
ential performativity of migrant domestic workers. Butler suggests that “performativity” should be understood “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993: 2). With performativity, Butler brings the focus to the regulatory norms which invoke certain sex and gender identifications (i.e. heteronormativity) and treat other sex and gender identifications (e.g. homosexuality) as abject. At the same time, the reiterative process forms the subject to assume a certain sex and its appropriate gender to fit the (heterosexual) norms. However, when a subject does not adapt the gender according to the subject’s sex (e.g. in the case of drag), the body according to the sex (e.g. in the case of transsexuality) or a sexuality which fits the subject’s sex (e.g. in the case of homosexuality), the normative ideal is then disrupted. When the real is hard to distinguish from the unreal, when what we understand as the real is in fact a naturalised knowledge of gender and is indeed changeable, it is called subversion (Butler, 1999: xxii-xxiii).

Granted that Butler uses performativity in the context of gender and sex, it does not mean that its use is limited to these areas. Indeed, in the Preface to the newer edition of Gender Trouble (1999), Butler recognises the academic discussions which explore the construction of “race” by using the theory of performativity, and acknowledges that such analyses show the limits of gender as a sole category of analysis.

In human geography, for example, Gregson and Rose (2000) extend the use of Butler’s theory of performativity to space. They argue that space is also “brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power”, and that space also bears the complexity and uncertainty of performances (p. 434). Although human geographers have applied performativity in their analysis, Nelson (1999) warns that uncritical use of performativity will limit its user to connecting the subjects with discursive changes as the subjects are located in time space. Instead, Nelson suggests that we should conceptualise a situated subject as constituted by discursive processes but not reducible to them (p. 332-333), in order to consider:

how individuals and/or collective subjects do identity in relation to various discursive processes (e.g. class, race, gender and sexuality), to other subjects, and to layers of institutions and practices – all located concretely in time and space (p. 349).

Both Goffman and Butler’s theories of performance and performativity are useful for this study. Goffman’s idea of theatrical performances allows me to understand the accommodation that migrant domestic
workers in this study sometimes choose to embark upon; a choice to accommodate the employers’ demands and not to resist the domination of the employers – which is why they take pride in behaving according to the expectations of the employers. Even in the example of spatial resistance, where migrant domestic workers create alternative spaces to escape the employers’ surveillance, the act is accompanied by maintaining the illusion that migrant domestic workers follow the employers’ orders. However, this act of accommodation/resistance is inseparable from the whole normative ideals of a good migrant domestic worker.

Butlerian understanding of performativity, in the meantime, helps to connect the subjects, their practices/acts, and the regulatory norm about a proper (subservient feminine) appearance and the (deferential) behaviour of a good migrant domestic worker. The normative images of a good migrant domestic worker are located in the intersections of gender, class and ethnic discourses, and are projected onto the workers’ body and behaviour wherein deferential performativity reproduces the workers’ subordinated position. At the same time, performativity also offers an understanding of how the norms work and when subversion, or resistance, is possible. Performativity allows the exploration of regulation and constraints, conformity and abjection, and subversion and reconstitution in the resistance practices by the workers. It also equips this study with a tool to connect the accommodation of migrant domestic workers to the domination power practices of the employers which force the workers to conform. These minor subversive acts – regardless of how significant or insignificant they are and of whether they are carried out consciously or unconsciously – are the power practices by workers that put the stabilised, naturalised normative expectation of deference into a crisis.

Paid domestic work in the globalisation context

The employment of women migrants as paid domestic workers in richer countries is inseparable from the globalisation processes. Structural economic inequality across the globe causes migration streams of migrant workers from poorer countries to richer countries to seek better employment. The “feminisation of migration” phenomenon not only refers to the increasing number of women in the migration trend, but also to the feminisation of jobs available for these migrants to take, such as paid domestic work. Lee and Pratt (2011) situate the analyses of the migration of women workers in the context of neolib-
eral mobility: where women migrant workers are confined to specific jobs and subjects of confining migration regulations, and where “luck” is an easier to grasp than the neoliberal discourse of choice and responsibility. Sassen (2002) points out that the migration of women workers across the world in the globalisation context is in fact a “feminisation of survival”, where

[n]ot only are households, indeed whole communities, increasingly dependent on women for their survival, but so too are governments, along with enterprises that function on the margins of the legal economy (Sassen, 2002: 265).

Despite their increasing participation in the labour market, women continue to bear the reproductive work. Men’s participation in care and domestic work, meanwhile, is almost non-existent. The lack of support from the state suggests that reproductive work is left to women to solve, and it includes relying on the market for a solution. As Molina and Mulinari (2013) argue,

If the state and the family cannot offer solutions for the reproductive work, it will be within the framework of the capitalist market as the negotiations take place; the negotiations which strengthens the patriarchy through building a moral economy where it is women who are responsible to “solve” the reproductive challenge by transferring the responsibility to other women (Molina and Mulinari, 2013: 229-230, own translation).

The recruitment and employment of women migrants in the home then solves the reproductive problem of the working women in rich countries. It allows them to balance their work and domestic duties; meanwhile, the men in rich countries resume their privilege as not having to deal with domestic work. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002: 12) argue, “A division of labour feminists critique when it was ‘local’ has now, metaphorically speaking, gone global.” The trend now is a “global redivision of women’s traditional work” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002: 11).

An interesting point from Ehrenrich and Hochschild’s (2002) observation is the negotiation of the traditional gender role among women as a result of this global migration phenomenon. As will be shown through the materials, the traditional gender role is reproduced on a global scale, with women migrants from poor countries taking up the traditional reproductive role. Furthermore, when “race” and class are included in the analysis as they intersect with gender, we can see what Glenn (1992) refers to as the “racial division of reproductive labour”,

60
where middle-class, white women transfer the burden of domestic work to more oppressed groups of women.

While the decision of these women to migrate for work may be an individual family’s decision, it is also a decision taken in the globalisation context. In a study of Filipina domestic workers in Italy and the US, Parreñas (2001) finds that these women experience “dislocations” in the forms of partial citizenship, family separation, contradictory class mobility and non-belonging. These “dislocations” are caused by globalisation and macro-processes, and institutionalised in social processes such as transnationalism and gender. Filipina workers in Parreñas’ study, however, resist these structural processes by responding to particular “dislocations” that they face (Parreñas, 2001).

I will not use Parreñas’ concept of “dislocations” because the migration of Indonesian domestic workers is temporary, unlike the case of Filipina workers; nevertheless, I think Parreñas’ finding about the spatiality of the workers’ resistance is interesting. As will be shown later, the institutional power position of migrant domestic workers limits their resistance, and therefore resistance to larger structural processes is harder to undertake. Rather than resisting directly to the structural processes, the workers tend to adapt everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1985; 1989; see also the discussion on “everyday resistance” in the previous section).

As the role of women migrant domestic workers in the global economy can no longer be ignored, I echo the call by Gibson-Graham (2006) regarding the need to change the globalisation script, by refusing to accept the victim role and by challenging, rejecting and rewriting the discourse from which the globalisation script draws its legitimacy (Gibson-Graham, 2006: Chapter 6). While Gibson-Graham directs the advice at the non-capitalist economy, it is also applicable for the context of paid migrant domestic labour. Reflecting on her joint work with Stiell on paid migrant domestic workers in Toronto (see also Stiell and England, 1997), England (2008) for instance suggests to see the “local” and the “global” as co-constitutive, in order to deconstruct the notion of the “local” as the victim of globalisation. It is precisely what Massey suggests with “a global sense of place” (Massey, 1994: Chapter 6). By unfolding the relations between the local (the home, the body, the national) and the global in the context of paid domestic labour, as will be argued later in Chapter IX, we obtain an alternative narrative of globalisation (Nagar et al., 2002) in which the voices of women migrant domestic workers are at the centre. As I stated elsewhere when reflecting on the achievements of feminist economic geographers (Hierofani, 2016), it is important to keep
raising the voices of women migrants as an alternative voice to the dominant economic globalisation discourse.

Conclusion

These different feminist scholarships shape our knowledge by theorising the multiple faces of paid domestic work phenomena. The flourishing literature on (paid) domestic work by feminist scholars are useful for this dissertation to identify different elements of these phenomena: the overlapping domestic and care tasks, the requirement of physical and embodied labour as part of the economic exchange, the expectation and construction of deference, the paradoxical space of the home, and the construction of paid domestic work as a racial division of reproductive labour where gender intersects with class, “race”/ethnicity and immigration status. Foucauldian feminist scholarships, meanwhile, are important for this dissertation to understand the power relations which underlie the work relations between employers and migrant domestic workers: the notion that power is everywhere, the notion of the body as a subjected body (body in space and body as space) and a productive body, and forms of power practices (discipline, paternalism, master suppression techniques and exploitation). Viewing power as entangled with resistance offers a way to recognise the everyday resistance practices of migrant domestic workers in spite of their weak power positions. Lastly, by situating paid domestic work in the feminist critiques on globalisation, this dissertation benefits from the notion of the interrelated linkages between the home, the body, the national and the global.
IV. Carrying out feminist research

In a reflection about feminist geography scholarship as marked by the 10-year celebration of the feminist journal *Gender, Place and Culture*, Kobayashi (2003) claims that feminist academics have become more self-reflexive and socially active. These two aspects are true in this research. For me, the meaning of carrying out feminist research is twofold. First, to be aware of power relations in the research process and to be critical of how they affect the construction of knowledge. This is a question of “who speaks with whom, and how?” (Kobayashi, 1994). The question of who speaks with whom is a matter of reflexivity about the researcher’s positionality in relation to the research participants. The “how” question encourages transparency about the research process—the methods that are used and the representation of the participants’ voices.

Second, to contribute to the political commitment for improvement of the situation. Feminist research on an oppressed group goes beyond a mere academic research; it is a political activism aimed at improving the situation for that group. It is about “how we use our privilege [as feminist researchers] to social ends” (Kobayashi, 1994: 76). This study does not go insofar as a participatory action research because I did not develop the research together with the participants (see for instance Kindon, 2005; Pain, 2004; Schurr and Segebart, 2012). Bringing up the stories from the migrants, however, can raise awareness of the precarious situation faced by women migrant domestic workers. The analysis in the study I hope can also offer a new perspective for further development of the governance of labour migration based on the human rights of migrants as suggested by Basok and Piper (2012).

How the study is used for the political commitment to improve the situation of the workers is beyond this dissertation. Rather, in this chapter, I will elaborate the research process. The first part of this chapter is designed to answer the question “who speaks with whom?” and is founded on feminist ideas of reflexivity. The second part of the chapter interprets the question of “how?” in a wider sense, to include
how the experiences and voices of migrant domestic workers are gathered, handled and (re)presented in the research process.

Reflexivity: “Who speaks with whom?”

The relations between the researcher and the research subjects are inherently unequal. This is partly a result of the higher power position occupied by the researcher in relation to the research subjects, especially if the research subjects are from marginalised or oppressed groups. Some feminists try to apply collaboration as a strategy to fill this gap, but even this ideal strategy still has certain limitations (Sharp, 2005). As McDowell (1992: 408) argues, “It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that the notion of non-exploitative research relations is a utopian ideal that is receding from our grasp.” Rather than idealising equality between the researcher and the research subjects, we need to recognise the unequal power positions between the two “and write this into our research practice” (McDowell, 1992: 409, italics in the original text).

Reflexivity is a way to recognise the positionality and power relations between the researcher and the research subjects. Rose (1997) argues that reflexivity is usually formulated in terms of visibility and spatiality. **Visibility** means making the research process and the researcher’s own positions visible. **Spatiality**, meanwhile, can be defined in two directions: *inward*, where the researcher looks into the researcher’s own identity, or *outward*, where the researcher reflects on the researcher’s relation to the research subjects and the wider world (Rose, 1997: 309). The following section will reflect on the research process and how I relate to the research participants.

One aspect of this research process that still haunts me is how a researcher enters the field with a predefined assumption that the researcher and the research subjects share a similar understanding of the situation. For this study, feeling well-equipped with knowledge of the situation of Indonesian migrant domestic workers gained from a previous work experience and feminist theoretical discussions on domestic work and the public-private divide, I went into the field with the idea of carrying out research about the negotiation of public and private spaces in the experiences of live-in migrant domestic workers.

The first challenge to the research idea emerged when I tried to translate the research questions from English into Indonesian as a preparation prior to meeting the migrant domestic workers. There is no Indonesian word equivalent to “private/privacy”, other than proba-
bly the word “privat” which is obviously adapted from English. When I finally spoke to the first few research participants, this worry turned out to be not unfounded. For example, the migrant domestic workers did not understand why they were asked whether or not they could lock their rooms, when for them it was more important that the employers did not hit or physically or sexually abuse them. Rather than public/private, the control and discipline of the employers were more problematic for migrant domestic workers in their everyday lives. Interestingly, when a similar question about public/private was asked to the two employers (the question was in English), they immediately answered that the workers got their own private space, such as their own room with all the basic amenities, and that they respected each other’s privacy by not disturbing the other person while they were in their private space.

I was unsure about whether or not to write down this experience, but finally decided to do so because it was an important part of the research process. Writing it down becomes a process of reflection in order to avoid making the same assumption in future work. Two important points emerge from this experience. First, the researcher often comes with a research agenda which might be different to that of the research group. The issues raised by the researcher may not be as important for the research subjects, whose experiences are grounded on their everyday lives; for example, how the research participants in this study considered the discipline of the employers as more important than the negotiation of the public/private divide. Academic research projects are often designed by academics as part of the requirement to produce theoretical analyses of a situation; on the other hand, research subjects are concerned about how the research is relevant to and useful for their needs (Schurr and Segebart, 2012: 149-150). The least we can do as researchers is to listen to our research subjects and to adjust our research ideas accordingly, because ultimately our academic research should aim to achieve the improvement of situations in society.

Second, our identities and experiences clearly shape our knowledge and how we understand the world including in how we see ourselves in relation to the participants and vice versa. As Valentine (2005: 113) suggests, “[O]ur prior assumptions about our sameness to, or difference from, an informant can often be challenged in the course of the interview, because the way that we as researchers and our informants perform our identities and read those of others is something that is negotiated in the relational moment of the interview.” It seems easy to assume that I share similar understanding with migrant domestic
workers because I am an “insider”—coming from the same society, Indonesian, sharing the same language, having the empirical knowledge on the situation, and so on. This assumption, however, was challenged when I was in the field, from not speaking the same language as a result of our ethnic differences (see also the discussion about language in the next section), to not having the same understanding of public/private. Rather, it was easier for me to communicate with the employers since we speak English fluently, and we shared similar ideas about public/private, whether it is a result of our education, middle-class/upper-class background, or the experiences of living in urban spaces where privacy and individuality are seen as the norms. At the same time, it is also a common concern about the precarious situation experienced by migrant domestic workers which made the two employers in agreeing to accept me in their house for an interview.

This is precisely what Mullings (1999) brings up about the challenge of negotiating the “insider/outsider” identity in an intercultural research. The experience confirms the relativity and flexibility of our positionality as researchers in relation to our research participants. Commonalities and differences between us and the research participants may position us as an “insider”, an “outsider”, both or neither (Mullings, 1999). It is up to us to use the flexibility and relativity of our positionality to benefit the research. We will see below another example, where the identity as an Indonesian PhD student at a Swedish university creates just such flexibility.

For white feminists researching non-white research subjects, “race” often becomes an important category which separates them from the research subjects. This is because “whiteness” as a norm entails a higher power position along with its privileges which are often taken for granted as natural (see, for example, Kobayashi and Peake, 1994 on critiques on naturalism; or Kobayashi, 1994 on the danger of essentialism and naturalism). The experience in the field shows that an identity as a PhD student at a Swedish university represents this “whiteness” norm.

When contacting the employers’ association and the placement agency for the first time over the phone, they assumed that I was a (white) Swedish student because I presented myself as a PhD student at a Swedish university. Having “Patricia” as a first name also suggests a Western name rather than an Indonesian name and therefore conceals the nationality. This was obvious from their surprised faces when I arrived at their offices and introduced myself. The reality that I am Indonesian destabilises the “whiteness” norm which is entailed in
the identity as a PhD student at a Swedish university. During his inter-
view, however, the director of the placement agency once again 
associated me with the Western (white) way of thinking when asked 
about his opinion on days off for migrant domestic workers. At that 
point he reasoned that the Malaysian/Indonesian society “are not as 
Americans yet” when referring to the formalisation of work relations 
between employers and domestic workers as found in the USA, Eu-
rope or other “developed countries”. When I visited Kuala Lumpur for 
the second fieldwork and contacted the placement agency, I was una-
ble to obtain another appointment with the director; nor did he respond 
to calls or text messages. It was not possible to be certain whether the 
revelation of the Indonesian identity had anything to do with this, but 
it was certainly one possible reason.

Being a PhD student at a Swedish university gives me a certain po-
positionality which entails “white” privileges. Yet when these two re-
search participants found out that I was Indonesian, it destabilised 
these very same “whiteness” privileges. Asking a question with 
“whiteness” value in it, such as about days off for migrant domestic 
workers, restored once again the “whiteness” norm embedded in the 
identity as a student in a Swedish university. As Faria and Mollett 
(2016) found in their experiences during their fieldwork in South Su-
dan and Honduras, “whiteness may inspire awe while scholars of col-
our evoke disdain”.

There is no need to deny that the relations with the research sub-
jects are complex as a result of the difference in power positionalities. 
Although such difference may always entail a danger of distancing 
ourselves as researchers from our research subjects, it is more con-
structive to refer to our commonality as a foundation for legitimacy by 
recognising “that commonality is always partial” (Kobayashi, 1994). 
Since beginning to design the research, I have been clear that I posi-
tion myself with migrant domestic workers. It is a position based on a 
concern to support the rights of migrant domestic workers. The narra-
tives of migrant domestic workers, therefore, underpins the arguments 
developed in this dissertation. The chapters about the general working 
conditions and the disciplinary power of the employers (Chapter V-
VII), for example, are developed from the worker’s perspectives: how 
migrant domestic workers perceive their employers. In the next part 
we will examine how the experiences and stories of migrant domestic 
workers in the study were gathered, documented and presented.
Qualitative methods: the first “how” question

This section discusses the experience of working in the field in Karawang and Kuala Lumpur, and the methods used to gather the material, namely interviews and group interviews, observation and media monitoring/document study. This is part of the first “how” question; how the material is gathered.

Visiting the field

To gather the data for this research, I visited a village in Karawang, Indonesia and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Fieldwork was undertaken in each place twice within two years (2013-2014), with a total duration of approximately three months.

Karawang was chosen as a site of fieldwork because it is one of the migrants’ origin areas in Indonesia. It is a regency in West Java, Indonesia, situated about 51 km east of Jakarta. Karawang used to be known as one of the main paddy producers (lumbung padi) in Indonesia. Now, however, the paddy fields in the area no longer produce much due to excessive use of toxic chemical fertilisers for over 40 years. Many of the farmers had to sell their lands to bigger landowners and became farm labourers, or found employment in other sectors. Around the centre of Karawang city, many industrial plants have been built, and these keep growing. However, the people working in those factories mostly come from other areas of Indonesia, such as Central Java. Migration to work abroad is therefore seen a solution for the survival of families in the area.

I had a contact in Karawang who was able to help with recruiting the participants. The contact there was a kind of gatekeeper for the study. Campbell et al. (2006: 98) suggest that gatekeepers are “those who provide – directly or indirectly – access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional, or informational”. When I approached this contact in Karawang with a research plan, I was put in contact with two other people who then recruited potential participants and provided assistance during the fieldwork.

One unexpected challenge that emerged during the fieldwork in Karawang was the language barrier. The Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia) is the national language, which is used for official purposes. It is, however, not an everyday conversational language in areas outside Jakarta. Indonesia is comprised of more than 300 ethnic groups and each ethnic group has its own language. In Karawang, as in the majority of West Java region, the Sundanese is the major ethnic
group and they speak Sundanese. As someone who grew up in Jakarta, I speak only the national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, with a limited knowledge of the Javanese language from interaction with the paternal side of the family, who are ethnic Javanese.

This linguistic difference became a challenge when I attempted to communicate with former migrant domestic workers in Karawang, especially those of older generations. When they were asked questions in *Bahasa Indonesia*, they answered in a mix of *Bahasa Indonesia* and Sundanese. I was grateful for the field assistants, who helped with translating the stories and filled in gaps on local knowledge.

The greater area of Kuala Lumpur was the second fieldwork site. It was chosen because it is the capital of Malaysia. While the fieldwork in Karawang allowed me to gather the stories of migrant domestic workers who had returned from Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur was a good place to get the stories of those who still worked in Malaysia, and also the stories of employers.

However, the fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur did not go as smoothly as it was in Karawang. Firstly, I had no contact person to open up access in the field. Secondly, the first fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur was quite stressful; I was worried about aspects such as the safety of being a woman alone in a foreign country for a lengthy period of time. It was difficult for me to accept this stressful feeling, given that I had travelled half way around the world from Indonesia to Sweden. Despite many methodology/method classes taken as part of the graduate studies I discovered that nothing in the education had prepared me for this embodied experience of being in the field. I was grateful when the family joined me during the second fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, easing the feeling of being alone in the field.

**Interviews and group interviews**

The stories of women migrant domestic workers are central to this research. Interviews were therefore a good method for capturing their stories. As Valentine (2005: 111) argues, the aim of the interview is “to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives”.

Dunn (2005: 79) defines interviews as “a data-gathering method in which there is a spoken exchange of information.” An important element of this definition is the conversational character of the method, which takes the form of an exchange of information between the interviewer and the interviewee. During an interview, the interviewee shares the experience and knowledge of the research topics with the interviewer. At the same time, the interviewer encourages the inter-
viewee to think about the research topics while also presenting her own knowledge. I found this process of information exchange during the interviews. We will see examples of the exchange of information in the interview materials later. It is also another reason why, for the most part, I present the interview excerpts in the form of a dialogue.

In recruiting migrant domestic workers and employers as potential informants for the interview, a combination of a snowball technique and on-site recruitment were used. Snowballing is a method which uses “one contact to help you recruit another contact, who in turn can put you in touch with someone else” (Valentine, 2005: 117). The strength of the snowballing method is that it is easier to gain trust and to find interviewees with the background required for the research (Valentine, 2005). The weakness, however, is that the participants tend to come from the same peer group. The snowball technique was used to recruit former migrant domestic workers in Karawang, employers, civil society activists and a few other relevant informants in Kuala Lumpur. Due to the lack of a contact in Kuala Lumpur, I also used on-site recruitment (Secor, 2010). This took the form of striking up conversations with several Indonesian hotel cleaners. A few of them agreed to meet me outside of their work hours. At the beginning of the research I planned to avoid interviewing employer and domestic worker of the same household due to the unequal power relations between the two. When I got in contact with the employers to do interviews, they advised me to talk to their domestic workers too. In total 29 people were interviewed: 16 of them were migrant domestic workers, two were employers, one representative of an employer’s association, two representatives of a placement agency, while the rest were civil society activists and academicians/researchers. The list of interviewees is attached in the Appendix.

Two forms of interview – group interview and individual interview – were used. The data gathering began with a group interview with five former migrant domestic workers in Karawang, Indonesia. The group interview was useful for gathering the collective experiences of migrant domestic workers. It was also an effective method for gathering a good amount of data within a short time period. It turned out that the group interview offered a more relaxed atmosphere for the conversation to take place. This was also the reason why, during the second fieldwork in Karawang, I followed the suggestion of the participants and carried out the interviews in a small group of two to three migrant domestic workers at a time, in addition to the presence of two research assistants. On the second fieldwork in Karawang, I met two participants of the group interview for a follow-up interview. On one of the
interviews in Kuala Lumpur, the domestic worker brought along a friend who also worked as a part-time cleaner. When the director of a placement agency in Kuala Lumpur was interviewed, he was also accompanied by his second-in-command. Other than these, individual interviews were conducted with the rest of the informants.

In terms of the structure of the interview, semi-structured interviews were employed. Dunn (2005: 80) argues that a semi-structured interview has “some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant”. Before beginning the fieldwork, I prepared a list of questions, broken down into topics, which was used as a guide for the interview. I also went through the interview guides with the contact in Karawang and the two field assistants (from now, I refer to them as local contacts, unless stated otherwise). Discussing the interview guides with them was useful in developing the guides further and in understanding the local cultural practices better, such as the habits of eating with hands or the communal practices where everyone knows almost everyone else in the village. They were also present during the interviews, although the first contact person only joined us for the group interview. The presence of local contacts made the initial contact with the research participants in Karawang easier and helped the participants to relax.

The interview with migrant domestic workers usually began with the general question about the reason for migration, and then proceeding with relevant questions according to the workers’ narrative flow. Since the local contacts were informed of the interview guides, they were engaged in the interview, such as raising questions to the participants and responding to the participants’ stories. In the excerpts of interview later, I use “LC” (local contact) to refer to the questions or comments raised by any of the local contacts. Being sensitive to the power relations between researcher/interviewer and participants/interviewees, on a few occasions I felt uncomfortable with the way the local contacts responded to the stories, such as making a teasing comment to the participant when she was sharing her story. On these few occasions, the participant did not seem to take the comment as an insult so it did not affect the flow of the interview.

For employers, the interview questions were developed on the basis of the interview questions for migrant domestic workers. Meanwhile, for other informants, such as civil society activists and placement agencies, I generally inquired about the general situation of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia. Throughout the fieldwork the questions were reworked to include new information that had come to light.
The interviews were conducted either in Bahasa Indonesia or in English. Due to a linguistic difference, some migrant domestic workers interviewed in Karawang responded in a mix of Bahasa Indonesia and Sundanese. In that case, the field assistants helped with the translations as the participants told their stories. Similarly, when conducting the interviews in Kuala Lumpur, a few participants used a mix of English and Bahasa Malay or used a few terms in Bahasa Malay. Since I did not have a field assistant in Kuala Lumpur, I had to rely on the English parts of the interviews.

One important aspect of an interview is building a rapport with the informants. It is “basically a matter of understanding their model of the world and communicating your understanding symmetrically” (Dunn, 2005: 89). While one may have reservations about Dunn’s view in terms of whether it is possible to communicate our understanding symmetrically with the participant as a result of our complex power positions and knowledge differences, it is clearly important to build rapport with the participants of the research project. Data are easier to gather when the participants feel at ease with the researcher. In Karawang, I found it easier to build rapport with the migrant domestic workers because most of them knew either one of or both of the field assistants; in Kuala Lumpur, it was not as easy.

In addition to building a rapport, there are other considerations to bear in mind when conducting an interview, such as the place where the interview is carried out, and gift-giving. When contacting potential informants, I usually asked them to choose an interview location where they felt comfortable. Elwood and Martin (2000: 656) observe that “Although interview site may not be part of the primary avenue of inquiry in the research, observing dynamics in that place, and paying attention to what the participant says about the place, may generate useful research material.” (please also see the discussion on observation in the next section). One exception was the place where the group interview was carried out, because a large space was required to accommodate the group (of nine people in total, including I and the three local contacts). The group interview was carried out at the local contact’s place, which was a school for the children in the area, and also the place where I stayed during the fieldworks in Karawang. Other interview locations include migrant domestic worker’s homes, employer’s homes and public places such as the local monument/graveyard or busy restaurants. Having interviews in public places offers a more neutral place where the participants may feel more comfortable to meet the researcher.
I also gave small gifts for the workers interviewed, by bringing them a small package of food and giving them a small amount of money as tokens of appreciation for their time. Gift-giving is also a tradition in Indonesia when visiting someone, especially in her/his home; sometimes it is considered rude to visit someone’s home without bringing *oleh-oleh* (something as a gift).

Prior to the interview, I asked for permission to record it. Almost every interview was recorded, with a few exceptions when the workers refused consent to be recorded. Some participants seemed to be a little hesitant when asked, but usually after being reassured that the recording would only be used for the study, they became more relaxed. I found the recording useful to help focus on the interview rather than being busy taking notes. For those few interviews which were not recorded, simplified field notes were taken during the interview and more thorough notes were written up after the interview.

**Observation**

One of the benefits of doing fieldwork is the opportunity to get close to the research subjects. In doing so, the researcher is able to observe the research subjects as well as to experience the situation first hand. In this study I used observation not as a method of its own, such as preparing an observation guide or having scheduled observation visits. Observation in this study, rather, was used to complement the interview method as a way to enrich the understanding of the situation. As Kearn (2005) suggests, one of the purposes of observation is:

> to gather additional descriptive information before, during, or after other more structured forms of data collection. The intent is to gain added value from time ‘in the field’ and to provide a descriptive complement to more controlled and formalized methods such as interviewing. (p. 193)

When in Karawang, I was invited to visit a number of migrant domestic workers in their homes. Although the main purpose of visiting the homes was to interview the migrant domestic workers, this also provided the opportunity to observe the environment where the workers lived. For example, their houses are in relatively better conditions than the other houses in the village. Or, when I was invited to the two employers’ house to do the interviews, it offered a valuable opportunity to observe the power relations in those places which enriched the material from the interview. For instance, when I interviewed one of the employers, she closed the door which separated the kitchen from the living room where the interview took place. The door was left open
when I interviewed her domestic worker in the kitchen before. It suggested the power relations between the two, where the employer could choose to get a private conversation while the worker could not enjoy such privilege. It was different from the time when I interviewed the other pair of employer and domestic worker, where the employer stayed in the veranda while I interviewed the worker inside the house.

In Kuala Lumpur, I also visited two areas which are often considered to be places where migrant domestic workers might gather if they get any days off. One area is known as the area for Filipina migrant domestic workers, the other where Indonesian migrant workers usually go. Each place was visited twice; once during a weekday and once at the weekend. During these visits, I observed the presence of police, the presence of migrant domestic workers and the general environment of the place. The observation then generated knowledge of monitoring by the police – as a symbolic representation of the state – of migrant (domestic) workers in public places and the saving/consumption patterns of these two groups of workers, which was useful to contextualise and enrich this research.

**Media monitoring and document study**

To complement the data gathered from the interview and observation, a simple document study and media monitoring process was carried out. Relevant regulations or laws pointed out by the civil society activists interviewed were also studied; for instance, the Malaysian Employment Act, the Malaysian Immigration Act and the regulation on the employment of migrant domestic workers issued by the Immigration Department, and the Memorandum of Understanding between Indonesia and Malaysia on domestic workers. The Malaysian online media were monitored for relevant news about (Indonesian) migrant domestic workers. Due to language limitations, this was mainly restricted to news in English. The material gathered from the media monitoring and document study is useful when putting the research topic in the context of wider discourses. This became the core idea when I developed the contextualisation chapter of this dissertation (Chapter II).
Analysing and presenting the narratives: the second “how” question

This section continues the “how” question with a description of the analysis and presentation of the narratives of migrant domestic workers. When I returned to Sweden after each fieldwork, the interview recordings were transcribed. Transcribing the interviews as soon as possible was useful because the memory of the interview was still fresh. This helped to start categorising the emerging themes from the interview. Categorising ideas about emerging themes is what Crang (2005: 222) called “open coding”. This categorisation of themes was also useful for editing the interview questions as a preparation for the next fieldwork.

In analysing the interview materials, a combination of content analysis and narrative analysis is used. Secor (2010) suggests that in content analysis, “themes, words, and phrases are tracked and analysed within across transcripts” (p. 202); meanwhile, in narrative analysis, “the researcher examines the stories told within the interview or focus group context and analyses how they are put together, the resources they draw on and the social work that they do” (Secor, 2010: 202). Emerging themes from the interview materials were categorised during the process of transcribing, and these themes were then tracked across the transcripts. When analysing the stories of the participants, I analysed how the stories were built into their narratives, including presenting the interview materials as a conversational dialogue to show how the narratives were built. After all, it is the narratives of migrant domestic workers which are central to understanding their experiences and how they make sense of these experiences. As Crang argues when discussing narrative analysis,

> The key argument is that people tend to make sense of things as stories, comprising events, imputing motives, agency and roles, rather than in terms of static characteristics (Crang, 2005: 230).

Throughout the PhD studies, I worked closely with the materials, working and re-working the analyses of the materials as the research developed further and new themes emerged. At the same time, this process also continuously trained the analysis and writing skills. As Crang says,

> Analysis should not be an afterthought, but needs to be included in early research plans, if for no other reason, because getting to grips with the materials properly can take as long as creating them in the first place (Crang, 2005: 219).
Presenting the materials is another challenge. As the narratives of migrant domestic workers were woven into the broader discourse, I have striven to be cautious in weaving own understanding into the text. As Secor (2010) rightly observes,

> [W]hen we work with these [qualitative] methods we need to be aware that we are working with, what we have gathered, are words, statements that are shaped by conversational contexts and variously situated within wider discursive formations (p. 195).

Presenting qualitative materials is therefore a process of unfolding the narratives as situated in the broader discourse, where the knowledge of the informants and the knowledge of the researcher build on each other. Making the researcher's own reflexivity and positionality visible, as suggested by feminist authors, as described at the beginning of this chapter, is a way to contextualise the materials.

When designing the research, the intention was to present the narratives of migrant domestic workers in their original language and to provide the Anglophone reader with an English translation. It was first thought that this would be a good way to retain the original voices of the workers. As the research progressed, however, it became clear that this was not practical, including as a result of space limitation. I have instead attempted to keep the tone of their narratives as close as possible to the original when translating the interview excerpts from Indonesian/Sundanese to English. This is why in the narratives some words, terms or ways to address someone are still in their original forms. This includes how the informant refers to herself, whether using “I”, “we”, her own name or a combination of these different ways. These words or terms in Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia) are listed at the beginning of the dissertation.

To ensure anonymity for the participants, pseudonyms have been used. These were applied to all migrant domestic workers and the two employers interviewed. The representative of the placement agency is also referred to only as the Director of a placement agency, with the name of the agency being eliminated because only one agency was interviewed. For other interviewees, their affiliations are unaltered.

**Conclusion**

It is important to emphasise here that no matter how much commonality and difference we have as researchers with the research participants, there will always be power inequality between us. As discov-
er during this research, although I come from the same country, of the same “race” and a similar cultural background, the power inequality between I as the researcher and migrant domestic workers as the research subjects still remains due to other differences, whether these are based on class background, education level or living experience. Identities and experiences shape us as we are and influence our perception of the world around us. Rather than worrying about these differences which set us as researchers apart from our research subjects, it is more useful to focus on our shared, partial commonalities which strengthen our legitimacy to speak with the research subjects (Kobayashi, 1994). We should use the flexibility and relativity of our identities for the benefit of advancing the situation. Critics could reason that due to the privileges as a Western educated, middle-class (Indonesian) woman in Sweden, I am not in a position to speak about Indonesian migrant domestic workers. Yet it is a common concern with Indonesian migrant domestic workers to improve their situation that becomes the foundation of this dissertation, and the aim is not to speak for the migrant domestic workers, but with the migrant domestic workers by presenting their narratives here.

Feminists seem to vary in their positions about whether or not their research should empower the research subjects. Valentine (2005: 123), for instance, points out the opinion of some feminist academics, “that feminist interviewing should be a consciousness-raising process and therefore ‘educating’ participants is an important goal of research.” McDowell (1992: 413) cautiously argues, “[W]e, as scholars, cannot, nor should we aim to, empower our participants. That is a political task for them, or better, one that we might share together.” Kobayashi (2003: 348), meanwhile, suggests that reflexivity needs to be connected to a larger agenda, i.e. to changing the world. In this sense, I agree with Kobayashi. A concern shared with Indonesian migrant domestic workers about improving their situation, which is the foundation of this research, is one of the contributions of this dissertation to the political commitment required to improve their situation. As Nelson and Seager (2005) suggest, it is political commitments that drive feminism in the first place. It is therefore important to situate the narratives of migrant domestic workers in the wider discourse, such as globalisation, which benefits from patriarchy and racial/ethnic subordination. Presenting the resistance of migrant domestic workers is also a way to challenge the victimisation of migrant domestic workers as scripted in the globalisation discourse.
V. Migration at the nexus of family survival, patriarchy and geographical imagination

In this chapter we will hear the narratives of migrant domestic workers about their reasons for migrating and about the choice of Malaysia as a destination country. Despite the important role of these women in the survival of the family, patriarchal norms restrict their migration and belittle their contribution. Geographical imagination built on stories of other migrant workers complements the geographical proximity between Indonesia and Malaysia in constructing Malaysia as an attractive destination country for work migration. By presenting these narratives, the study aims to provide a background to contextualise the migration of these women to Malaysia.

Family survival in the face of patriarchy

For many of the domestic workers, the reason why they decided to migrate was to financially help their husband or family. With declining agricultural production and a poor economy in rural areas in Indonesia, such as in Karawang where the fieldwork for this study was carried out, job availability is limited for locals. The migrants’ husbands mostly carry out paid work, but the work is usually temporary and does not bring enough income for the family. Family survival, especially if the family has young children, forces these women to migrate, as described by Kokom:

Yocie : Could you tell me why you decided to become a woman migrant [domestic] worker [...]?
Kokom : Well, to help my husband. Daily we did poorly in the village.

10 Here I use the term “geographical imagination” in a rather generic sense, i.e. a way to think about the places as “individual mental images and socially produced discourses about cultures, spaces, and differences” (Gilley, 2010; for other theoretical discussions on geographical imagination, see e.g. Harvey, 1990; Gregory, 1994; Rose, 1993).
Yocie: Your husband is still alive?
Kokom: Back then he was. Plus, the kids were not married yet, two [kids].
Yocie: You have two kids?
Kokom: Back then [I had] two, now [I have] three.
Yocie: [Are they] still young?
Kokom: Two are finished with their school. [One finished] junior high school, one finished elementary school, the youngest is still on the first year of elementary school. As usual, to help my husband.

(Interview with Kokom, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 15 October 2014)

In general, migrant domestic workers usually transfer their earnings to their family back home. The frequency of the transfer, however, varies from one worker to another depending among other things on the employer’s “good will” (see also the discussion about employer practices of withholding the salary in Chapter VII). When asked to whom the money was transferred, the majority of the domestics answered that it went to the family in general although a few said that it was sent to her sibling or parents. Kokom’s answer in the above citation, however, is the common answer given by the workers to the question of the reason for migrating; to help her husband. If we put the two together, this suggests that the husband is probably “the family” meant by these women to whom they send their earnings, with a few exceptions of those who said that the money went to their sibling or parents.

The patriarchal family ideal where the husband is the head of the family is still strong in Indonesia. The husband is the breadwinner in the family. When the husband is not able to provide sufficient income for the family, migration for work offers an alternative solution; nevertheless, the patriarchal norm of the husband as the breadwinner remains unchanged as we can see in the following interview excerpt.

LC: Why did you not choose [to work] in Jakarta, Bu?
Melati: In Jakarta it would be shameful: [I] have a husband but why work in Jakarta... It’s better to work abroad, I thought. My husband would be ashamed. Many people [say], ‘going abroad’, so

11 LC is short for local contact who accompanied me during the interview. See the discussion on methodology on Chapter IV.
12 Ibu (in short, Bu) is a way to address a married woman in Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia).
the husband would not be ashamed. If [working] in Jakarta, ‘Why,’ they’d say, ‘do you work in Jakarta if you have a husband?’

Yolanda: It is better not to work, rather than [working] in Jakarta. It’s embarrassing.

Melati: It’s better [to work] abroad.

Yolanda: If [we’re working] abroad, our husband would not be ashamed... well, not too ashamed, I mean.

(Interview with Melati and Yolanda, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

As the country’s capital and the biggest city closest to their village, Jakarta may offer wider work opportunities. There is a high demand for paid domestic workers as a result of growing middle- and upper-class families in Jakarta. Despite pressing economic needs, Melati and Yolanda were worried about bringing shame to their husbands if they worked in Jakarta. According to Melati and Yolanda, it was better not to work at all rather than working in Jakarta because the neighbours would judge them and their husbands badly.

Working as migrants abroad, in their opinion, offers a better solution because they earn more money than working in Jakarta. In a sense, there is a shift in the discourse where migration for work is no longer a necessity for family survival, but a way to earn more income for the family. This shift of issue in fact reinforces the patriarchal family ideal with the husband as the primary breadwinner in the family while the wife generates “supplementary income”, despite the fact that the wife’s earnings from migration are higher and necessary for the family survival (Bastia and Busse, 2011). The same patriarchal logic is also the reason why some governments of the migrants’ origin countries encourage women to migrate for work because “migrant women are more likely than their male counterparts to send their hard-earned wages to their families rather than spending the money on themselves” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002: 7).

Migrant workers, however, do not usually know what the family – or the husband – do with the money. The observations carried out in Kuala Lumpur may also be able to shed light on the consumption patterns of Indonesian and Filipina migrant domestic workers. Two areas in Kuala Lumpur, Chow Kit and Kota Raya, were visited. These areas are well known as the places where Indonesian and Filipina migrant (domestic) workers usually go to if they get any days off.
Here is an excerpt of the field notes taken during the visit to Chow Kit, the place where Indonesian (domestic) workers\(^\text{13}\) usually gather:

Other than restaurants, I noticed that there were many stores selling gold jewellery, offering money exchange and remittance transfer services, selling cheap phone cards with call rates to Indonesia advertised on the banners, even selling airline tickets to Indonesia. In one of the restaurants, there was even an advertisement of a service for sending packages to Indonesia. When I entered a market in the area, I saw that they also sold cheap clothes, bags, shoes, and Indonesian products ranging from condiments (such as sweet soy sauce and chili sauce) to medicines. It seemed to me that they are facilitating the needs of Indonesian workers, including the gold jewellery which is often chosen as a form of investment. When it comes to money transfers, they seem to compete to convince potential clients that the money will be received within a short period of time with a very low transfer fee. (Field note, Kuala Lumpur, 5 October 2013)

Compare the environment at Chow Kit, as described above, with the situation at Kota Raya, below:

This is an air-conditioned, four-story building with escalators between floors. Particularly on the first and second floor, the stores were mostly mobile phone stores and they sold mostly smartphones. I noticed that many of the stores/businesses there were oriented towards the customer’s pleasure and consumerism. In addition to mobile phone stores and the usual clothes, shoes and bag stores, they also sold cheap jewellery (not gold!) and watches. They also had many hairdressers and massage services. In contrast to Chow Kit, I only saw 2-3 places selling Filipino food/drink and they were packed with customers. There were only two money transfer services and both were crowded with long queues of customers. There were a lot of businesses in the back alley on one of the floors which offered package-sending services. I saw a big pile of boxes, mostly about the height of my waist, on the sides of the alley and the boxes were addressed to various places in the Philippines. This reminded me of Lan’s\(^\text{14}\) story of how the Filipino domestic workers often send packages to their family back home. There were a few stalls selling cheap international phone cards and the advertisement on the side of the stalls said “Smart Pinoy”. (Field note, Kuala Lumpur, 6 October 2013)

\(^{13}\) “Domestic” is written in brackets here because Indonesian domestic workers do not usually get any days off, nor are they allowed to leave the home without permission from the employers (see also the discussion in the next chapter (Chapter VI) on spatial (im)mobility).

\(^{14}\) In her book, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestics and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan*, Lan observes that Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan often send gift packages to their children and families in the Philippines as an expression of their transnational motherhood (Lan, 2006: Chapter 4).
These two descriptions about the types of businesses or stores in two areas in Kuala Lumpur where migrant domestic workers usually visit indicate a difference in the consumption patterns of Indonesian and Filipina migrant domestic workers. Bearing in mind that the stores serve the demands of the customers, it seems that those in Chow Kit provide services to meet the need of Indonesian migrant (domestic) workers to send money home or to invest their money in the form of gold jewellery. Those in Kota Raya, on the other hand, cater to the need of Filipina domestic workers to send packages home to the family in the Philippines as affective tokens of their transnational motherhood; or simply to pamper Filipina migrant domestic workers at the end of their hard work week through hair styling and massage. However, further study is undoubtedly required to better understand the phenomenon.

Almost none of the domestic workers interviewed were able to save any money from their earnings abroad. Imas and Wulan, who came to Malaysia as undocumented migrants, could barely repay the loans they took to finance their migration, let alone be able to save the money they earned (Imas and Wulan, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Sari and Hana are among the few migrant domestic workers who are able to amass some savings and buy land as an investment. Here is what Sari said:

Yocie : Do you send the money per month, or per year, or...?
Sari : I send it when my family needs it. If there is anything needed, then I send it.
Yocie : So you do not do it regularly?
Sari : No. For instance, I sent [the money] to buy a land, and then for [renovating] the house. Now everything is gone for the house. Next time, my child asked for a motorcycle. So when it is needed, then I send it. Or, when my husband was ill, had high blood pressure, but now he’s alright, so now I send the money once every two months to buy the medicine and for food for my child.

(Interview with Sari, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014)

In Sari’s story, she and her family used the money she earned to buy land and renovate their house. A strong, well-decorated house is considered to be a symbol of success among Indonesian migrant domestic workers. When visiting the homes of migrant domestic workers who participated in the study, it was noticeable that their houses were in better condition than the other houses in the village. The walls of their
houses were usually made of brick; some of them painted, some of them only half-painted. The floors were also of cement. In contrast, other houses in the village were often constructed of rattan walls and dirt floors (field note, Karawang, 24 April 2013). The phenomenon of strong, yet sometimes odd, houses in the villages where migrant domestic workers originate in Indonesia is also noted by Krisnawaty, Ningsih and Rizal (2007). Rather than viewing these houses as odd, these houses, which are built by women migrant domestic workers over a period of time, become dream houses which motivate other villagers to seek to migrate for work (Krisnawaty, Ningsih, Rizal, 2007).

Without any access to citizenship or family reunification in Malaysia, resettlement in Malaysia is not an option. However, a few of the workers who I met in Malaysia managed to find another job in the country by the end of their contract as domestic workers and therefore were able to settle down. Some workers interviewed were also able to migrate for work again, while a few expressed the sentiment that they would like to migrate again if only they were younger or if they had the chance. Some participants simply accepted that their family prohibited them from migrating again, as described by Nur below:

Yocie: At that time, why did you decide to stop [working] after three years?

Nur: Back then I was on leave for two months here, and then my mother forbade. ‘Emak’ is already old,’ she said, ‘afraid if something happens, no one will know.’ So I did not return [to Malaysia] again. My employer said, ‘If you continue [working] here, you can take leave once per year. You don’t have to get two-year contract, once a year you can take a leave.’ We (sic) did not have a husband [at that time], I was a widow, did not have any kid. My mother said, ‘If you meet someone, it’s better to get married.’ Alhamdulillah, now I have kids.

(Interview with Nur, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 15 October 2014)

Nur followed her mother’s request to stay in the village to take care of her due to her old age, including getting married again and building a family. Wulan, on the other hand, expressed frustration because she was not allowed to migrate again although her husband did not have a secure job.

---

15 Emak is a word for mother in Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia).
16 “Praise be to God.”
Wulan : I actually want to [migrate] again, but afraid to go to Malaysia again. I do want it, but I am not allowed. A relative of my passed away husband said, ‘You should not go anywhere. Sad, happy, it’s better to take care of the children.’

LC : But your husband has a job, right?

Wulan : Well, his work is part-time. ‘Too bad for the kids,’ he said, ‘They don’t have any grandmother anymore.’

Yocie : After you returned from Malaysia, have you ever worked again?

Wulan : After I married this [current] husband, I went away, I wanted to work as a domestic worker in Jakarta. (laughs) I worked as a domestic worker for two months.

LC : Why only two months?

Wulan : I remembered my young kid. (laughs)

(Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Once again we see the strong patriarchal family ideal in contrast with the need for family survival in Nur and Wulan’s narratives. In Nur’s story, her mother reminds Nur about her role as a daughter in taking care of her elderly mother and as a woman/wife in getting married and building a family. Wulan is also reminded of her role as a mother in taking care of the children; at the same time, however, we can see how Wulan tries to destabilise the gender norm by running away to work as a domestic in Jakarta.

These different stories show how the matter of family survival faces challenges when meeting patriarchal norms about the ideal family and the gender roles in the family. Despite the important contribution of these women to the survival of the family, patriarchal norms belittle their contribution by constructing it as secondary to the husband’s earnings. Most of these women do not have access to the money which they earn once they send it to the family; examples here, however, indicate that the remittance is usually used for daily consumption rather than saving or investment. In the meantime, gender roles – whether as a daughter or a wife – prohibit these women from migrating for work again.

Geographical imagination: why Malaysia?

When the participants were asked about their choice of Malaysia over other destination countries, a geographical imagination unfolds –
about how they imagine the spatial relations between Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as in relation to other destination countries, and how they perceive Malaysia as a place. Ita, for instance, chose Malaysia as a destination country because Malaysia is geographically close to Indonesia, which would make it easier for Ita to return home in case she did not like working there. Malaysia and Indonesia share a border, including a land border on Kalimantan/Borneo Island. Miri, where Ita worked, lies in Malaysian Borneo (East Malaysia). Here is how Ita saw it:

LC : Why did you choose Malaysia?
Ita : They said it’s easier to go home, [Ita] could take bus. Ita thought that Ita would not be able to work as a domestic. So [Ita] brought a lot of money from home, [Ita] was prepared in case [Ita] did not like it or had problem, so [Ita] could go home immediately.

(Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Similarly, Melati chose Malaysia over Saudi Arabia because of its geographical location. At that time, there were not many people from her village who migrated to Saudi Arabia. It discouraged Melati from going to Saudi Arabia.

Yocie : [...] Why did you choose Malaysia?
Melati : Back then I was afraid [to go] to Saudi Arabia, not many people had gone there. I thought, well, Malaysia was still close, like going to Jakarta. It had the same language. To Saudi Arabia I was afraid, no one went there.

(Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

For Wulan, the objection from her husband at that time about working in Saudi Arabia was among the reasons why she chose Malaysia as a destination country. Here we can see the patriarchal norm where the husband is the decision maker in the family in deciding where the woman should migrate. In addition, the presence of a relative who offered her the opportunity to migrate to Malaysia for work added a level of familiarity to how Wulan and her husband imagined Malaysia.

LC : Why did you go to Malaysia, not to Jakarta instead?
Wulan : Back then I was invited by my relative. My husband also [said], 'Well, there is a relative there.' And back then I was not
allowed to go to Saudi Arabia by my husband at that time. If I
went to Malaysia, I was with a relative.

(Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16
October 2014)

The role of sponsor for Wulan, in addition to the objection of her for-
mer husband about migrating to Saudi Arabia, was important in
choosing Malaysia as a destination country. The situation was similar
for Kokom, whose sponsor promised a quick process for departing to
Malaysia.

Kokom : [...] At first I was going to go to Saudi Arabia, but the sponsor
was not too good.

Yocie : How did you know the sponsor, the one to Saudi Arabia?

Kokom : He went around [in the village], looking [for interested work-
ers]. Then there was someone else who was looking [for work-
ners] too, to [work in] Malaysia. He said that it would be quick
to leave, quick to depart. So I chose the one to Malaysia, but I
was at the shelter17 for quite a long time anyway, three months.

(Interview with Kokom, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 15
October 2014)

For Kokom, then, the quick procedure promised by the sponsor influ-
enced her geographical imagination of the work migration procedure
for Malaysia. In her comment, however, we can hear that she was
disappointed because the process was not as quick as the agency
promised.

Similarly, Sari developed geographical imaginations about differ-
ent destination countries based on the information she received about
the working conditions and the culture in those countries. This then
motivated her to be selective in choosing destination countries. She
was not interested in working in countries other than Singapore and
Malaysia. Before working in Malaysia, she had worked as a migrant
domestic worker in Singapore for three years.

Yocie : What was the difference between Malaysia and Singapore?
Why did you then decide to go to Malaysia?

17 Before migrating for work, the Indonesian law required potential migrant work-
ers to go through a series of pre-departure preparations, including training and
medical examination (Law on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Work-
ers Abroad, Law No. 39/2004). Migrant domestic workers often refer to the pre-
departure training centres as “shelters”. Migrant domestic workers usually wait at
the “shelters” while the recruitment agencies process their application.
Sari: Because I wanted to go to Singapore again, but at that time there were a lot of problems in Singapore. Back then [Singapore] stopped recruiting helpers\footnote{Helper (“pembantu”, in Indonesian language) is the popular term usually used in Indonesia, rather than “domestic worker”.}. I was already at the shelter, then the agency there said that it was better to change [the destination country] to Malaysia. If I did not change, it would be too long [waiting] at the shelter. Alright, so I changed to Malaysia, I immediately got [a job] within one month.

[...]

Sari: Yeah, I like it here (in Malaysia), I am happy with the language too. I can go wherever I like. I have only worked in Singapore and here, no other places. Such as Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, I am not interested, do not want to [work there]. Only here and Singapore for me.

Yocie: Why?

Sari: Because back when I was in Yogyakarta (her origin area), many people who worked in Taiwan, just left, after one week they were returned. If you were not good in Chinese, Hokien or what was it…did a small mistake, you were returned. I was also not interested to go far away. For one, language; it was hard to understand, right? Back in Yogyakarta, many just left for like one week, two weeks, they returned. In Jakarta (in the shelter), some were already [waiting for] one year, some for two years.

(Interview with Sari, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014)

These different narratives show that although these women have never been to Malaysia before, they develop geographical imaginations about what it would be like to work in Malaysia from stories shared by relatives or other people who have been there, or from the promises by the sponsors or recruitment agencies. Stories from other migrant domestic workers who work in other countries also contribute to shaping their geographical imaginations about other destination countries. This indicates that oral stories are important sources for these migrant domestic workers in choosing the destination country for work migration.

Conclusion

In this chapter we see how these women workers construct their migration experiences. Sassen (2002) suggests that migration of women
workers is a “feminisation of survival”. Family survival is the reason why these women migrate. The remittance they send home is crucial for the family. In the face of patriarchy, however, the important role of these women in family survival is belittled because the husband continues to be seen as the head of the family. They do not have access to the earnings they send home. The decision to migrate—or not to migrate—is also taken under the patriarchal family ideals with the man as the head of the family and the woman as a mother who takes care of the children or as a daughter who takes care of elderly parents. Stories of other migrant workers, however, also influence the choice of the destination country. These stories bring another level of “closeness” (familiarity) to the geographical proximity between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Although stories from other migrant workers about working in different countries may help in constructing a geographical imagination for these migrants as a background for choosing a destination country, the working conditions they face once they arrive in the destination country may differ from what they imagined. In the rest of the dissertation we will see the power practices by the employers in the home which lead to the precarity of the working conditions for these workers, the resistance by the workers to the exercise of power by the employers and the geographies of exploitation of migrant domestic workers at different levels of analysis.
VI. Spatialised domination practices by employers in constructing deference

Employer-employee relationship is different. This is in a house. I wonder if you’re an employer, you have a maid, on Sunday the maid wakes up as she likes, does as she likes, goes out as she likes, I say, you’re the employer, will you allow your maid to be freely at home as though it is her house? (Interview with the director of a placement agency, Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013)

The interview excerpt above illustrates how spatiality of the home as a workplace plays a central role in the work relations between migrant domestic workers and their employers. While other forms of work usually have a clear definition of duties and working conditions and a clear-cut separation of workplace from home, domestic work is something of a grey area. For live-in migrant domestic workers, as in the case of Indonesian domestics in Malaysia, the boundary of the workplace is permeable. The workplace of these migrants is a “paradoxical space” (Rose, 1993), where work/leisure, public/private and exploitation/resistance meet.

Without recognition or proper regulation, the state gives the institutional status of power (Mills, 2007) to the employers to determine the working conditions of domestic workers because the workplace of these workers is the home of the employers. In Malaysia, the institutional status of power is clearly given to the employers since the regulation from the Immigration Department requires employers to be responsible for the discipline and conduct of migrant domestic workers (see also the discussion in Chapter II about the role of the state).

In this chapter we will see the spatialised domination practices by the employers in constructing the deference of migrant domestic workers. Rollins (1985) suggests that deference – in the form of behaviour (gestural and task-embedded deference), language (linguistic deference) and space (spatial deference) – is central in the context of paid domestic work because it confirms the unequal power relations between employers and domestic workers. The narratives of the work-
ers will show that the employers exercise discipline, immobility and isolation, and surveillance over the workers. In doing so, the employers target the body, emotion, habits and behaviour of the workers as the objects of domination practices. Gender, nationality/ethnicity and class differences, among other categories, along with immigration status, are used by employers to reinforce asymmetrical power relations.

This chapter is developed according to these different forms of domination practices – discipline, immobility and isolation, and surveillance – by the employers in creating deferent workers. In the discussion we will see how each form targets the body, emotion, habits and/or behaviour – although not always simultaneously – of the workers to construct this deference.

Disciplining the gendered ‘Other’

Foucault (1982: 788) argues that power demonstrates the relationships between partners, but that it only exists when it is put in action. In Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1977), Foucault also suggests that power in the modern period takes subtler forms such as control and discipline, rather than harsh bodily punishment. In this section we will see examples of discipline by women employers of the body and its embodied attributes of the workers as the “Other” women to reinforce their power positions.

One disciplinary practice by employers that is commonly found in the stories of migrant domestic workers is the appropriation of the body. The employers sometimes alter the body of migrant domestic workers without asking for consent from the workers. Almost every domestic worker in this study who took care of a baby (up to one year) told me that the employers cut their hair short and required them to wash the hair thoroughly and regularly. Citra’s employer, for instance, told her that it was unhygienic to have long hair because she took care of a baby (interview with Citra, former domestic worker, Karawang, 24 April 2013). It suggests that the employers see the body of the worker as dirty, un- or less hygienic, and abject19, which will contaminate their home through the presence of the “Other” body (Anderson, 2002: 108). The assumption of the “dirty” body of domestic worker resembles the construction of African body as lack of hygiene in Victorian British soap advertisements in McClintock’s study, where

---

19 See also Sibley’s (1998) discussion on the exclusion of certain social groups through the construction of the “abject”.
cleanliness is associated with civilisation (McClintock, 1995: chapter 5). McClintock argues,

The poetics of cleanliness is a poetics of social discipline. [...] People who have the power to invalidate the boundary rituals of another people thereby demonstrate their capacity to violently impose their culture on others. (McClintock, 1995: 226)

The employer’s practice of cutting the hair and requiring the worker to wash the hair thoroughly and regularly is therefore not merely a matter of hygiene. It is a racialised power practice whereby the employer imposes the standard of cleanliness on the worker. As McClintock (1998: 152) argues, “Nothing is inherently dirty; dirt expresses a relation to social value and social disorder.” We can see other examples throughout this section of the chapter, where the employers impose their cultural practices by disciplining the workers’ habits and behaviour based on the assumption that the workers’ habits are inferior to the employers’. In doing so, the employers reinforce the superior-inferior power positions.

To return to the appropriation of the body, cutting the worker’s hair short is also a practice of imposing a certain form of gendered body. Long hair for instance is associated with feminine beauty, and cutting the long hair is a bodily alteration of this particular form of femininity. Another example of the appropriation of the body is the prohibition on wearing makeup or using body care products. Ratna, for example, told me that when she arrived at the employer’s house, her employer went through her belongings and threw away all of her makeup:

Ratna : I brought powder and hand and body lotion from here, I thought I was expected to wear powder. After I arrived at the employer’s house, the woman employer went through my stuffs right after I came. I brought hand and body lotion because I heard that hands could get callouses after working there, so I brought two bottles of hand and body lotion, powder and lipstick.

LC : Did the woman employer throw everything away?

Ratna : Yeah. I arrived at 8 PM at the employer’s house. [...] I wrapped them in clothes and spread them in my bag to hide them. “What is this?” “This is hand and body lotion, this is powder.” “For what?” “For me, Nyonya (Madam).” “What is this?” I also brought Ya-Sin and tasbih [beads]

---

20 *Ya-Sin* is one of the chapters in Quran. *Tasbih* beads are used as a prayer rope by Moslems.
the *Ya-Sin* and the *tasbih* were not thrown away... I did not know why she threw away the lipstick and the powder.

Yocie : Did you ask the employer why she threw away the lipstick?

Ratna : I did, “Why are these thrown away?” “No, you’re not allowed to wear powder here.” “But this is not powder, this is just for the hands.” “No, not allowed.” So the lipstick and the hand and body lotion were thrown away, but the *Ya-Sin* and the *tasbih* were not.

(Interview with Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Controlling the clothing of the workers is another example of the bodily discipline by the employers. Islamic culture is rather strong both in Malaysia and in Indonesia, particularly for those coming from the West Java region like most of the participants in the study. In Islamic culture, wearing the hijab is a sign of decency in women Muslims. Some domestic workers are required to wear the hijab by their employers.

Yolanda : [...] she said, “Good, it is better to wear the hijab.”

Yocie : Who said that?


(Interview with Yolanda, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Migrant domestic workers, however, noticed a difference between Islamic cultures in Indonesia and in Malaysia in terms of covering the body parts. In Indonesia, the practice of wearing the hijab as a head covering is usually followed by the practice of covering the arms, legs and even body shape. So a woman who wears the hijab in Indonesia usually also wears a long-sleeved top, trousers or a long skirt down to the ankles and rather loose clothes, not fitted to the body. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, it is quite common to see someone wearing the hijab but not covering her arms or legs. In some cases, when the employers gave migrant domestic workers a pair of shorts and a short-sleeved t-shirt to wear when they worked, they felt uneasy.

Ita was ordered to wear hijab, but with short-sleeve clothes. She (the employer) said, “It’s alright to wear the hijab.” Ita refused. “It is useless. Rather than like that, it is better not [at all],” Ita said. (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)
Komariah, one of the workers, related the prohibition of appearing beautiful to the insecurity of women employers. She said,

People here are like kings! They don’t want to be called “Kakak” (sister). We (domestic workers) are not allowed to wear beautiful dresses. Her husband will be distracted. We are not allowed to look too pretty. Wearing shorts are also not allowed. (Interview with Komariah, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)

Feminists argue that body is a social construction, with gender as a bodily performance (McDowell, 1999; Butler, 1993). In the examples above, we can see the reproduction of gender identities in the relations between the woman employer and the woman domestic worker. The gender identity of the woman employer are defined through the presence of the “Other” woman in the home which reproduces:

… two mutually dependent but antagonistic stereotypes: pure/dirty, emotional/physical, Madonna/whore, each drawing their identity from their opposite, and these stereotypes were expressed and reproduced in the employer/domestic worker relationship. (Anderson, 2000: 18)

The binary works to maintain each power position in the gender hierarchy. The inferiority of the worker’s gender identity is shown through her material body, with short hair, no makeup or other body care products, or a covered body in less attractive clothes, in comparison to the superiority of the employer’s femininity. Through discipline, these gender differences between a woman employer and a woman migrant domestic worker are maintained in the home. The discipline of the body of the worker is seen as necessary to prevent the man employer from being attracted to the woman worker. While the woman worker carries out the hard physical labour of domestic work in the home, the woman employer proves her superiority through her femininity and skill in managing the home (Anderson, 2000: 18).

The habits and behaviour of the workers are also objects of discipline. Through disciplining the habits and behaviour of the workers, the employers reproduce the unequal power positions in the home and reinforce the deference of the workers. Although cultural similarities are often cited as one of the reasons why Indonesians are preferred over other nationalities as domestic workers in Malaysia (interview with Fauzi, MAMA, Kuala Lumpur, 2 October 2013; the Director of a placement agency, Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013; and Al Rashid, CARAM Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 9 October 2013), the stories of Indonesian domestic workers suggest that the Malaysian employers often adopt a patronising attitude based on cultural differences.
One example of how the employers discipline the habits of migrant domestic workers is *disciplining the eating habit*. In certain regions of Indonesia, such as West Java where most of the domestic workers in the study come from, it is common to eat directly with the hands. Citra, for example, said that her employer demanded that she ate using utensils such as a spoon and fork (interview with Citra, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 24 April 2013). The employer scolded Citra when she saw her eating with her hands as she was accustomed to. This story suggests that the employer considers the habit of eating with the hands as less civilised in comparison to eating with utensils.

Ninik even had an experience when a neighbour complained to her employer because she gave leftovers to the cat. Ninik mimicked the neighbour, “‘Why did your maid throw away [the leftovers]?! It’s dirty, [attracting] the cat! This is not Indun (Indonesia),’ she said, ‘This is Malaysia!’” (Ninik, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). After being told by her employer about the complaint, Ninik never again gave leftover food to the cat.

Pratt (1998) in a study on Filipina domestic workers in Canada also comes across to a similar finding. Since the workers rely on the employers on basic bodily needs such as food, they have to follow the employers’ food preferences although they are uncomfortable with Canadian food. At the same time, they also feel awkward to introduce their own food preferences to the employers and assume that the employers may distaste their food culture. Pratt argues,

> Food, as a symbolic good that literally sustains the body, is a fascinating condensation of the symbolic and material and an important market of cultural difference. (Pratt, 1998: 294-295)

If we follow Pratt’s argument, food and eating habits are not simply materials necessary for sustaining the body, but they represent symbolic cultural differences between the Indonesian workers and their Malaysian employers. The workers in this study in general did not have any complaint about the food at home because Malay Malaysian food was similar to Sundanese Indonesian food and they ate the same food as their employers (group interview with five former domestic workers, Karawang, 25 April 2013; interview with Melati and Yolanda, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014). Citra and Ninik’s experiences, however, suggest that cultural practices in consuming the food—whether eating the food with hand rather than cutleries or giving food leftovers to a cat—are different. The differ-
ences in eating habits in turn are used to reinforce the superiority of
the employers. The underlying perception embedded in these employ-
ers’ disciplining practices is that the Indonesian workers have inferior
eating habits in comparison to the employer, as shown in Citra’s pref-
erece to eat with hands, and even to the general Malaysia public, as
commented by the employer’s neighbour about the littering of lefto-
vers by Ninik.

The employers also try to discipline the worker’s feelings and emo-
tions. When taking care of the children, for example, the employers
often prohibit the domestic workers from expressing feelings which
they find negative, such as anger. Melati shared her experience:

Once I was sprayed with water. The child played with the water tap. When
I was washing, I was sprayed [with water] so I was drenched, so I got an-
gry. At that moment the employer arrived home. “What happened?!?”
“Your kid is naughty, Bu.” She got angry. I was not allowed to call her
child naughty. (Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker,
Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Migrant domestic workers, however, often find it hard to take care of
the employers’ children because they reminded them of their own
children. Simple things in everyday life may trigger memories and
make them miss their children. While they are required to give care
and love to the employers’ children, they have to leave the care and
love of their own children to other family members while they work
abroad (see also Aragao-Lagergren, 2010; Parreñas, 2005; Lan, 2006).

Yocie : When you were there (in Malaysia), how did it feel taking care
of the employer’s children?

Wulan : Yeah, well, I think about [my own] child, especially when see-
ing a child of our (sic) own child’s age.

Ratna : Children there (in Malaysia) often wears hijab when going to
school. “My God, she looks like my daughter!” When I was
eating, I could cry because I remembered my kid, wondering if
she’s also eating.

(Interview with Wulan and Ratna, former migrant domestic workers,
Karawang, 16 October 2014)

At the same time, migrant domestic workers are well aware that the
children they care for are not theirs. They understand that they have to
take good care of the employer’s children, or else they will be pun-
ished by the employers.
Yocie : When taking care of the children, did you feel any different between taking care of your own children and taking care of the employer’s children?

Yolanda : I was more afraid when taking care of the employer’s children than my own children.

Melati : Afraid if the kid falls…

Yolanda : …afraid if the kid does not stop crying, worried that the employer thinks the kid is pinched or beaten up [by me]…

LC : Did the employer ever ask you, “Why does the kid keep crying?”

Yolanda : Yes, “Why?” The employer thought that probably we beat up or pinch [the kid].

Yocie : Did the employer say so?

Yolanda : No, I was worried that the employer thought so. Sometimes the oldest kid commented, “Maybe [the kid] was pinched.” So the employer got suspicious. I would not even dare to pinch, to beat up someone else’s kid, afraid!

Melati : Exactly, [we’re] afraid, right?! If it’s our own kids, well...(laughs)...it’s up to us.

(Interview with Yolanda and Melati, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

The discipline by the employers of the workers’ emotions in providing emotional labour reinforces the inferior status of the workers in the context of “stratified reproduction” (Colen, 1995). The workers are required to provide love and compassion to the children of the employers while they leave the care of their own children to their relatives back in Indonesia.

Stories of migrant domestic workers in this study also indicate that employers sometimes adopt colonial-like forms of discipline to reinforce the inferior position of the workers. One illustration of this is that most migrant domestic workers are not allowed to eat before the employers and their families finish eating (interview with Komariah former Indonesian migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014; group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). A more explicit example is that some employers require the workers to address the men employer as Tuan (Sir/Master) and the woman employer as Puan or Nyonya (Madam) (interview with Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014; Komariah former Indonesian migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014); compared with the term Ibu/Bu (Mrs.) as we have found in the narratives of the other workers in this study. Some workers also said that the
employers sometimes ordered them by pointing with their toes to a dirty spot on the floor to demand the worker to clean it (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013).

In these various examples, we can see the discipline practices by the employers which target the body, habits, behaviour and emotions of migrant domestic workers. These practices by the employers are inseparable from discourses on gender, sexuality, class and religion as part of cultural practices. Ultimately, all of these discipline practices are aimed at constructing deference – particularly “gestural and task-embedded deference” and “linguistic deference” (Rollins, 1985: chapter 5) – in the workers as an important part in the work relations in the home. As Rollins (1985: 167) argues, the employers require gestural and task-embedded deference from the workers through a subservient demeanour and attitude in doing their work. The appropriation of the body, the control of the clothing, the disciplining of the eating habit, and the disciplining and control of feelings and emotions are examples of the spatialised discipline practices by employers to form the gestural and task-embedded deference of workers. The requirement to address the employers in a certain way as found in the colonial-like form of discipline is an example of a discipline practice to construct linguistic deference. A close analysis of the spatialised gender and cultural practices enriches our understanding of the construction of deference through these different discipline practices.

Immobility and isolation in the home of the employers

Migration in the globalisation discourse is strongly associated with freedom of movement. Lee and Pratt (2011), however, argue that by migrating abroad for work, women migrant workers are in reality “trapped in a state of immobility that separates them from their children” (p. 227). As these women migrate abroad, they leave their children behind, often to be taken care of by other family members. The spatial distance, as in the case of Indonesia-Malaysia, prevents the women migrants from commuting back home from work, which then renders them immobile in the country where they work.

The situation for women migrant domestic workers in particular is complicated because their mobility relies on the employers (Lee and Pratt, 2011; Yeoh and Huang, 2010a). In the context of paid domestic labour in Malaysia, the visa and work permit of a migrant domestic worker is tied to the employer. If a domestic worker wants to change
employer, the worker is required by law to return to Indonesia and re-apply for a new visa and work permit. It is also a common practice in Malaysia that the employers – or the agencies – hold the domestic workers’ passport for “safe keeping”, as had happened to almost every migrant domestic worker in this study. Previously the regulation from the Immigration Department of Malaysia required the employer to give the worker’s passport to the authorities in the case of absconding migrant domestic workers; thus the employers often kept the worker’s passport. The regulation has recently been revised so that a copy of the worker’s passport is sufficient, but the practice of withholding passports is still commonly found (interview with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014). This practice means that if a domestic worker leaves the employer’s house without a passport or leaves the current employer to work with another employer, the domestic worker will become an illegal immigrant and can be deported. This is another example of the institutional status of power (Mills, 2007) given to the employers by the state. Through these arrangements, freedom of mobility is taken away from the workers.

Other than a few occasions when the employers take migrant domestic workers to public places to take care of the children or to help carrying the groceries, the workers are practically confined in the home. This clearly puts the workers in a vulnerable situation if they experience violence or abuse. Not only are migrant domestic workers subject to deportation if they go out of the home without a passport or identification, most of them are also not allowed to leave the home without permission from the employers (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Even in rare cases where the employers allow them to leave the home, migrant domestic workers prefer not to go out by themselves because they are afraid of getting detained without documents or getting lost in a foreign country (Imas, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013; interview with Kokom, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 15 October 2014). When the workers were hypothetically asked if they would like to live out of, rather than live in, the employers’ house, however, they still preferred to live in the employer’s house, as in the following excerpt of an interview with Kokom and Nur:

Yocie : If for instance you are allowed to choose not to live with the employer, would you like it? For example, you rent [a place] together with other Indonesian migrant domestic workers.

Kokom : Not really…

Nur : No, it’s scarier. If we’re together with the employer, we’re protected, get a place. If we rent, we don’t know [the others]…
Kokom: If we rent, what if there are bad people? With the employer, we’re at their home, safe. If there is a bad person, [the employer] would know, there would be someone who could help us. *(laughs softly)* If we rent by ourselves, we do not know who this is. If in the employer’s home, we know, ‘Oh, this is [the employer’s] relative, guest.’ It’s better to stay at the employer’s home rather than rent like that.

(Interview with Kokom and Nur, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

One thing that is interesting from these two examples – the preference for staying in the home for fear of being detained or getting lost, and the preference for living in the employers’ house rather than living out for fear of “bad” strangers – is the underlying fear of being alien in a foreign country. If we pair this fear with the social isolation of the workers (see the discussion on social isolation later in this section), we can understand how the lack of information prevents workers from leaving the employers’ house. The status of being foreigners in Malaysia makes these women feeling more vulnerable. Instead of feeling independence from the employers as a liberation from an oppressing situation if they leave the house, they are afraid to be exposed to other dangerous situations such as getting lost or being detained. We will return to the issue of vulnerability in Chapter IX. In this context, however, we can see that the home serves as a protection for these workers from bad things, such as deportation by the police, getting lost or experiencing crime. This brings up once again the home as a “paradoxical space” *(Rose, 1993)*, where the home becomes both a space of control and a space of protection for these women.

Even in the home, the employers also control the mobility of migrant domestic workers *(Yeoh and Huang, 2010; Lee and Pratt, 2011)*. The kitchen, for example, is a place constructed as a domestic worker’s space. For instance, new apartment buildings in Kuala Lumpur now include a room for a domestic worker in the apartment plan and the room is usually situated next to the kitchen *(interview with Al Rashid, CARAM Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 9 October 2013)*. The proximity of the domestic worker’s room to the kitchen limits the presence of the worker in roaming around the house. The kitchen is also the place where they retreat when their services are not required:

Yocie: When for example you were watching television and then suddenly a guest [of the employer] came, could you still watch the television?

Kokom: Not really. We understood, if there was a guest, we would go to the back (the kitchen). After serving water, that’s it, not joining
them chatting. […] Although the employer was kind, [we] knew [that] we’re (sic) only helpers, usually stayed at the back. If in the kitchen there was a work to do, well, we worked.

(Interview with Kokom, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 15 October 2014)

In the employer’s home, almost every migrant domestic worker in the study has their own bedrooms, with a few basic furniture like a single bed, a cupboard and an electric fan. Other than the kitchen, the room is where the workers usually retreat to rest. Unlike the usual bedroom which is often decorated to represent the embodiment of the occupant, however, the bedroom of a migrant domestic worker is merely a functional room. Allen (2003: 11) suggests, “The composition of space, the partition and layout of particular uses, also serves as both a resource and the means through which power is exercised.” Pratt (1998: 292) in a study on the Filipina domestic workers in Canada finds that employers sometimes control the workers’ body and identities through the furnishing of the bedroom where the workers stay during their work period. The lack of furnishings in the room—such as the absent of writing table in Pratt’s study, or the lack of furniture as in the experiences of the workers in this study—suggests that the employers construct the body of the workers as a “working body” (McDowell, 2009), without personal needs for leisure. The room therefore represents the construction of the body as a source of labour and detaches the body from its embodied needs.

Another indicator on the construction of the worker’s body as a working body is the placement of iron and ironing table in the worker’s room, as often found in the experiences of the Indonesians in this study. As Ratna, one of the workers whose bedroom was also used as a place to iron clothes, commented, “[The bedroom] was only for ironing the clothes and sleeping.” (Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Because the worker’s bedroom is also the place where she irons the employer’s clothes, it justifies the employer to go into the room to take the newly ironed clothes. Melati shared her experience as the following:

Yocie : Could you lock your room?

Melati : Yes, I could.

Yocie : So did you lock it during the night?

Melati : Well, when I was sleeping, it was locked.

Yocie : During the day, did the employer enter your room?
Melati: Yes, she entered our room, [it’s] free, because her clothes were inside. After I ironed [the clothes], I often hanged them there. Sometimes she took them herself. It’s alright, [it’s] free. Well, in the room we did not keep anything unusual anyway, so it’s alright.

Yocie: But she never got nosy, moving your stuffs around?

Melati: No, she didn’t dare. Well, I don’t know, I know it happens to other people, but never in my experience.

(Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

The bedroom is an example of a place which has a strong private/privacy association. Woolf (1929: 4) says, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” While Woolf, with her essay *A Room of One’s Own*, criticises the denial of space and resources experienced by women, having one’s own room also symbolises privacy where women writers could seclude themselves to be productive. This suggests a mutual relationship between one’s own space (privacy) and productivity. Yet in Melati’s narrative above we can see that the employer can still enter the bedroom – to get the ironed clothes, for example – although Melati did not see this as an intrusion into her private space because she “did not keep anything unusual anyway” and her employer never touched her things.

Melati’s narrative above is an example where the understanding of “public-private spaces” is challenged. There are many ways to understand why Melati did not find this to be a problem. Perhaps it is because Melati came from a rural culture where everyone in the village could come into the home and wander within the spaces in the home freely, as was found in the observation of a number of the migrant domestic workers’ homes visited in Karawang. One alternative explanation is that there is perhaps a sense of temporariness about the bedroom as a result of her identity as a migrant domestic worker. The home of the employer belongs to the employer; therefore, the room in which Melati stayed also belongs to the employer. It was not her place to deny the employer access to the room.

The challenge to the “public” and “private” division in the context of mobility in the home can also be seen in Wulan’s narrative below.

Wulan: Well, I stayed in the same room with the children, [because] I always took care of the children.

LC: So you never got your own bedroom? [Always] with the children?
Wulan : Nope.

LC : Was it difficult that you shared the bedroom with the children?

Wulan : Of course! (*chuckles*) I could not sleep. Here I have never had air-conditioner, I don’t like air-conditioner; meanwhile, there the children always put on air-condition. So I often slept anywhere else. (*laughs*)

(Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, in group discussion, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

According to her story, Wulan never got her own bedroom; rather, she always stayed in the children’s bedroom as a result of her work, taking care of children. Without her own bedroom, Wulan was not able to control the room, such as turning off the air-conditioner, because the children’s wish had to be prioritised. Instead, Wulan “slept anywhere else”, which meant that she slept in other (“public”) places in the home. Here we can see that sleeping place which is supposedly a private place is situated in a public place in the home, such as in the living room. It renders Wulan vulnerable to intrusion of her resting time or even sexual harassment.

The control of the employers over the mobility of the workers in the home is also found in the context of the use of space around each other’s bodies, which is also a key character to “spatial deference” (Rollins, 1985). Sometimes migrant domestic workers feel insecure and worry that they will get into trouble if they are in close proximity with the men employers in the home. Wulan, for instance, was worried about being alone with the man employer because she was afraid that neighbours would gossip or bad mouth Wulan to the woman employer (interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014). Or, as in Imas’ experience below:

LC : Did anyone have an experience of receiving jealousy?

Imas : I did, in Selangor. [My employer] in Selangor had two wives. After the morning prayer and bought me nasi uduk (coconut milk rice), the husband often read newspaper in the kitchen…

LC : Did he buy the food from a food stall?

Imas : From a food stall. The man employer often drove to the mosque… Reading newspaper in the kitchen. “For you,” he said. “Alright, thank you.” But the wife became sullen.

(Interview with Imas, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 25 April 2013)
In Imas’ story, it was the man employer who chose to sit in the kitchen, but the close proximity of the man employer with the worker in a place associated with domesticity, i.e. the kitchen, upset the woman employer. These examples show that despite the presence of paid domestic worker in the home, the home, particularly the kitchen, is still an intimate space with gender relations at the centre.

Another common experience related to immobility of workers in the employer’s house is the social isolation arising through the prohibition to talk to strangers (anyone who is not a family member of the employers). The employers forbid the workers from talking to strangers or receiving strangers in the home.

Yocie: If you wanted to talk to the neighbours, were you allowed to do that?

Melati: Yeah, sometimes the employer reproved. We’re not allowed to do that.

Yolanda: Yeah, not allowed.

Yocie: Did you ever ask why?

Yolanda: Probably [the employer] was afraid, afraid that we would gossip…

Melati: Yeah, afraid that we would gossip about the employer. Everywhere is the same, helpers are not allowed [to talk to strangers]… We could only go to our friend’s place when the employer was not around.

(Interview with Melati and Yolanda, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

In the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in Canada, Pratt (1998) suggests that the prohibition of bringing friends home is a form of control over domestic space, “by designating whose raced, classed and gendered bodies have a place within home” (p. 293). The experiences of Indonesian domestic workers in this study indicate that it is not only a matter of spatial control of the material body, but also it is in fact a form of social isolation. The prohibition on talking to strangers or receiving strangers in the home can be understood in many different ways. It can be a way for the employers to avoid having someone they do not know in their homes. If we relate this to the general stereotype in Malaysia about the likelihood of Indonesian domestic workers to flee (see Chapter II), it may also be a way for the employers to prevent the migrant domestic workers from running away after hearing of better opportunities. In this context, the practice
can also be interpreted as the “withholding of information”\textsuperscript{21} practice, to keep the workers in ignorance and make it easier for the employers to maintain control. The director of a placement agency reasons this prohibition as follows:

Because, once they go out, who will she be meeting with? What kind of information she gets? What kind of planning they have when they come into the house? They can bring thief, they can bring also bad things, they can also take from your house to outside. Anything happens. (Interview with the director of a placement agency, Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013)

A previous study of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia by Chin (1997: 374) finds that the employers’ fear of the perceived sexual and criminal tendencies of migrant domestic workers becomes the reason to curtail the workers from interacting with people beyond the workplace. Whatever the reason is, the prohibition limits the social networking of the migrant domestic workers. Depending on when the migrant domestic workers work in Malaysia – whether before or after mobile phones became easily accessible – such prohibitions also cause the workers to be dependent on the employers. Without access to communication, however, it is harder for migrant domestic workers to seek help in case of abuse.

The immobility of migrant domestic workers in the home is a practice to construct “spatial deference”. Rollins (1985) suggests that spatial deference in the context of paid domestic labour takes two main forms: “the unequal rights of the domestic and the employer to the space around the other’s body and the controlling of the domestic’s use of house space” (p. 171). The stories of jealous women employers are examples of the unequal power relations between domestic workers and employers in the space around each other’s bodies. Close spatial proximity with men employers can cause trouble for the workers. Meanwhile, the arrangement of where they can be when their services are not required is an example of spatialised domination practice in controlling the domestic workers’ use of space in the home. Yeoh and Huang (2010) argue that such spatial arrangements not only reproduce the unequal power relations, but also confirm and maintain each other’s power positions.

Spatial deference literally means knowing her place, making every effort to hone the skill of ‘knowing when and where she is needed’, and navigating between being present and hovering around ready for service at the

\textsuperscript{21} Withholding of information is the third of Ås’ five “master suppression techniques” (Ås, 2004).
appropriate times and making herself scarce or keeping her distance […] It means giving way all the time, from stepping back to allow the family to go first, to assuming a posture of subservience the moment a family member steps into the space. Employers insist on such spatial propriety as it preserves the social boundaries between mistress and domestic worker, family member and outsider. The dominant-subordinate relationship is thus spatially reproduced… (Yeoh and Huang, 2010: 229)

Two points that this study contributes to the definition of “spatial deference” above are the confinement of migrant workers in the home of the employers – including in relation to the immobilisation of the workers in the host country – and the social isolation through the prohibition on talking to or receiving strangers. In the context of paid domestic work in Malaysia, the government regulation and the practice of withholding passports by employers limit the mobility of these migrants. With a few exceptions, the workers’ mobility is practically confined to the home, creating mobility dependency of the workers on the employers. At the same time, the confinement of the workers in the home is followed by the social isolation of the workers through the prohibition of talking to or receiving strangers. This adds another element of spatial deference to include social spatial deference, where the spatialised domination practice by the employers in the form of social isolation reinforces the dependency relations between the workers and the employers.

Surveillance to create self-discipline

Foucault (1977) argues that the ultimate form of discipline is when the subject takes part in his/her own subjection: “he (sic) inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles: he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (p. 202-203). Bentham’s idea of the Panopticon prison setting therefore interests Foucault because the surveillance setting induces self-consciousness in the inmates to ensure the automatic functioning of power (Foucault, 1977: 201). In this section we will hear stories of migrant domestic workers in experiencing the spatial domination practices in the form of surveillance by the employers. We will also see that even in the absence of the employers, the workers resume self-discipline as a result of the lingering presence of the employers’ power in the home.

One form of surveillance is controlling where and when the workers are allowed to eat. The employers usually require the workers to eat at the dining table, rather than in the kitchen, whether after the employers and their family (group interview, Karawang, 25 April
2013; interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014), or together with the employers and the family (interview with Yolanda, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014). As we can see in the following interview excerpt:

Yocie : But where did you eat?
Imas : At the dining table. I was not allowed to eat in the kitchen.
LC : Did the employer invite you to eat together?
Imas : Yeah, well, not together. After they were finish, there was still a lot of food so I took it. “You, don’t eat in the kitchen. Eat at the table,” she said so.
Wulan : We domestic workers are afraid.
(Imas and Wulan, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

The prohibition against eating in the kitchen indicates the importance of visibility even when domestic workers are not working. By requiring the worker to sit and eat at the dining table, it is easier for the employer to exert surveillance on the body of the worker. Conversely, domestic workers are afraid of objecting to this arrangement, as indicated by Wulan’s last comment. The unequal power relations as symbolised in the eating arrangement are more obvious when the employers require the domestic workers to eat together with the family, as in Yolanda’s experience:

Yolanda : When eating, everyday, should be together. On the same table. Should not miss it. The man employer was the one who always invited. So it felt like with own family, but fussy. (laughs) When eating, should not miss it, should be together. Whether willing, or not; want, or not; should.
LC : How did it feel eating together with the employer?
Yolanda : Of course [I was] shy… (laughs) …how was it, I wanted to take some more, I was shy because we’re on the same table…

(Interview with Yolanda, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Yolanda felt uncomfortable with the eating arrangement. For example, she did not feel free to take more food because she was eating together with the employer and his family. With this arrangement, the employer not only put Yolanda under spatial surveillance, but also construct-
ed the gestural deference (Rollins, 1985: chapter 5) where the domestic should eat according to the portion set aside for them by the employer.

Another form of surveillance is to leave valuable items lying around in the home. Some workers said that the employers sometimes intentionally left valuables lying around to test their honesty. One of the domestic workers said,

You know, piles of money, a lot of stuffs with diamonds. Like a shop, I said. This cloth, it’s with this diamond [jewellery]; that cloth, with this diamond [jewellery]. If I steal one, she definitely would look for it! The money, 10 ringgit, 5 ringgit… She had a lot of mirrors, cameras everywhere… Sometimes I knew she must be testing me or something. The key, I was the only one who was responsible for [her room] upstairs, no one else was allowed. (Interview with Komariah, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)

Komariah was the only one responsible for cleaning up the employer’s room, although the employer had another migrant domestic worker in the home. From Komariah’s story, we see that the employer left the valuables (money and jewellery) in visible places as a way to test Komariah’s honesty. Although the employer was away, the presence of cameras in the home replaced the employer’s direct surveillance in overseeing the situation. If Komariah stole any money or jewellery, the employer would have been able to see it from the camera recording. If we return to Foucault’s idea of the Panopticon, the cameras represent two main notions of power; that it should visible and unverifiable for the automatic functioning of power (see Foucault, 1977). The visibility of cameras in the home reminds the domestic worker of the presence of the employer who may put the worker under surveillance; at the same time, this presence is unverifiable because the domestic worker does not know whether or not she is under surveillance by the employer. In this kind of situation, the workers tend to exercise self-discipline, where the subject of power automatically resumes the functioning of power (Foucault, 1977).

Another migrant domestic worker, Ratna, shared her experience of being accused by her employer for stealing an item of jewellery:

Once I was taking care of the kid when the grandfather went with my employer to the market. They left money and jewelleries on the table. When they returned, I was scolded, “You stole a necklace!” I saw it earlier. “Tuan (Master), it was there, I did not take it.” After looking for it, I

22 According to Ratna, it was usually the parents of the woman employer who took care of the employer’s children.
saw that the young kid played with it. “I did not take it. It was used as a toy by Your kid.” But then he scolded me, “Don’t lose attention!” (Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

In Ratna’s story, she was accused by her employer for stealing a piece of jewellery when the employer was away. As it turned out, the employer’s child had played with the jewellery, not knowing that it was not a toy. However, Ratna was still reprimanded by the employer for not keeping an eye on the child she was supposed to be caring for.

Stories of Indonesian migrant domestic workers stealing from employers dominate news stories about migrant domestic workers in the Malaysian media, in addition to news about their abuse (e.g. Koh, “Maid that ran away with money and jewellery arrested”, New Strait Times Online, 9 April 2016; “Maid absconds with RM185,000 worth of jewellery”, The Star Online, 10 October 2013). The stereotype of the thieving Indonesian migrant domestic worker is therefore formed in the general public in Malaysia (see “Beware of this new tactic maids are using to steal your valuables”, Malaysian Digest Online, 9 March 2016). This then influences employers in putting their migrant domestic workers under surveillance, including testing their honesty when they are away, as described by Komariah and Ratna. Even without the presence of the employer in the home, the domestic worker still feels the employer’s presence and therefore leaves the valuables untouched, whether or not the employer leaves them on purpose. The practice of leaving the valuables around in the home then can be interpreted as a practice of power based on the assumption that the employer’s presence lingers and prevents the worker from stealing the valuables.

The lingering presence of the employers even in their absence suggests the embeddedness of the power of the employers in the home. Imas’ story below gives an obvious example of the automatic functioning of power despite the absence of the employer. One of Imas’ duties was to pick up the phone when the employer was not around. A few times when Imas picked up the phone, it was someone who claimed to be from the police and who intended to check up on her. “Often called. ‘Who?’ ‘Police,’ he said so. ‘Is your employer good?’ ‘Good.’ What else can I say?! [He] often called around maghrib, said Imas (Imas, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Although Imas felt that she was exploited by her employer, she felt that she could not say anything other than

---

23 Maghrib is a time of prayer for Moslems at sunset, around 6 p.m.
agree that her employer was good, even though the employer was not present. In this story, we can see that the domestic worker feared the power of her employer even in her absence and that she would be in trouble if she reported her employer to the police.

Migrant domestic workers also notice changes in their work ethics depending on whether or not the employers are around. Some domestic workers feel more relaxed in doing the work when the employers are not in the home, as described by Melati and Yolanda in the following:

Yocie : Did it feel different, let’s go back to [your experience in] Malaysia, when the employer was in the home, compared to when the employer was not in the home? When you worked, did it feel different?

Melati : Better without the employer! (laughs) I mean, if the employer was around, we (sic) felt awkward. When the employer was not around, quick, quick, everything was taken care of, as long as it’s clean. When the employer was around, if she kept an eye on us, [we became] nervous. (laughs) Sometimes she was watching us while watching television. Of course she could see us, right? When watching television, if we were working, of course she stole a glance once in a while. (laughs) It’s better when the employer was not around, [we could] work freely. I didn’t mean free to sleep, no!

Yolanda : So [we could] work more relaxed.

Melati : Yeah, [we could] be free, better, work quick, quick, quick, quick.

(Interview with Melati and Yolanda, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

According to Melati and Yolanda, they felt more relaxed when the employer was not around and this affected their work performance. With the employer around, they felt nervous because the employer might be keeping their work under surveillance even though the employer was doing something else like watching television. The presence of the employer in the home reminded the workers of the invisible and unverifiable form of power; however, the effect was the diminishing of work performance from the workers’ point of view, rather than an improvement of productivity.

In addition to feeling more relaxed in doing their work when the employers were absent from the home, some migrant domestic workers also treasure such times as an opportunity to take a break from their work, as we can see from the following discussion:
LC : Usually what did you do on your break?
Wulan : Well, we (sic) can’t sleep of course. Usually, just watching television.
LC : Were you allowed to watch television?
Wulan : Well, because the employer was not around. (laughs) If [the employer] was around, of course we did not dare!
Imas : Couldn’t sleep, Bu, did not dare. (laughs)
LC : Although you did not have any work, no employer, you did not dare to nap?
Ratna : Didn’t dare! Keeping busy, even though it’s already clean, we wiped it again, wiped it again, if the employer was around.
Wulan : Around the time when the employer usually arrived home, about 4-5pm, we got ready for work again. (laughs) [If not,] we would be scolded!

(Wulan, Imas and Ratna, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

According to this discussion, these workers used the time when the employer was not in the home to relax and take a break such as watching television. From their narratives, however, we can still sense their fear of the employer’s disciplinary power because they felt that they were not supposed to sleep or nap even if the employer was not around and they did not have any work to do. Here we can see the tension in their workplace; a “paradoxical space” (Rose, 1993) where work and leisure meet. Ratna and Wulan’s last comments also tell us that they would keep themselves busy around the time when the employer would usually arrive home or when the employer was in the home. This narrative shows us that the control of the employer remains in the home even when the employer is not present. The employer’s power prevents the domestic worker from resting sufficiently for fear of being punished or scolded as Wulan describes in her last comment.

These various examples support the arguments of Constable (1997) about the illusion of freedom which comes with a subtler form of domination practice. Constable argues,

Allowing a domestic worker to choose when and how to do her work does not mean that she is not being controlled, but it often gives her a comfortable illusion of freedom. (Constable, 1997: 15-16)

This “comfortable illusion of freedom” which comes with the absence of employers in practice reinforces the fact that the home is a “para-
doxical space” (Rose, 1993), where the power of the employers is no longer defined by the material representation – the presence or absence – of the body of the employers. Even in the absence of the employers, the workplace of these domestic workers remains the space of the employers because the place always reminds the workers of the presence of the employers. Here we can again see how the spatialised domination practices by the employers – in this case surveillance – construct the deference of the workers. In Komariah’s story earlier, the cameras in the home are definitely material representations of the employer’s presence. The cameras put the bodies of the women affected by that kind of practice in a situation of permanent surveillance, always on the lookout for the right type of behaviour. The workers cannot sit and relax in the home as though it is their own. To refer to the earlier discussion about valuables intentionally left around the home, the workers would not dare to touch those valuables even if the employers were not around.

The fear of punishment overshadows the domestic workers even without the presence of the employers. In the context of work performance, migrant domestic workers fear that they may be punished if the employers find them sleeping, napping or being lazy. In the context of honesty, they fear that they would be in trouble if the employers found them stealing any of the employers’ valuables. With the lingering presence of the employer’s power in the home, migrant domestic workers exercise self-discipline and resume the automatic functioning of power as suggested by Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon (Foucault, 1997).

The surveillance practices to reach self-discipline and automatic functioning of power contribute to enriching the understanding of “gestural deference” (Rollins, 1985). This particular spatialised domination practice suggests the achievement of gestural deference through the workers’ own discipline (self-discipline). Through this mechanism, the presence of the employers is no longer a requirement to ensure the subservient demeanour and attitude – or in the examples here, the honesty (behaviour) and work ethics (work attitude) – of the workers.

One interesting finding of this study is that, from the workers’ point of view, their productivity diminishes – rather than improves – when the employers are around because the presence of the employers reminds the workers about the unverifiable and invisible form of power. The workers are fully aware that the employers keep their work under surveillance even though they are simultaneously occupied in doing something else. In this case, surveillance with the presence of
the employers does not contribute positively to the productivity of the subject of power, contrary to Foucault’s theorisation of the economic use of the subjected body (cf. Foucault, 1977: 25-26).

Conclusion
This chapter documents the stories of migrant domestic workers in experiencing spatialised domination practices by the employers. Foucault (1977: 25-26) suggests that the economic use of the body is achieved through the construction of the body as a productive body and a subjected body; the examples in this chapter in particular show the construction of the subjected body of the workers. In the context of paid domestic work, the body and its embodied attributes in the workers are subjected to spatialised domination practices by the employers in the shape of discipline, immobility and isolation, and surveillance and self-discipline. These practices aim to create deference in the workers in order to confirm the superiority of the employers. By exploring these spatialised domination practices utilised by the employers, this study contributes to the theorisation of deference as a concept. Through applying a Foucauldian conception of surveillance, we learn that gestural deference can be achieved through the workers’ self-discipline as the workers automatically resume the functioning of the power even in the absence of the employers. And in the context of spatial deference, this study contributes by expanding the term to include spatial deference as a result of the immobilisation of migrant workers in the host country and in the home of the employers, and to include social spatial deference as a consequence of the social isolation of the workers. The examples in this study also confirm the feminist theorisation of the embodied body as space, as well as the body in space (McDowell, 1999: Chapter 2).
VII. Spatialised techniques of labour exploitation by employers

Young (2009) argues that exploitation as one of the five faces of oppression manifests in a process of transferring the labour of one group for the benefit of another group. The stories of migrant domestic workers are presented in this chapter with a view to arguing that the employers exploit the labour – both the physical and emotional labour – of migrant domestic workers and reproduce the structural unequal power relations between the two. Exhaustion of labour, maternalism, paternalism and heaping blame are identified as spatialised techniques of labour exploitation by the employers.

This chapter builds on the previous chapter about the various spatialised power practices utilised by the employers. If we return to a Foucauldian understanding of a productive body and a subjected body to achieve the economic use of the body (Foucault, 1977), the previous chapter puts the focus on the subjected body of the workers while this current chapter focuses on the productive body. These two aspects of the body, however, are inseparable in the relation of power to achieve the body of the workers as the force of production, as the source of effective labour.

Each technique of labour exploitation – exhaustion of labour, maternalism, paternalism, and heaping blame – will be explored separately in this chapter. Experiences of migrant domestic workers will enrich the discussion of each technique by providing empirical data, and it will be argued that these different techniques constitute the labour exploitation of migrant domestic workers.

Exhaustion of labour

In discussing the economic use of the body, Foucault (1997) suggests that the modern power intensifies the use of each moment to achieve and maintain maximum productivity. It is a matter of an “ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, even more available moments and, from each
moment, ever more useful forces.” (Foucault, 1977: 154). This principle of the exhaustion of labour is used by employers in exploiting migrant domestic workers. The employers exhaust every moment to get the maximum value from the workers’ embodied labour.

The experiences of migrant domestic workers in this study indicate an exhaustion of labour through the exhaustion of time. Migrant domestic workers often endure long working hours, with an early start in the morning (4-5 a.m.) until late at night (9-11 p.m.). A study on Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Malaysia by Human Rights Watch (2004: 38) finds that these workers usually work 16-18 hours every day. They are at the employers’ beck and call, required to be ready for the employers whenever their services are required (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Komariah shared her daily activities as follows:

"Komariah: We (sic) woke up at 5 a.m., washed five cars, before 7 a.m. all cars should be ready. We made juice for the employer. We had to remember which juice for today, which juice for tomorrow, which juice for the day after tomorrow. After making juice, we had to clean all doormats, changed them every day.

[...]

Yocie: Until what time did you usually work?

Komariah: About 10-11 p.m. There were five persons in the home. Someone might go home at 12 a.m. (midnight), we had to open the door; 1 a.m., opened the door; 3 a.m., opened the door. Until the morning! They all had keys, but they did not want to open the door by themselves.

(Interview with Komariah, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)

The story from Komariah is just a brief glimpse into the busy work these women have to do every day. Migrant domestic workers typically start the day by washing the employers’ cars before the employers go to work, doing the laundry, washing last night’s dishes and preparing breakfast for the employers and the family. Then, during the day, they sweep or vacuum and mop the floor, clean up and tidy up the home and iron the clothes in the afternoon. Some domestic workers also prepare lunch for the employers, who may take their lunch break at home or who finish their work around noon. Throughout the day, those who take care of children have to mind them while at the same time making sure that all of the domestic work is done.

Once the employers are home from work, sometimes the workers can leave the children to spend time with their parents while they prepare dinner. However, some domestic workers are not required to
prepare dinner for the employers because in Malaysia it is common to eat out; in this case, the workers only need to prepare dinner for themselves and for the children they take care of. After the employers have finished with dinner, the workers can have dinner and clean up the dishes afterwards. Usually the working day of these domestic workers ends after washing the dinner dishes. Domestic workers, however, are not usually allowed or feel too shy to join the employers and family if they watch television in the evening after dinner. Instead, the workers prefer to excuse themselves and retire to their rooms to rest.

In the previous chapter it was described how most employers do not allow migrant domestic workers to leave the house unaccompanied or without permission. In addition to this, the employers do not give any days off for Indonesian migrant domestic workers. This is different from the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in Malaysia, who are usually allowed to leave the home as part of the working conditions negotiated through the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Philippines and Malaysia. Although the MOU between Indonesia and Malaysia stipulates that the employer should provide “sufficient rest” for the Indonesian migrant domestic worker, there is no clear definition about how many hours “sufficient rest” constitutes. Without any day off or the opportunity to leave the house unaccompanied, combined with long hours of work, these women are under constant pressure to work for the employers as a result of the spatial characteristics of their workplace. We heard in the previous chapter that Ratna and Wulan, for instance, tried to appear busy when the employers were around for fear of being scolded, even though they had already completed the work (Ratna and Wulan, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013).

While migrant domestic workers’ labour is exhausted through the exhaustion of time, this frees the employers to do other activities of their choice, whether to participate in the labour market or to relax and take up a hobby. Migrant domestic workers, on the other hand, have limited – if any – time to rest. The exhaustion of labour through the maximum utilisation of time is possible because the workers live in the same place as their workplace; meanwhile, they do not have any clear working hours, days off or clear rest time.

Another application of the exhaustion of the workers’ labour is the high demand of cleanliness. Almost every domestic worker said that their employers demanded a high standard of cleanliness (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Sometimes employers supervised the workers directly to make sure that they cleaned the home thoroughly, as described by Melati:
If the employer was around, “Here, there, there!” So we (sic) became slower. “This is dirty, that is dirty!” If [we were] alone, we could see if this was still dirty, we cleaned it. It’s definitely busier when the employer was around, especially if she came into the kitchen! (Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Melati’s narrative suggests that the demands from her employer made her slower to clean the home because the employer kept adding areas or things to clean. In practice, the employers often order the workers to do seemingly unnecessary tasks. Imas, for instance, said that her employer ordered her to clean the ceiling every day to remove and prevent any spider’s webs (Imas, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2014). Or, as Korimah described below:

Komariah : The woman employer’s room was like a shopping centre. We (sic) had to clean it. When she put on clothes and saw the mirror that it did not look good, she would throw the clothes on the floor. If we did not pick it up immediately, it would crumple and then we would have to iron it again. We tidied up [the clothes]: whites with whites, blacks with blacks, everything we tidied up. When she returned home at 1 p.m. during the day, she would play mah-jong with her friends. If her friend wanted to be cooked something, we had to cook it. And then the woman employer wanted to be cooked something else, we had to cook them all. All the while, I had to iron the clothes, you know?! Her friend wanted her car to be washed, the woman employer ordered me to wash the car, under the hot sun in the middle of the field! I worked there only for one month.

Yocie : In the meantime, the employer was home?
Komariah : Yes.

Yocie : In the afternoon, what did you do?
Komariah : A lot of work! It was 10-11 p.m. when we were done with everything. Her house had a lot of mirrors. She did not want any spot on the mirrors, we had to polish them. On the front yard, if there was any wild grass, we had to pick it. Her house was like a villa. Before Christmas, we had to clean small while stones one by one! All along the driveway!

Yocie : What do you mean, “stones”?
Komariah : In the garden there were small white stones.

Yocie : You had to clean them?
Komariah : Yes! Scrubbed and polished!
The labour of migrant domestic workers is perhaps required to keep the house clean or to take care of children, but it is not necessary to ask the workers to clean the same spot every day, to cook everyone’s meal separately or to polish every stone in the driveway. The stories told by these workers indicate that their labour does not simply substitute for the domestic work necessary to keep the home running; rather, it is an exhaustion of labour to support the lifestyle of the employers. Underlying these practices, there is also a relation between person-related tasks and object-related tasks as suggested by Lutz (2011). While person-related tasks, such as taking care of children, are necessary for the survival of life, some object-related tasks serve to support a comfortable lifestyle and the reproduction of status as shown through the lifestyle. Anderson (2000) suggests that:

The employment of a paid domestic worker therefore facilitates status reproduction, not only by maintaining status objects, enabling the silver to be polished or the clothes to be ironed, but also by serving as a foil to the lady of the house. (p. 19)

Chin (1997) in her study on Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia finds that the employers perceive the employment of migrant domestic workers as similar to possessing material items as part of the employers’ achievements in “middle-classhood” (p. 372). Anderson (2000) argues that the work domestic workers do is often tasks “that any woman with a choice would be prepared to undertake” (p. 16). The exploitation of migrant domestic workers’ labour as found in this study, however, does not stop at supporting the employers’ middle-class lifestyle and status. Instead, there is a relation between the labour exploitation of the workers and the historical colonial legacy in Malaysia. A civil society activist related this labour exploitation to the high fee that the employers had to pay to bring the workers into the country:

It goes on further when the recruitment fee is exorbitant. 10 years ago it used to be 4,000 [ringgit] (910 euro); it started with 2,000-4,000 [ringgit] (450-910 euro). But it is now up to 15,000 [ringgit] (3,410 euro). And I think it’s even more, depends on the nationality of the domestic worker. So it has gone up to 15,000. Now, an employer who recruits a domestic worker has a mentality that I have paid 15,000 [ringgit] (3,410 euro) to purchase you, so you become a commodity. That’s when they take on the practice of master-servant relationship. (Interview with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014)
According to the activist, the high cost that the employers had to pay made the employers adopted the slavery-like attitude under which the employers “own” the workers and exhaust their labour. The exhaustion of labour by the employer is not only in terms of the physical labour of the workers, but also the exhaustion of the emotional labour. In the previous chapter, it was discussed how the employers require the workers to provide care, love and compassion to the family they serve – and how the provision of this embodied labour is at the cost of the workers’ own reproductive labour because they are forced to leave their own children behind in Indonesia.

As suggested by Lutz (2011), there is a close relationship between object-related tasks and person-related tasks. In performing the object-related tasks, whether cooking for the employers and the family members or tidying up clothes, migrant domestic workers need to consider each family member’s food preferences or where to put the clothes so that the family members can find them. At other times, the object-related tasks need to be carried out while the domestic workers perform person-related tasks. Women workers in this study who took care of babies or small children stated that their employers demanded that they always had to keep an eye on the children while cleaning the house and doing other domestic work.

Ratna : The most important was [taking care of] the children.
LC : So the work is basically taking care of the children?
Citra : Yes.
Imas : While tidying up, cleaning up, but prioritised [taking care of] the children. [The children] should not fall, should not be bitten by anything. We should really keep an eye, [while] cleaning, tidying up.

(Ratna, Citra and Imas, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

If anything happens to the children, the workers usually suffer the consequences. Citra, for instance, was scolded because her employer found a mosquito bite on the baby’s leg (Citra, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview Karawang, 25 April 2013). The employer also blamed Yolanda for letting one of the seven children to climb onto the roof, as shared by Yolanda below:

Yolanda : My employer’s kid climbed onto the roof, right when my employer arrived home. I was worried that the employer thought that I did not take care of the kid. It’s the boy, 1.5 years old. […] I was taking care of another kid, [when] the boy climbed
onto the roof, right when the employer arrived home at 1 p.m. He could see it from the ground, up on the roof, from afar – there was not a lot of houses in the area. “You were not careful,” he said, “in taking care of the kid!” It was the kid who was naughty!

Melati : He thought you let it happened?
Yolanda : Yes. But it was him who sneaked around.
Yocie : Did you say that you were taking care of another kid?
Yolanda : Well, he already knew that his kid was naughty, but we were still the one who was wrong. “You were not careful,” he said, “for letting it to happen. Even if he cried, you should not have let him. What if the kid falls and dies?!”

(Interview with Yolanda and Melati, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

It is Yolanda’s responsibility of keeping an eye on the children, and she is the one to blame if anything happens to them. One thing to remember here, nevertheless, was that the worker experienced an overload of work. She was required to take care of seven children, while making sure that all other domestic tasks were completed. The overload of work then led her to lose track of the kid.

On top of these different applications of exhaustion of labour is the withholding of salary. The salary of the participants in this study varied considerably, depending on the period of their migration and their immigration status. Melati, who migrated to Malaysia in 1998, received 600 Malaysian ringgit (about 130 euros) per month. Sari, who started working for her employer in 2001, received 430 ringgit (about 90 euros) at the time, but by the time of the interview (2014), she received 1,000 ringgit (about 225 euros). On the other hand, Imas, who migrated to Malaysia in 2008, received only 350 ringgit (about 75 euros) and the amount was reduced further by deductions from the agency. Imas’ low salary was partly due to her status as an undocumented migrant domestic worker. While migrant domestic workers’ salary is usually deducted for three months to repay the recruitment fee to the recruitment/placement agencies, Imas’ salary was deducted for about one third of the length of her work duration with each employer (see also the discussion on the precarious working conditions of undocumented workers in the later section of this chapter). The current salary standard for Indonesian migrant domestic workers as negotiated between Indonesia and Malaysia in 2015 is 900 ringgit (about 193 euros).
Withholding of salary is a common practice in Malaysia. What is interesting is that the employers develop an illusion that the workers have control of their salaries.

LC : What about salary, Bu? Was it paid every month or only when you were about to go home?

Nur : Well, it depended on how we (sic) wanted it.

LC : What about you, Bu? Did you take it every month, or?

Kokom : Not really. When we wanted to send home, we sent home.

LC : But did the employer every month offer you whether you wanted to take it or not?

Kokom : Well, not really.

LC : If we did not ask, she did not offer?

Kokom : If we did not ask, well, not. But if we asked every month, well, she would give it too.

Yocie : But how every how many months did you usually ask for it?

Kokom : Sometimes half a year, six months.

LC : While you did not take the money, how did you survive there?

Kokom : We did not have any money.

Nur : Well, food and everything were with the employer.

(Interview with Nur and Kokom, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 15 October 2014)

In this narrative, Kokom and Nur believed that it was up to them to choose when they would ask for their salary. Underlying this narrative, however, is the unequal power relations between employers and migrant domestic workers; that is, the workers have to ask the employers for the salary that is theirs by right in the first place. The exploitative character of this practice was revealed when the workers confirmed that the employers would not give the salary if the workers did not ask for it; thus, it was actually the employers who controlled the salary. Withholding of salary allows the employers to keep the workers in their subordinate position, and is a way to ensure their loyalty.

The unequal power positions in the work relations between migrant domestic workers and their employers prevent the workers from demanding their salary, including if the employers do not pay the full
salary of the workers. This is clearly shown in Ratna’s narrative below:

Ratna : Me too, [my salary] was deducted three months. Two years [I worked], deducted three months, I only got 20 months. [The salary of] two months never arrived here. The first time I sent here it was during the [Moslem’s] fasting month. Before the fasting month, I sent [the salary of] two months. There was no phone here back then, only letter. I could not ask the employer, I was afraid, but in the letter [the family] said that it did not arrive.

LC : Whenever [the employer] sent the money, did [the employer] not show you the proof?

Ratna : Nope.

Yocie : And you did not ask the employer?

Ratna : No, I was afraid.

Yocie : So until you finished working, how much of the salary was received [by the family] in Indonesia?

Ratna : I did not know about the amount, because the exchange rate for ringgit sometimes was low, sometimes it was high.

Yocie : Other than those two months’ [salary] that were not received, did you send the salary per month or only at the end of your work period?

Ratna : Every month, and they arrived. But then I recounted everything, [the total] was only equal for about 19 months. Five months I worked there for free, did not receive salary. Well, three months were deducted, but those two months’ [salary] did not arrive.

(Interview with Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Other than the salary, migrant domestic workers also do not receive any social benefits. A few domestic workers told me that the employers sometimes gave them money or gifts on big holidays, like Ied. Rollins (1985), however, reminds us that these expressions of maternalism are based on unequal power positions (see also the discussion on maternalism in the next section). These gifts or money are only given depending on the “kindness” of the employers. The act of giving these gifts or money on the employers’ terms therefore reveals the unequal power positions between the employers and the workers.

This is also the case with health benefits. Migrant domestic workers do not receive any health benefits from the state. If migrant domes-
tic workers are sick, it is the responsibility of the employers to pay for their medical care. Almost every migrant domestic worker in this study said that they did not develop any serious illness during their work period in Malaysia and they were able to rely on generic medicines if they felt unwell. If they did not feel better quickly, the employers usually took them to the doctor. Ratna, for instance, fell on the stairs and needed medical attention so her employer took her to the doctor (Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, 25 April 2013).

These different stories of migrant domestic workers’ experiences of the exhaustion of labour suggest the spatiality of this exploitation technique. In the exhaustion of time, the labour exploitation is possible as the result of the constant power practices by the employers in the home space as the workplace. As the workers endure long hours combined with no day off nor sufficient resting time, along with the confinement of the workers in the house of the employers, we can see the maximisation of time and space/place as a means to exhaust the labour of the workers. Implied in the high demands for cleanliness is the exhaustion of labour to maintain the “middle-classhood” (Chin, 1997) status and lifestyle of the employers as represented in the meticulously clean house and the employers’ “ownership” of the workers themselves. What we see here is the symbolic middle-class status of the employers as embedded in the super clean house of the employers. In the exhaustion of emotional labour, we also see the relations between object and person as the workers carry out their work. Remembering where to put the clothes for the employers to find, or to keep an eye on the children while cleaning the house, are examples of the relations of object and person in this specific embodied labour. Lastly, withholding the salary is an effective means of controlling the workers and one that reproduces the unequal power relations.

“Part of the family”: an example of maternalism

This phrase “part of the family” is found everywhere in this study and in the narratives of different actors: the employers, the migrant domestic workers, the placement agencies and the civil society activists. Each actor, however, imbues the phrase with different meanings. The director of a placement agency interviewed, for instance, advised trust as the foundation of a good working relationship between employers and migrant domestic workers. He said,
On the benefit side, first we have to have trust. We trust this domestic maid by looking at their face, looking at the biodata, and we give trust. [...] Secondly, [...] they are not experienced so we have to spend time to teach, even to know her likes and dislikes. Because sometimes maybe they’re allergic to something, and lady girl, menstruation cycle, they’re moody… I mean, the employer has to be prepared on this. As I said, because of the trust on everything, we have to have positive-looking. (Interview with the director of a placement agency, Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013)

By building the trust, according to him, the employers treat and include the workers as part of the family. At the same time, the employers should be able to manage the balance between treating the workers as part of the family and ensuring the workers do their work:

Only then you can have the trust, you can have smiling face on both sides. But some of the maids, after knowing that the employers are so good, only become less respectful, so they must have a thin line of separateness. I mean, like teacher and students, right? They have certain line of respect there. (Interview with the director of a placement agency, Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013)

With this advice, he suggested that the employers should be understanding of the workers’ needs, such as emotions or likes and dislikes, while at the same time keeping a distance to prevent the workers from becoming less respectful. Implied in his statement was the importance of the employers’ managerial skills in maintaining good work relations with the workers.

The chairperson of the employers’ association in Malaysia also advised employers to treat migrant domestic workers as part of the family. One example of treating them as part of the family, according to him, was to take migrant domestic workers along with the family to the shopping mall, which is what most middle-class Malaysians do at the weekend:

Whether it’s Chinese or Malay or Indian, Malaysian middle-income lifestyle, they only have weekends with the family and on the weekends they normally go to shopping malls. Sometimes they just leave the maids at home so the maids should understand that that would be their off-day where they can rest. But sometimes they might feel lonely, you know, coming from a faraway place in a strange city. To me, although the maids come here to earn a living, the employers should treat them as a family. They came here to earn a livelihood. If they could earn it in their own country they would do that, but they travel all the way to get a decent income. So the employers should treat them as a family because they miss their family themselves. Also, bring them along! (Interview with Fauzi, MAMA, Kuala Lumpur, 2 October 2013)
Although he framed the idea of taking the workers along with the family to shopping malls at the weekend as being a measure to ensure that they felt like part of the family, migrant domestic workers often felt that this was still an obligation because they had to take care of the employers’ children (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013; interview with Citra, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 24 April 2013). Sometimes, the employers would also not listen if the workers said that they preferred to be at home (interview with Kokom, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 15 October 2014). This once again reminds us about the unequal power relations between employers and migrant domestic workers, despite the employers’ efforts to be caring to the domestic workers.

Interestingly, the chairperson of the employers’ association suggested that treating migrant domestic workers as part of the family was part of the Asian tradition, vis-à-vis the colonial slavery relations found in the West. He said,

> You want their help, domestic workers come here to help you, but teach them how to help you right and treat them as part of the family! They’re not slaves. We’re Asian and we have certain Asian traditions, good family values. And the majority cases of maids staying and willing to continue their stay here are because of good family relationship with the employers. (Interview with Fauzi, MAMA, Kuala Lumpur, 2 October 2013)

He believed that Asians had “good family values”, unlike the colonial tradition which treats maids (or domestic servants) as slaves. Interestingly, Rollins (1985) in her study of black women domestic workers in the US argues that maternalism characterises the relationships between women employers and women domestic workers, and maternalism itself finds its roots in the historical tradition of paternalism in domestic servitude (p. 178). This suggests that treating migrant domestic workers as “part of family” – whether or not this is framed as part of “good Asian family values” – still carries the traces of colonial servitude relations. Some examples below confirm that treating migrant domestic workers as part of the family serves to affirm the superior status of the employers and the inferior status of the domestic workers in the complex power positions.

Migrant domestic workers sometimes receive gifts from their employers, such as food, clothes or money; one of the employers in this study even paid for the education of her domestic worker’s children. As live-in domestics, these women in practice rely on the employers for basic amenities such as toiletries, food, water and accommodation. On certain occasions, employers give something extra for the workers
and expect the workers to be grateful. Gift-giving is a form of materialism which is often found in studies on domestic workers (for instance, see Lan, 2006; Rollins, 1985). Often the workers are grateful for the gifts from the employers, but sometimes they do not like these gifts, as described by Wulan below:

The older [kid] was also close to me. When eating, “Bi, have a burger.” I do not like burger. “Come on, Bi, eat,” he said. How to eat it? Well, I ate it anyway, one bite, I didn’t like it, felt sick immediately. “Bi, what’s wrong?” “Don’t like it.” After that, he never bought it for me anymore, never bought anything for me anymore. (laughs) I can’t eat burger. It’s better to eat rice with salt. (laughs) (Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, 16 October 2014)

Sometimes the workers also disapprove of the clothes provided by the employers. In the previous chapter, we heard stories in which these women felt uneasy when the employers told them to wear the hijab with shorts. Ita, who also worked as a shopkeeper for her employer at the market, said that whenever her employer earned a lot from the shop, she would be very kind to Ita and offer to cook and buy things for Ita.

*Ibu Haji* often said, when she got more than 2,000 [Malaysian ringgit] (about 450 euro), “Ita, when we’re home, what do you want me to cook? Do you want *rendang* or Indonesian food? I will cook it for you.” She was glad because she got a lot of money. Ita said, “Don’t need to mind Ita, just buy me some cigarettes.” “Yes, but let’s close the shop early now, then we go to the supermarket.” And it’s true, earlier, around *maghrib* [the shop] was closed, she took Ita to the supermarket. She bought eye-shadow and lipstick for me. She also bought me a short skirt, but I was not used to it. There they wear shorts but wear hijab. Ita said, ‘What is that?!’ (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Sometimes when the employers know that the domestic workers like something, such as a certain type of food, they will often buy it for the workers. In the end, the workers cannot eat it all because it is too much. Ratna remembered such a time, and it made her cry because she had such abundant food while her children might be starving.

---

24 *Ibu Haji* is a title for a Moslem woman who has done a pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj).
25 Indonesian spicy beef curry.
26 The prayer time at sunset for Moslems, usually around 6 p.m.
The grandfather\textsuperscript{27} said, “Do you like roe?” “I like it!” He bought one kilo for me! When I was eating, I was crying, I remembered my children. I did not like to eat much. I could not eat it all by myself. I remembered my children. (Interview with Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, Karamang, 16 October 2014)

The ideal situation is that the employers should ask the migrant domestic workers for their preferences, rather than giving abundant gifts which are reluctantly received by the workers. Sari, for instance, had an employer who was thoughtful of her needs:

Sari : [...] On the Hajj holiday, Ied, I always received money, on Christmas, on my birthday, on satu suro\textsuperscript{28}, Muhammad holiday. She knows because she has a lot of Malay friends, so she knows the big holidays [for Moslems]\textsuperscript{29}. She always gives me \textit{angpau}\textsuperscript{30}. On the last Ied, I got 300 [Malaysian ringgit] (about 70 euro). Not bad, to buy clothes.

Yocie : Did she ever buy you clothes or [other] things?

Sari : Yes, clothes. She always buys me clothes.

Yocie : Did she buy it for you or did she take you to the store?

Sari : Yeah, she told me to pick.

Yocie : So you could pick according to your preference? Sometimes the employer buys clothes for the domestic worker, but the worker does not like it. For instance, a Moslem who usually wears long-sleeve cloth, but the employer buys her a short-sleeve cloth, so she does not like it.

Sari : She always takes me, then she tells me to choose. Or she gives me the money, “You buy it yourself.”

(Interview with Sari, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014)

In a study of black domestic workers in the US, Rollins (1985) argues that maternalism is a central character in the relations between women domestic workers and women employers. Although maternalism de-

\textsuperscript{27} The father of the woman employer also lived in the home.

\textsuperscript{28} Sari comes from Central Java, and is ethnic Javanese. \textit{satu suro} is the first day of Javanese calendar year. It is often seen as corresponding to the first day of the Islamic calendar, Muharram. In Javanese tradition, \textit{satu suro} is often considered as a sacred day.

\textsuperscript{29} Sari’s employer is a Catholic, while Sari is a Moslem.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Angpau} is a small red envelope containing money in the Chinese tradition. It is usually given to younger relatives at New Year or on any other celebration day, such as their wedding day, symbolising good luck. In this example, Sari used the term to refer to the money she received on those holidays.
velops from the historical tradition of paternalism, Rollins suggests that maternalism has a distinct character from paternalism. If paternalism offers protection and guidance and in return the domestic servant gives loyalty and obedience, caring and empathy are central to maternalism. However, the caring and empathy approaches as parts of maternalism in the relations between domestic workers and employers need to be scrutinised. Rollins argues,

The maternalism dynamic is based on the assumption of a superordinate-subordinate relationship. While maternalism may protect and nurture, it also degrades and insults. [...] The female employer, with her motherliness and protectiveness and generosity, is expressing in a distinctly feminine way her lack of respect for the domestic as an autonomous, adult employee. (Rollins, 1985: 186)

The narratives of women employers in this study are also filled with maternalistic perspectives, despite the fact that they show care for their workers. The employers see their role as the protector of these women.

I think [the domestic] stays because she comes from that family, I don’t think her family will allow her to stay out. They’re very happy with me, [with] this household, they know I protect her and so on. I’m very careful about the way she dresses, the way she talks to people, and so on. Her friends I also know who they are, the neighbours. Her relationships with men, and so on. She’s very friendly with the bread man, she talks, but normal talking, no hiding behind and talking stories. This is a married woman. She’s good in that way. But I’m always alert with that, so I make sure that she’s okay. I’m actually protecting her for her family also. I don’t send her alone. She doesn’t go alone outside for a full day. She always goes with [a domestic worker working for another family in the area], a very good friend. (Interview with Caroline, employer of a migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 2 November 2014)

Caroline believed that the family of her domestic worker trusted her to protect the worker while she was in Malaysia. She adopted the role as the protector of the domestic worker, just as she thought the worker’s family would do for her. This included knowing all of her friends and her relationships with men, and not letting her going out alone.

If we relate maternalism to the surveillance practice in the previous chapter (see Chapter VII) and apply these to Caroline’s story, we can see that she employed a form of spatialised maternalism by putting under surveillance the behaviour of the worker and the way she develops relationships with others. In a spatialised form of maternalism, the employer oversees the behaviour of the worker and reacts accordingly.
Another employer, Christine, also showered her domestic worker with gifts and money. She even paid for the education of the worker’s children until they all graduated from high school. She, however, regretted that the worker always spent all of her income and the money she received on gifts for her relatives, while the worker could not save anything for herself.

Because we give her money, spend it overnight, show that to many, and come back with the debt. Every year she’s home! I mean, I don’t blame them, she goes back with so much, she cooks and feeds them, she looks after them. That’s everything. (Interview with Christine, employer of a migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014)

She was particularly furious after discovering that the domestic worker had given all of her money to the husband who lost it all in a failed investment.

But, as soon as she went back, her husband appeared. He and his brother-in-law… (hesitates for a bit) …in spite of everything I told her, she was stupid! Many women are stupid when it comes to husbands! They put her to an investment which failed. (Interview with Christine, employer of a migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014)

Christine regretted that the domestic worker lost all of her income to her relatives. While she tried to show compassion for her domestic worker, she could not hide her frustration about the domestic worker for being “stupid” and giving all the money to her husband. She was glad that the worker finally followed her suggestion to buy some land in her village in Indonesia as an investment. What is particularly interesting in Christine’s story is that the spatialised form of maternalism extends beyond the boundary of home – even the state, for that matter – as she became involved in the worker’s personal relations with her family and relatives back home.

Maternalism is based on the idea that the employers view migrant domestic workers as family members who they have to protect, while at the same time reducing the autonomy of these workers. The relations between the woman employer and the woman domestic worker resemble a mother who is protective of her daughter in terms of the friends she makes, including the relationships she builds with men, the money she spends, the clothes she wears, the food she eats and so on. While this kind of relationship dynamic is understandable between a mother and her underage daughter, this relationship fails to recognise that the domestic worker is a fully-grown woman who can make decisions on her own. This kind of relationship dynamic serves to affirm
the superior-inferior power positions between the employers and migrant domestic workers while at the same time sharpening the differences between women.

Treating migrant domestic workers as part of the family sometimes also creates additional responsibilities for the workers. Some migrant domestic workers said that the more the employers were kind to them, the more they felt shy of the employers. Caroline, who treated her domestic worker as part of her family, also expected the worker to behave like a member of her family.

I always keep on repeating, reminding her when she doesn’t behave like a family. I said, “I am taking you like my own family, so I want you to even behave like them. So you cannot ignore things. So you should keep the house tidy and by arranging this way.” She’s also like that, it may not be as perfect as you are doing, but she tries with her very best to do whatever is necessary for the house. (Interview with Caroline, employer of a migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 2 November 2014)

McDowell (2009: 91) argues that this form of “false kin” relationship serves to reduce economic obligations, such as paying domestic workers with the minimum wage. One of the civil society activists interviewed criticised employers who treat migrant domestic workers as “part of the family” because this obscures the work relations.

Here we are fighting the fact that you are paying her a salary; therefore, treat her as a worker. But a lot of employers would say: “oh, she betrayed me, she abused my love, because I treated her as a family, she lives in my home, she eats my food, she cooks my food, and now she betrayed me” – when there is a problem. But our argument is, she is not your family! You don’t pay your family. You pay this girl for the work she does, therefore treat her as a worker! (Interview with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014)

The power positions between employers and migrant domestic workers are inherently unequal, which allows the employers to define which form of work relations they will develop with the workers. Maternalism offers a more caring and friendly face as a work relation; however, it does not change the power relations between the two. The examples here suggest that gifts, food and money from the employers conceal the exploitative power relations in the guise of caring familiar relations, while at the same time justifying similarly demanding responsibilities, such as expecting the worker to behave like a family member or blaming the worker for betraying the employer when a problem arises. Maternalism is a technique of labour exploitation masquerading as a caring, familiar work relation.
Through the examples presented here, this study also contributes to broadening the practices of maternalism to include spatialised maternalism. As the workplace of these women is a “paradoxical space” (Rose, 1993), the work relations developed in this particular workplace are influenced by the social relations between the employer and the worker. Combining caring and sympathy as the key characters of maternalism with surveillance practices – and even immobilisation, as we saw in the previous chapter – produces an analysis of a spatialised form of maternalism. We can see examples here where the employers put surveillance over the behaviour of the workers, including the relations beyond the boundary of the home.

Another important aspect of maternalism is that it reproduces the superior-inferior power positions of the employers and the workers (Anderson, 2000). The construction of maternalism in the “part of the family” discourse in the context of paid domestic work is not a finding specific to this study. Previous studies on paid domestic work also find similar discourses (for example “like of the family” in Constable (1997), Romero (1992); as a “custodian” of the workers in Lane (2006)). Parreñas (2001) even finds practices by the workers which challenge the script of materialism by the employers, for example “by crying, showing anger, projecting a somber mood, becoming very quiet and unresponsive to employers, or by simply talking back” (p. 190). Treating migrant domestic workers as part of the family in practice veils the work relations between the employers and the domestic workers, which contributes to the devaluation of domestic work.

When the employer is a man: a paternalism technique

The argument of domestic work as a highly gendered work, where both the employers and the workers are mostly women, is the foundation for this dissertation. Paid domestic work itself arises as an extension of women’s domestic duties in maintaining the home as the support for providing a caring and loving environment for the reproduction of labour. Studies of domestic workers therefore mostly take up the assumption that the employers share similar gender roles with the workers in fulfilling this domestic duty. Among the participants of the study, there were two workers whose employers were men; it was the men who managed the workers, rather than the women.

In this section we will see the tension from the unequal power positions based on gender as reflected in the work relations between the
men employers and the women workers. By clustering the experiences of women workers with men employers as paternalism, however, it is not intended to imply that only men use paternalism while women use maternalism. Rather, it can be argued that these two forms are built on gender stereotypes and learned gender roles.

The two migrant domestic workers who had a man employer giving the orders said that the man employer had higher demands than the woman. These workers said that the reason why they could not stand working for these employers was because of the demanding men employers.

LC : Did you like it there?
Ratna : Not at all.
Yocie : Why not?
Ratna : I liked the woman employer, but the man employer was very demanding! I could not stand.

(Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

Yolanda : In my case, it was the husband who was demanding. He was the one who gave the order to work. That’s why I could not stand. They got a lot of children, [and] the husband was demanding. The woman employer was kind. I did not like it. I felt uncomfortable with a man [employer]. Sometimes he ordered: “Do this! Do that!” It’s the husband [who gave the orders].

Yocie : Did you feel any difference between you, Melati, who got the woman employer who was demanding, and you, Yolanda, who got the man employer who was demanding?
Melati : It’s natural for the woman employer [to be demanding], but for a man employer, ough…
Yolanda : With a man employer, I felt uncomfortable. How could we talk so often with a man?! Afraid…
Yocie : When your employer was demanding, did you say something to the woman employer, that you felt uncomfortable?
Yolanda : Because I was new [there], I could not say anything, afraid: “Well, maybe here it was the man who gave the orders.”

(Interview with Yolanda and Melati, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

In the last conversation, Melati suggested that a demanding man employer was “unnatural” in the context of domestic work, while a demanding woman employer was “natural”. An underlying assumption
in this statement is that domestic work is a woman’s sphere. A demanding man employer, therefore, destabilises this assumption, while at the same time it reinforces the position of the man employer as the head of the house. As we can see from how Yolanda described that she felt uncomfortable with the situation, she suggested that it was hard for her to challenge the authority of the man employer. At the same time, she did not dare to say anything to the woman employer and assumed this just to be the normal cultural practice in Malaysia. Later on in the interview, she also justified the involvement of the man employer in domestic work as “natural” for an Ustad31:

Most Ustad are demanding. Here (in Indonesia) [Ustad] are also demanding. People here are the same. Buying groceries and stuffs, it’s the man who handles it. (Interview with Yolanda, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Whether or not the man employer occupies a position of religious leadership, the involvement of the man employer reinforces the gender roles in the home. It is the reason why these two women domestic workers felt uncomfortable with, or afraid of, the men employers. Men employers embody a higher power position in the gender hierarchy, both in relation to the women employers and the women migrant domestic workers. When a domestic worker feels uneasy at refusing the order of a man employer, like in Yolanda’s story, it indicates the superiority of the man employer which finds its institutional status of power in the gender hierarchy. The worker feels uneasy at challenging the disciplinary power of the man employer as a result of her inferior gender identity in the patriarchal society.

Interestingly, when it is the man employer who gives the orders in the home, the gender identities of the woman employer and the woman worker are shaped differently. In the experiences of these two women workers, for example, they did not experience jealousy from the women employers as sometimes found in the domestic work relations if the employers were women.

Yolanda said that even the woman employer was afraid of her husband (interview with Yolanda, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014), although we did not discuss further the reasons for this. Later on in the interview, she was asked whether the man employer ever made advances on Yolanda:

LC : Did you ever feel that the [man] employer was a bit naughty, teasing you?

31 Ustad is a title for a male Islamic scholar or teacher.
Yolanda: Of course not, he’s an *Ustad*. His wife was also pretty, still young.

(Interview with Yolanda, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Here Yolanda referred to the man employer’s status as a religious scholar/leader as explaining why he never made advances on Yolanda. In addition, Yolanda thought that the woman employer was pretty and still young, in comparison to the man employer who was much older than her, so it was unnecessary for the man employer to make advances on Yolanda. The assumption behind this comment is that the gender identity of the woman employer was not challenged by the presence of the woman worker.

Ratna, on the other hand, related the inferior power position of the woman employer to her background, since the woman employer came from a lower economic class. Ratna said,

The father and mother of the woman employer lived in the home. So she came from a poor family. It was her husband who has the money. (interview with Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

Ratna’s man employer even had a stronger power position compared to the father of the woman employer. Ratna recalled a story,

For example, [...] after dinner around 9 or 10, after he (the man employer) was at home, he said [to me], “Look, the car is not washed yet!” The grandfather (the father of the woman employer) said, “Just do it tomorrow at 4 a.m.” “Right now!” he shouted, banging the table. (Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

Paid domestic work in the case of men employers is no longer a work relation of the same sex (woman employer – to – woman worker); rather, it reinforces both the relations of opposite sexes and of the same sexes (man employer – to – woman employer – to – woman worker). When the employer is a woman, the role of the man in the household remains somewhat in the background. The woman employer holds a certain degree of power which allows her to manage and control the workers, but her power is limited. Her husband enjoys the most benefit from this arrangement. The role of the woman employer here is similar to Young’s (2009: 65) description of the professionals who benefit from the exploitation of non-professionals, yet they are not members of the capitalist class.
When the employer is a man, the norm of domestic work as women’s sphere is challenged, but the patriarchal role of the man as the head of the household is reinforced. As the man employer enjoys the privilege of the gender hierarchy, the wife does not hold the power to control the workers as in the case of women employers. The wife and the worker are in subordinate positions, although they are not situated in the same subordinate positions because the wife still enjoys some benefits from the labour of the worker. In paternalism, the man is the head of the household who holds the “ultimate power over and responsibility for all the people in his house – wife, children, and servants” (Rollins, 1985: 27). The institutional status of power which the man employer receives as a result of a patriarchal social relations puts him in a superior power position in comparison to the worker, as well as to the wife. Furthermore, when gender intersects with economic class, as in the context of Ratna’s employer, it reinforces the man employer’s superior power in the home. Examples in this section show that paternalism has its own practices which differ from maternalism as a result of, among other things, the unequal gender relations. The consequence of having a man as an employer is a weaker position for the woman domestic worker in refusing an order or challenging the authority of the man employer.

Heaping blame on undocumented migrant domestic workers

The high number of Indonesian migrants without documents in Malaysia has strained the political relations between the two countries for years. The migration of Indonesian citizens without documents to Malaysia is possible due to the geographical proximity between the two countries. These undocumented workers usually migrate over the sea by boats or through the land border on Borneo/Kalimantan island. Overstay and misuse of visas are other means used by the immigrants to prolong their stay in Malaysia. Transnational human trafficking in the form of labour trafficking is therefore a big problem for Malaysia.

Since the 1990s, Malaysia has regularly carried out nationwide operations or raids to remove undocumented migrant workers from the country, under which some migrant workers are granted amnesty while others are deported back to their country of origin. During the first fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur for this study, I visited two areas famous as the favourite hangout places for Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers if they received days off. The presence of police
officers in these two areas increased significantly on Sunday, in comparison to the middle of the week. The police put the migrants under heavy surveillance – although not this was not specific to migrant domestic workers – so as to be on the lookout for undocumented migrant workers. They also stopped suspicious migrants in the middle of the busy street.

In the context of paid migrant domestic labour in Malaysia, migrant domestic workers may find themselves without documents as a result of a variety of practices. In the previous chapter (see Chapter VI), we heard stories about the withholding of passports by employers (and/or recruitment/placement agencies) as a common practice in Malaysia. Without a passport, migrant domestic workers can be detained and deported at any time if they leave the employers’ home. In another situation, migrant domestic workers may not know upon leaving for Malaysia that the agencies have tricked them into an undocumented situation. This situation resembles a master-suppression technique of “heaping blame” (Ås, 2004), where the migrant is the one to blame for being in an undocumented situation although the reasons are probably beyond her control. In this section we will follow the experiences of two migrant domestic workers who became undocumented involuntarily. As a result of their immigration status, these women embody particular forms of precariousness and institutional vulnerability which contribute to their labour exploitation.

Imas and Wulan were neighbours in Karawang. They migrated to Malaysia together in 2008 after being approached by another former migrant domestic worker in their village who claimed to be married to a Malaysian citizen. She assured them that she and her “husband” would sponsor them, rather than them having to go through an agency. After paying a hefty sum of money, they were brought to Malaysia by a land route and found that the sponsor had lied to them. After placing them separately in the employers’ home, the sponsor never gave them – nor the employers – their passports or work visas, saying that the documents were still being processed.

Imas and Wulan stated that employers were usually kind when they just started working, but after a few months they would start repeated-

---

32 In the group interview, these workers expressed their doubt whether the woman was really married to the man or not.

33 “Land route” was a term often used by migrant domestic workers to indicate that they came to Malaysia by using a car/boat, rather than by air. In the discussions with migrant domestic workers for this study, it was clear that for them travelling by plane to/from Malaysia was associated with migrants coming through formal procedures, while those coming by car/boat used sponsors or were victims of trafficking.
ly asking about their documents. The employers accused them of lying when they told the employers that the agent held their documents.

Wulan: It was because the employer was frustrated about the passport (the visa) and the permit.

Imas: “You came illegally!” the employer said.

Wulan: “Where is the passport?” “The agent has it.” “You lie!”

(Wulan and Imas, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

Not only did the employer pressure them about the documents; the employer also started to treat them differently, often in a more degrading way as described by Wulan below:

At first my work was never checked. After four months, she (the woman employer) started to ask about the passport. The bathroom was checked by her, using her feet to point, “Here, here, it’s not clean yet!” After 4 months, [she] started to get demanding. (Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

As we can see in Wulan’s story, the employer started treating her differently after realising that the domestic worker she was employing had neither visa nor work permit. Without the proper documents, the employer and the migrant domestic worker would be liable for fines and detention/deportation, hence putting both of them in a difficult situation. The agent, meanwhile, reaped the most benefit because he received payment from the employer and the worker whenever he placed the migrant domestic worker in a new home. Due to the pressure from the employer, these two migrant domestic workers could not stand working for one employer for long. They worked in Malaysia for about two years and they changed – or were placed with – employers three to five times, each time in a different city. Every time they were placed by the agent in a new employer’s home, both the worker and the employer had to pay a fee to the agent.

Since Imas and Wulan did not have the proper documents to stay and work in Malaysia, they were constantly in fear of being detained and deported. They did not dare to leave the home of the employers; on the other hand, nor did the employers dare to take the domestic workers out of the home for fear of being caught employing undocumented migrants. Although they were confined in the home of the employer, the home in a way provided a “shelter” for the undocumented migrant domestic workers from the surveillance of the police (see Anderson, 2002: 107).
LC: So you never went around [in Malaysia]?

Imas: No, because I did not know any other places. To take me far, the employer did not dare, no passport.

Wulan: On Ied holiday, I was taken to another home of the employer’s relatives. But only on big holidays.

Imas: The employer was also afraid to take me somewhere, worried that there was a raid.

[...]

LC: So actually you were allowed to leave the home, but because you did not have a passport…

Imas: Yeah, I was afraid to get arrested by the police.

Wulan: My last employer said, “Bi (Auntie), the way is, if a police approaches, you should look normal, normal as though you have a passport.”

(Imas and Wulan, former migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

The fear of being arrested followed migrant domestic workers even when they tried to return to Indonesia. For migrant domestic workers who come to Malaysia through the formal procedure, the employers are required to cover the transportation fees for the workers to come to and to leave Malaysia. Undocumented migrant domestic workers, on the other hand, have to cover the transportation expenses by themselves. This is another reason why they are easy prey for human traffickers, who often offer “cheap” prices to undocumented migrants with a promise to return them home. Wulan had to leave Malaysia early because her husband suddenly passed away. She took the chance because she had to return home as soon as possible. She shared how she had to sneak around the police to return to Indonesia.

We stayed over in a shelter for a while, owned by a Javanese. Afraid of the police! We got on a boat, and then got on a ferry in the middle of the sea, and then got off in the middle of the sea too, onto a hut. (Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2014)

Imas, on the other hand, had to pay another hefty sum of money to go home over land and to obtain a temporary passport in order to pass the border. Her employer blamed her for being undocumented and therefore was not willing to cover her expenses to go home.
Imas: I went home by making a temporary passport, so I could [go home].

LC: Temporary passport, what is it?

Imas: I don’t know. They took care of it there. They made it in Johor. I gave them 1,500 ringgit (about 340 euro), so I did not bring any money [home].

[...]

LC: Did you tell your employer that you had to make the passport?

Imas: Yeah. “I was asked for money,” I said. “Well, it’s up to you. I already paid for you 5,000 ringgit (about 1,140 euro), I did not get anything, no passport. So now I am not responsible. If you are legal, your journey home is my responsibility, by plane,” the employer said, “You only have to sit. It’s the fault of your agent. I am not responsible for you.” But the employer finally took me to the bus station, and then I went to the agent’s place.

(Imas, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

Through Imas and Wulan’s narratives, we can see the different forms of vulnerability as a result of their immigration status. The change in the way the employers treated them, the constant fear of being detained and deported by the police and the refusal of the employers to pay for the return expenses for the workers as shown here are just a few examples of the vulnerability of undocumented migrant domestic workers. The home of the employers becomes a “paradoxical space” (Rose, 1993) – as a space of exploitation and a space of safety/shelter – in both contexts, the vulnerability that arises from their immigration status remains. Imas and Wulan did not choose to be undocumented, but they were blamed for being in this situation and for subjecting the employers to possible fine and detention for employing undocumented migrant domestic workers. The person reaping the most benefit from the situation was the agent who placed Imas and Wulan in this irregular situation in the first place.

Conclusion

In this chapter we map out various spatialised techniques of labour exploitation in the context of paid domestic work. While the exploitative relations are obvious in the exhaustion of labour and heaping blame techniques, maternalism and paternalism conceal the exploitation through friendlier, familial relations. What is also dangerous is
that maternalism and paternalism are constructed as positive because it is part of the “Asian values”. Regardless of which techniques the employers apply – exhaustion of labour, maternalism, paternalism or heaping blame – in the end they result in the exploitation of migrant domestic workers.

In mapping out these different techniques, we also identify different power subjects who benefit from this exploitation. For instance, in the context where the employer is a man, the superiority of the man employer in the gender hierarchy is brought into plain sight as the man enjoys the benefits from the subordination of the worker and of his wife. Placement agencies, on the other hand, reap the most benefits from the undocumented situation of workers. While in this chapter the focus is on the labour exploitation techniques applied by the employers, in Chapter IX we will see a geography of exploitation where the exploitation by the employers is related to other structural exploitation practices. Before mapping out the geography of exploitation, we will first hear the stories of migrant domestic workers in resisting and accommodating the power of the employers.
VIII. An entangled part of power: spatialised resistance and accommodation

“Where there is power, there is resistance” is one of Foucault’s (1978) famous and often cited lines about resistance. Partial use of this line as such, however, creates an incomplete understanding of Foucault’s idea of resistance. If we focus only on the beginning of the sentence, we are limited to view resistance as (always) in opposition to power. However, Foucault’s complete sentence is as follows: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (Foucault, 1978: 95; emphasis added). In the context of paid domestic labour, resistance can never be separated from power; rather, as Sharp et al. (2000) suggest, resistance is always entangled and co-existed with domination.

This chapter is dedicated to the stories of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in resisting the domination power of the employers. Resistance by migrant domestic workers takes a different form from public resistance by civil society as a result of the relatively constant control of the employers, including the confinement of the migrant domestic workers in the employers’ home. Rather than marching down the street for their rights, the resistance of migrant domestic workers takes the form of everyday activities, or what Scott (1985; 1989) calls “everyday resistance”.

In certain situations, migrant domestic workers in the study may openly resist the power of the employers. The story of Ita, which is presented as the first story, is an example of direct and intentional resistance. Most of the migrant domestic workers interviewed, however, prefer to avoid direct confrontation with the employers, or at times their resistance is not even deliberate. For that reason, Ita’s story is presented here separately. The stories of runaway migrant domestic workers will follow the story of Ita. In dire situations, running away is the only option for these migrant domestic workers to end the exploitation of the employers.
In other situations, migrant domestic workers choose to resist behind the employers’ back and utilise spatial resistance against the immobilisation and isolation of the workers in the employers’ space of domination (see Sharp et al., 2000). Migrant domestic workers may enjoy temporary pleasure from the resistance, as well as dream of something better (see Pile, 1997), but their space of resistance is still prone to the employers’ control.

At other times, migrant domestic workers may accommodate. To understand the accommodation of migrant domestic workers, this study employs the concept of *deferential performativity*, which combines the Butlerian understanding of performativity (Butler, 1993; 1999) and the expectation of deference in this particular line of work (Rollins, 1985). This is also a way to avoid romanticising the resistance of migrant domestic workers, as advised by Cresswell (2000).

An integral element of resistance for migrant domestic workers is a *space of respite* (Moss, 1997). Through spaces of respite, migrant domestic workers rejuvenate themselves and gain the strength to continue with their hard labour. As will be shown later, however, their space of respite, just like their space of resistance, is vulnerable to intrusion by the employers because they are situated within the domination space of the employers. This is again a consequence of the confinement of migrant domestic workers in the employers’ house.

The last part of the chapter is dedicated to resistance outside the employer’s house – whether this takes the form of efforts to mobilise migrant domestic workers collectively, or the choice to work outside the individual contract/legal system.

The exceptional story of Ita: open resistance

By the time of the interview, it was about two decades ago that Ita had migrated to Malaysia. With help of an agent, Ita left Karawang, Indonesia to travel to Miri, in the north of Borneo Malaysia. After spending one night at the agent’s, a 50-year-old woman employed her as a domestic in her house. On the first day the employer gave Ita a timetable with a list of things to do around the house. On the third day the employer required Ita to wake up earlier to do all the domestic chores before she took Ita to the market. This was the first time Ita had discovered that her employer owned a grocery shop in the market. In

---

34 This part of Malaysia shares borders with Indonesia in the south and Brunei in the north.
addition to domestic chores, Ita was also required by her employer to work at the shop, from carrying the supplies to keeping the shop.

After being required to work both at the shop and at home for a few days, Ita decided to resist this exploitation by not doing the domestic chores. When her employer asked her about this, she demanded that her salary should be paid double if her employer wanted her to work both at the shop and at home. At first her employer raised her objection, but Ita insisted:

“Well, it’s up to you. If you want to pay me 800 ringgit (162 euro), Ita will do the house chores. Even if Ita cannot, Ita will learn. But if you don’t want to, well, Ita wakes up at half six and directly goes to the market,” [Ita said]. Then she became sort of angry, but Ita did not care. It was more tiring at the market! (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

By not doing the domestic chores, Ita left her employer with two choices, either paying her double for working double or keeping her salary the same with only one workload. In the end the employer released Ita from the domestic chores at home.

Ita employed the same resistance strategy – not doing the work – whenever her employer was late in paying her salary:

The payment date was on the 2nd. If she had not given me the salary by the 3rd, Ita would not wake up. Even if she woke me up, “Ita, it’s already half six, child.” I would not wake up, if she had not given my salary. I often heard that in Malaysia the payment was often not smooth; if it’s been too long it would be even harder. Ita heard that a lot, so Ita did not want my salary to be unpaid. Although she woke me up, Ita would not work… (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

As shown in these two narratives, Ita chose to stop working as a resistance to labour exploitation by her employer. From her narratives we can easily see that Ita understood the problems of labour exploitation in Malaysia. Previous stories of other migrant domestic workers about the working conditions in Malaysia gave Ita the knowledge of what she might face during her employment in Malaysia. This knowledge in turn prepared her with strategies to deal with work-related problems, such as stopped working when she was exploited for

---

35 This is another example of a maternalistic approach by the employer, where she addressed the worker as “child” (see also the discussion on maternalism in the previous chapter).
her labour as in the previous narratives. Including when she was not happy with the work in Malaysia, as she described it below:

Ita never worked here (in Indonesia), Ita worried that Ita would not be happy, so Ita had some money with me. Those who had gone there said that it would be easy, just find a travel there and you could go back to Pontianak; it would be easy once back in Indonesia, we could speak the language. So Ita prepared myself by bringing a lot of money from home. (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Ita’s story is exceptional. She was the only one among the Indonesian migrant domestic workers interviewed who put her foot down in firmly resisting the exploitation. Resistance by Ita was clearly an open form of resistance, which is rarely found in general stories of Indonesian migrant domestic workers. Ueno (2009: 498) notes that migrant domestic workers in major receiving countries in Asia usually employ covert, passive and discreet resistance due to reasons such as less stringent state regulation of employers and employment agencies. During the conversation with Ita, it was clear that she was empowered. By the time of the interview, she was active in a local community which was part of a prominent Indonesian women’s organisation advocating the rights of women migrant domestic workers. Ita also showed a strong personality. She openly expressed strong opinions about her employer, including the employer’s religious practices and physical appearance.

In addition to Ita’s strong personal traits, her narratives also indicated that her employer was quite open-minded. Ita’s resistance to work was therefore met with negotiation by her employer, producing results that accommodated both parties, as clearly seen in the following narrative:

“Bu, Ita wants a vacation.” “Why do you want a vacation? Where do you want to go?” “Ita wants to know how Malaysia looks like,” Ita said. “Here the closest is to the harbour.” “Yeah, wherever,” Ita said, “but Ita wants to rest.” “Alright, but Ibu asks before Ita goes on vacation to take the stocks out. Ibu is not strong enough.” Ita at first did not want to, but Ita felt pity for her, she was already kind to give the vacation to us, we only had to take the stocks out. “Alright, but Ita will be given some money,” Ita said, “not cutting it from the salary. Just some meal allowance for Ita.” “Stingy!” she kept talking. “Shut up, you talk and talk, do you want to give it or not?” Ita said. “Yeah, yeah, but you’re not done yet,” she said. “Alright, then don’t keep talking!” (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)
As we can see from the narrative, although Ita’s employer raised objections, she turned to negotiation in order to achieve a decision acceptable to both of them. This was an unusual approach. In most cases the employer would show her power and silence the resistance of the domestic worker, as shared by Melati:

Yocie : Had the employer ever gotten angry because of your work?

Melati : Yeah, sometimes. She wanted all domestic chores done, but we also must be able to take care of the kid. We sometimes commented anyway when [we were] too annoyed, ‘How can all be done when the kid is not asleep yet?! Should we work while take care of the kid?!’ Sometimes so when [we were] too annoyed.

Yo : Then how did the employer respond?

Melati : “How dare you talk back?!“ Sometime so.

(Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

If we return to Ita’s case, both Ita and the employer were aware of the contribution of Ita work and this may be one of the reasons why they could use negotiation to settle dissatisfaction. Ita told me that the income of the grocery shop doubled, and sometimes even tripled, after Ita started working at the shop. Ita said that because she was easy-going it was easy for her to attract people to the shop. The recognition of the contribution of Ita’s work not only gave Ita the power to resist exploitation by her employer, it also made the employer open to negotiation. Furthermore, rather than Ita doing the domestic chores at home, her employer cooked her favourite foods for her; hence reversing the dominating power relations as commonly found between employer and migrant domestic worker. As formulated by Ita:

Ita’s thought is, if we are always servile there, always servile regardless whatever done to us, we will be oppressed even more. As long as we are right. If she was wrong but angry, Ita scolded back! (Interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Running away as a spatialised resistance

Runaway Indonesian domestics is a topic commonly found in the public discussion in Malaysia, as has been stated elsewhere in this
dissertation (see Chapter II). The image of runaway domestics is strongly associated with Indonesian migrant domestic workers, with blame aimed at the big Indonesian diaspora community in Malaysia for providing domestic workers with easy access to networking and hence encouraging them to run away for “better jobs”. Whether or not runaway domestic workers do get better jobs is a different story altogether, which will not be discussed here. Instead, we will examine how some migrant domestic workers in the study perceive running away as a form of resistance, to escape from pressing – possibly even life-threatening – working conditions.

In Chapter VII, we have already discovered the stories of Imas and Wulan, who were tricked by their agent into working in Malaysia without documents. While their employers were usually kind when they had just started working, after a while the employers then started to pressure Imas and Wulan as a result of their status as undocumented migrants. When the pressure of the employer became too much for them to handle, they would call the agent and ask him, to use their term, to “pick them up”. Imas shared the experience as the following:

In Selangor it was [also] like that, no permit, no passport, so [the employer] became grumpy to me, basically, mean. I was tortured, had to clean this, had to clean that, cleaning up the spider web every day. Ough, always angry. I called, could not stand, [I] was “stolen” again by the agent. She (the employer) already paid 5,000 ringgit (about 1,140 euro); that’s why I was “stolen” at dawn. After the morning prayer [the agent] called, “I am outside, Imas.” I did not put on sandals, bare footed, maybe she (the employer) was still in the room, praying, I ran away again, picked up [by the agent]. Then [I] stayed for a while at his house, with his wife, [before] moved again to Trengganu. (Imas, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

In the conversations with Imas and Wulan, they showed awareness of their situation as subjects of trafficking. As we can see from Imas’ narrative above, she was aware that the agent received a hefty payment from the employer whenever she was placed in a new house; meanwhile, the agent did not process her documents as promised. Without the documents, Imas was vulnerable to exploitation by the employer as described above. The only way for her to escape the exploitation by the employer was to call the agent and run away.

Interestingly, Wulan used the assumption of easy connection to the big Indonesian diaspora community in Malaysia in an intelligent way to pressure the agent to pick her up from her controlling employer; or else, she said, she would run away. Wulan recalled, “I threatened, ‘If not picked up, I will run away with an Indonesian.’ Only then the
agent got worried, so [I] was picked up.” (Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014) Wulan used the negative image of runaway Indonesian domestic workers as a tool for her to resist exploitation. While Wulan might not have sufficient power to directly resist exploitation from her employer, she had the power to threaten the agent who put her into this position by using this assumption.

Running away was also the only option for the migrant domestic worker when her life was threatened, as experienced by Wulan. After she had worked for her first employer for one week, her employer became more and more unkind. At some point her employer choked her and threatened to kill her. Afraid for her life, Wulan asked for help from an Indonesian street sweeper to contact her agency to help her run away.

LC : Why did you ask for the agent to pick you?
Wulan : I did not want to be choked, of course! So I called the agent.
LC : Luckily the agent came right away.
Wulan : No, he did not come. It was an Indonesian street sweeper…
Yocie : What do you mean? Were you helped by a street sweeper?
Wulan : Yes, I was helped by a street sweeper to get out of the employer’s [home].

(Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013)

Wulan decided to run away after her employer threatened to kill her. When their life is threatened, running away becomes the only option for a domestic worker to resist the domination power of the employer. Running away not only brings an end to the exploitation, it also breaks the immobility and isolation of the worker in the home. It allows the worker to resist exploitation through spatial distance.

Komariah was also a runaway domestic worker. She ran away from her employer after being forced to work long hours with little rest and without payment for one month. Before working in Malaysia, Komariah worked in Singapore for 4 years. Throughout the interview she repeatedly stated that in Singapore the working conditions were much better than Malaysia, as she described here:

But in Singapore really no story of being bullied, no! In Malaysia? A lot! In Malaysia, so different! We sign one thing, we arrive here doing another thing. (Interview with Komariah, former domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)
Previous work migration experience from in Singapore gave Komariah a knowledge of good working conditions. In Komariah’s narrative, there is a sense of remembering the good working conditions in Singapore. When she was exploited by her employer in Malaysia, she therefore decided to run away.

For Komariah, running away to escape the exploitative situation she faced should not be seen as the same as running away after stealing, as is often described in public accounts in Malaysia (see Chapter II). She narrated her decision to run away as follows:

But I ran away kindly. I ran away, I did not steal her stuffs. She would report me to the police, if I took even a little of her stuffs. […] Someone who is used to stealing is different. Why do I think so? If I steal one thing, she comments “Indonesian!”, although I am only one person who steals, right? […] People will comment, “Indonesian!” I do not want to cause comment on my own country. (Interview with Komariah, former domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)

In her narrative Komariah explained how she ran away only to end the exploitation by her employer, not because she wanted to steal any of the employer’s belonging. She suggested that domestic workers who ran away and stole the employer’s belongings had bad intentions in the first place. She distanced herself from those domestic workers by not taking any of her employer’s possessions when she ran away.

At the same time, her narrative showed that she was aware of the dominant assumption in Malaysia about Indonesian domestic workers running away with their employers’ possessions. The discourse constructs the stealing body of the Indonesian domestic workers as a material representation of the nation. By distancing herself, running away without taking her employer’s belongings, Komariah challenged this construction and showed her pride in not “causing comment on her own country”.

In capturing the complexity of resistance, Pile (1997) suggests that feeling and dreams of something better are the other elements of resistance which are often ignored in resistance literatures. If we return to the stories here, we can see that Komariah’s decision to run away to resist the exploitation by her employer was triggered at least partly by the memory of and desire for better working conditions. Fear, meanwhile, was a dominant element which drove Wulan into running away from the employer who threatened her life. Hope for a better employer was also present as a reason why these migrant domestic workers ran away from their exploitative employers. These elements – memory, fear and hope – are precisely what Pile (1997) suggests should also be
recognised as alternative values of resistance, not merely acts to resist domination.

Spatial resistance to immobility and isolation

Since migrant domestic workers are confined in the employers’ home, they may employ spatial resistance to avoid being constantly under the dominating power of the employers. As described in Chapter VI, employers control the spatial mobility of the workers inside and outside the home to ensure the (in)visibility of the workers. The employers’ control not only covers physical space – where domestic workers should be – but also social space – with whom domestic workers are allowed to interact. In the midst of spatial control by the employers, migrant domestic workers manage to find a space where they can be free – although momentarily – from the employers’ surveillance and control. Migrant domestic workers in the study, with the exception of Ita, generally preferred to avoid confrontation with their employers. Spatial resistance provides domestic workers with a form of everyday resistance which “avoid(s) any direct symbolic confrontation with authority” (Scott, 1985: 29). At the same time, spatial resistance allows migrant domestic workers to maintain the image of being good and obedient workers.

Wulan, for example, employed spatial avoidance. She avoided being alone with the man employer after the 9-year-old daughter of the employer told her that the father (the man employer) “liked pretty women”. Although the man employer never tried to approach her, Wulan was afraid to be left alone with him. She said:

I was afraid of the man employer. In the morning, before the man employer woke up, I went downstairs. The apartment [building] was four-storey. If [he] had not woken up yet, [I] just waited downstairs. When it’s almost time [for him] to leave, then [I] would go upstairs. If [he] had not woken up yet, I would not go upstairs, [I] took a stroll. [I was] afraid because the daughter said so. (Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

Wulan became afraid of the man employer after the daughter told her about him. For her, leaving the apartment was a strategy to avoid possible sexual harassment from the man employer. She also feared that the woman employer would become jealous of her or that the neighbours would gossip about her and cause her woman employer to be jealous (interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014).
Ratna, meanwhile, used her daily task of cleaning the employer’s cars in the garage as the opportunity to communicate with the Indonesian domestic worker living next door (Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). Neither Ratna nor the Indonesian worker living next door were allowed to leave the house unaccompanied or to talk to strangers. Washing the car in the garage gave Ratna both the space and time to escape the surveillance of her employer.

Another strategy for resisting the employers’ control over social space was to discreetly exchange greetings with fellow Indonesian domestic workers when the employers took them out. However, they had to be careful in exchanging greetings because the employers might reprimand them if they were caught (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013). The migrant domestic workers were forced to read the situation before greeting other fellow Indonesian domestic workers. Sari, one of few domestic workers who were allowed to leave the house without her employer’s supervision, said that she would be careful in greeting other Indonesian domestic workers if their employer was around:

Sari : Sometimes it was hard, not allowed to greet. But if her employer is this (doing something else), then [I] can greet. But if I am alone, [I am] afraid to talk to her, if she will be scolded or anything.

Yocie : So will you wait until she greet [first]?

Sari : Just see. If I know she is with her employer, it is better that I do not greet because there are employers who forbid [domestic workers] from talking to other people.

(Interview with Sari, migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014)

Exchanging greetings with other fellow Indonesian domestic workers, nevertheless, provided a temporary pleasure for migrant domestic workers, as we can read in the following interview excerpt:

Yocie : And then, could you chat?

Melati : Yeah, [I] could chat, if the employer was not around. If employer was around, not allowed. We (sic) were also afraid. […]

Yocie : It’s seldom meeting fellow Indonesians, right? How did it feel?

Melati : Oh, like [meeting] a sister! (laughs)

Yocie : But you didn’t know them before?
Melati: Yeah, didn’t know them before. It’s like [meeting] a relative. I felt *so happy* when meeting a friend, a fellow Indonesian. Regardless, [she’s] Javanese, NTB (East Nusa Tenggara), so happy! Like sisters!

(Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014, emphasis by the participant)

This temporary pleasure, of meeting a fellow Indonesian who is a stranger to them, is what gives this form of resistance its particular character (see Pile, 1997). The employer’s control over the social space of the migrant domestic worker does not leave many options for domestic worker. Yet by exchanging greetings with other fellow Indonesians, regardless of how short the greetings are, this creates an alternative social space for the worker – although there is always a risk that the employer will reprimand her if she is caught.

Migrant domestic workers may also obtain temporary pleasure by *grumbling or swearing in their mother tongue* when they get angry with their employers. The working language is usually a mix of *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian national language) and *Bahasa Malay* (Malaysian national language) because the two languages are rather similar, despite differences in meaning or words. Ethnic groups in Indonesia have their own ethnic language, although everyone is required to learn *Bahasa Indonesia* in school. Wulan, for instance, described how she would grumble in Sundanese, her mother tongue, when she was angry, so that her employer would not understand:

Wulan: …using Sundanese language, when angry, so she didn’t understand. (*laughs*)

Yocie: Did the employer not ask you?

Wulan: No… (*laughs*) …cause she didn’t understand. If in Indonesian language, she would understand.

(Interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

The use of language, jokes and humour by migrant domestic workers as a form of resistance was also found in Constable’s (1997: 174-178) study of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. For example, Filipina workers often substituted the Cantonese word “*m’goi*” (meaning: “please”, “thank you” or “excuse me”) for the Tagalog word “*unggoy*” (meaning: “monkey”). By using this language twist as a joke, the joker claimed symbolic superiority over her employer or local residents, who remained unaware of the insult (p. 176). This created a temporary illusion of equality or a reversal of roles (p. 177).
Similar to the experiences of Filipina migrant domestic workers as found in Constable’s study, Indonesian migrant domestic workers in this study gained temporary pleasure from greeting each other discreetly and talking in a language unknown to the employers. The act of resistance itself does not openly confront the domination power of the employers (see Scott, 1985: 25), but it carried “invisible, unconscious desires, pleasure, enjoyments” (Pile, 1997: 15). With these non-confrontational actions migrant domestic workers create a relatively safe space of resistance. The difference between their ethnic-based mother tongue and the working language provides the workers with a resistance practice. Since the resistance is within the employers’ space of domination (see Sharp et al., 2000), however, there is always a risk that employers may punish migrant domestic workers for their acts if they are caught.

Accommodation as deferential performativity

To avoid confrontation with the employers, migrant domestic workers sometimes choose to accommodate the employers’ demands or expectations. This accommodation, however, needs to be examined further. From the stories of Indonesian domestic workers in this study, it appears that accommodation of the employers’ demands or expectations may well be indicators of deferential performativity. In Chapter VI, we saw that the employers use various spatialised power practices to construct deference in the workers. At the same time, the domestic workers were aware that “deferential performance was an integral part of the job expectations” (Rollins, 1985: 158). Such performance not only confirms the superior-inferior positions between the employers and the workers, but it is also necessary from the workers’ perspective for the security of their jobs.

A particular form of femininity, among others, as discussed in the previous chapter (see Chapter VI) is expected – and demanded – in this domestic occupation. In doing their job, migrant domestic workers should be caring, sensitive, nurturing, submissive and deferent, but they should not wear make-up or body care products, have long hair, nor take off their hijab. Migrant domestic workers often accommodate these requirements constructed by employers or recruitment/placement agencies without questioning them.

Wulan, for instance, accommodated the demand of the employer’s daughter who was nine years old at that time not to open her hijab nor wear powder (make-up) when the father was around (Wulan, former
migrant domestic workers, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013, and in interview, Karawang, 16 October 2014). The participants of the group interview immediately laughed when asked whether they were allowed to wear sleeveless t-shirts while working, and answered “Of course not!” in unison (group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013).

While in some cases employers require migrant domestic workers to behave and appear in this particular form of femininity, in other cases the domestic workers do so because they feel that it is expected. For example, see Melati’s comment below:

Melati : It’s just, we (sic) felt like we were asked, “Why would a helper wear make-up?!” The employer, I don’t know whether she said it or not, never [to me] at least…

Yocie : So the employer never asked you [about it]?

Melati : Well, never, actually.

(Interview with Melati, former migrant domestic workers, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

These stories indicate that this particular deferential femininity is not only expected, but that it is also adopted by migrant domestic workers. This is precisely what Butler (1993; 1999) suggests as gender performativity, “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993: 2). It is not merely about migrant domestic workers performing a certain type of gender identity and role, but it is particularly the invisible power of discourse which regulates and constrains, conforms and excludes/makes abject, subverts and reconstitutes the normative image of a good migrant domestic worker.

The discourse which holds the normative ideal is also present in the narratives of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in the study as they perceive other Indonesian domestic workers. This indicates that migrant domestic workers also take part in reproducing the normative ideal. Wulan, whose story was mentioned earlier, blamed another villager who replaced her in her last employment in Malaysia for being flirty as the reason why her employer (Wulan’s former employer) was unkind to this new domestic worker. The woman had a reputation in the village as flirtatious; therefore, when Wulan heard that the woman was complaining about her unkind employer to her child, Wulan assumed that it was because the woman had flirted with the employer’s husband who liked “pretty women” and it caused the
Another story is that of my experience when talking to a domestic worker. I got in touch with Windi through another domestic worker. Windi worked as a migrant domestic worker in Johor for years before working as a cleaner in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur. I attempted different ways to explain the intention in interviewing her, but failed. She thought that she was being asked about her experience because I was learning to be a good domestic worker. I finally managed to ask her about her previous experience as a domestic worker, but throughout her story she repeatedly told me to be hard working, to wake up early before the employer woke up, and to be polite to the employer so that I would be a good helper and that the employer would be happy. Those were also things she did when she worked as a domestic worker and she was proud of them because they made her employer happy and satisfied with her service (fieldwork notes37, Kuala Lumpur, 6 October 2013). In this story, Windi not only adopted the normative image of a good domestic worker, but she also passes on this norm to someone she thought was learning to be a good domestic worker. These stories show the complexity of deferential performativity in the experiences of migrant domestic workers. Relating it to self-disciplining as discussed in Chapter VI, the workers resume the automatic functioning of power in the form of “self-discipline” (see Foucault, 1977). In assuming the normative ideal of a good migrant domestic worker and performing this deferential norm, migrant domestic workers contribute to their own subordination. Such deferential behaviour, however, can also be interpreted as both an accommodation, whereby migrant domestic workers conform to the normative expectation of the employers, and as a resistance, whereby migrant domestic workers take pleasure from their deference (Constable, 1997: 205). Yeoh and Huang (2010a) also suggest that migrant domestic workers are not passive subjects of their oppression, but that they are motivated:

37 The interview was not recorded, but a note was taken as the informant talked.
Space of respite

Moss (1997) suggests that space of respite is just as important as space of resistance, based on her study about the coping strategies of women working as franchise housekeepers in Southern Ontario. Women in Moss’ study value everyday things such as buying cigarettes or going out as rewards for completing a hard day at work (and at home) and as reminders of their being valuable people. Through these everyday things, these women rebuild their confidence and rejuvenate themselves to cope with hard domestic work.

Similar examples are found in the stories of migrant domestic workers in this study. Going out of the house is rarely an option for migrant domestic workers because the employers forbid them to leave the house unaccompanied. The constant control by the employers requires the workers to be creative in creating spaces of respite in the house. Praying for strength while the migrant domestic workers are away from their family is one example of a space of respite that recurred in their stories (Ratna, former migrant domestic worker, in group interview, Karawang, 25 April 2013; interview with Ita, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014). While employers usually control the bodily appearance of migrant domestic workers when they work, some domestic workers in the study put on make-up, took off their hijab and combed their hair when they were alone in their room or when they went to the supermarket as a way to value themselves (interview with Melati, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014; interview with Wulan, former migrant domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014).

Space of respite created by migrant domestic workers in the study is prone to intrusion because it is located within the employers’ space of domination. For example, when Ita recited Ya-Sin in her room, her employer requested her to stop because Ya-Sin was believed to be a haunted prayer for Moslems in Malaysia38. Wulan also shared the following story about when she was going to take off her hijab:

The [employer’s] daughter who was 7 years on said, “Bi, Bibi (Auntie), don’t open the hijab.” When in the room, Bibi opened hijab, wanted to comb, wanted to look in the mirror… (laughs) …but the [employer’s] daughter saw. “Bibi, don’t put on powder,” said her. (Interview with Wulan, former domestic worker, Karawang, 16 October 2014)

38 Ya-Sin is a prayer for Moslems to read when someone has passed away, but according to Indonesian Moslem culture, it is acceptable to recite the prayer every day, especially on Friday. Ita valued Ya-Sin as a prayer for her deceased relatives, hoping that they would also pray for her especially since she was away from her family.
Women domestic workers are required to provide bodily and emotional labour for the employers and their family. The workers create space of respite to recover their strength (for instance, by praying) and to restore their value as humans, including their own expression of femininity (for example, putting on make-up, taking off hijab, or combing the hair). Although space of respite does not change the working conditions, it is still necessary for the continuation of their labour. As we have seen here, however, their space of respite is vulnerable to possible intrusion by the employers since it is situated within the space of domination.

Other forms of resistance

There are also other forms of resistance outside the employers’ space of domination. These other forms of resistance are not aimed directly at the employers as the material representation of power, but at the broader system as the (invisible) representation of power.

Collective mobilisation by civil society

Previous studies show that civil society activism in Malaysia is severely curbed by the state (Uhlin, 2002; Piper, 2006). When it comes to migrant workers, the state prohibits migrant workers from organising themselves, joining a union or taking collective action. If a migrant worker participates in a demonstration or manifestation, her/his visa will be cancelled and she/he will be deported immediately (interview with Sadanasamy, MTUC, Subang Jaya, 29 October 2014). The isolated nature of the work carried out by migrant domestic workers also prevents them from participating in any collective action in the public space (see Chin, 2003: 59). Migrant domestic workers, as a result, are barely visible in public spaces in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) is the major national labour union in Malaysia. Although the MTUC’s stand on migrant workers was previously rather conventional, with foreigners being seen as competitors to local workers, in the last decade the MTUC has taken a more inclusive stance on migrant labour issues (Piper, 2006). For instance, the MTUC has tried to form an association of domestic workers. Their vision is that local and migrant domestic workers will be able to represent themselves in the association to negotiate working conditions with the employers, as expressed by two former and current representatives of MTUC:
The association would mean that there would be local people who would look after them as principal officials. And then, if there is problem like non-payment of wages, abuse, they bring it up to the association. (Interview with Moses, former representative of MTUC and current representative of CARAM Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 4 November 2014)

Union means a representative of people, voicing voice for themselves. They (domestic workers) should be the one who is coming up to defend themselves. They know where it is very badly affected, where is affecting them on day to day, daily life. (Interview with Sandanasamy, MTUC, Subang Jaya, 29 October 2014)

The MTUC has twice tried to register the association at the Registration Office; however, on both occasions their application was rejected without reason. One of the MTUC representatives expressed the frustration with the system as the following:

> When you deny that basic right for them to be recognised as an association, you’re taking away their rights. And the law has taken their rights without any explanation, without giving any reason. And we as a union are asking for it, and they are still denying it. (Interview with Sandanasamy, MTUC, Subang Jaya, 29 October 2014)

In the absence of migrant domestic workers in the public space, they rely on Malaysian civil society to voice their concerns. However, as a result of systematic harassment of civil society by the state, civil society in Malaysia remains weak and under-developed (Uhlin, 2002). Civil society organisations which voice the concerns of migrant workers can be categorised into: (1) faith-based organisations; (2) worker/labour non-governmental organisations (NGOs); (3) women’s rights organisations; and (4) human rights organisations, and to date there is no civil society organisation run by migrants in Malaysia (Piper, 2006).

One of the main campaigns by civil society organisations is the call for the recognition of migrant domestics as workers, rather than “servants”. This also includes the replacement of the word “servant” in the Malaysian Employment Act with “worker”, which will entitle migrant domestic workers to the rights of workers as regulated in the Act (interview with Al-Rashid, CARAM Asia, Kuala Lumpur, 9 October 2013). A network of civil society organisations also advocates for the establishment of legislation – separate from the Employment Act – specifically concerning domestic workers and applicable to both local and migrant domestic workers. The reason behind pushing for this new legislation is because the Employment Act was developed for the formal sector, not the informal sector such as domestic work (inter-
view with Das, Tenaganita, Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014). By
advocating these various regulations, civil society is aiming to im-
prove the situation of migrant domestic workers in the country.

The fact that migrant domestic workers rely on the advocacy of
Malaysian civil society is also interesting. Uhlin (2002: 154) argues
that Malaysian civil society is mostly composed of people from the
middle-class, who are in majority non-Malay and that this civil society
relies on a few key figures. The civil society activists are part of the
public in Malaysia; at the same time, they are also not part of the wide
public due to their activism in voicing the experience and concerns of
migrant workers. These civil society activists may also employ mi-
grant domestic workers in their homes, including a few of the activists
interviewed in this research. This may affect their position in advocat-
ing the issue, as cautioned by Molina and Mulinari (2013: 244) about
the relative silence of middle-class feminists on the precariousness of
the working conditions of women migrant domestic workers. At the
same time, however, being part of the public in Malaysia and having
the same class background as the employers also makes it easier for
the activists to consolidate their appeals and build more positive dis-
course on the issue. With their ethnic background as non-Malay,
members of civil society are cautious about bringing up the issue of
ethnicity in their advocacy due to the historical ethnic tension in the
country (Gurowitz, 2000). Malaysian civil society is also careful about
pushing international human rights norms and showing that its mem-
bers are not “the pawns of the West” (Gurowitz, 2000).

As a result of stringent state regulations on collective actions, par-
ticularly by migrants, in public spaces, the MTUC’s attempt to form
an association for domestic workers comes closest to an effort to mo-
bilise migrant domestic workers collectively. Instead, migrant domes-
tic workers need to rely on Malaysian civil society to advocate their
rights. This then creates ambivalence about the position of Malaysian
civil society since its members are also part of the public in Malaysia,
probably including as employers of migrant domestic workers. Non-
governmental organisations and labour unions continue their cam-
paign to improve the working conditions of migrant domestic workers,
but the workers cannot represent themselves in voicing their concerns.

Working as live-out workers and working outside the
legal system
Stories about runaway Indonesian domestic workers in the media are
often accompanied by stories of these migrants working “illegally”
with the support of the extensive Indonesian diaspora community in
Malaysia. Lita, Windi and Komariah are among those who previously worked as domestic workers in private homes in Malaysia, but were working as cleaners in hotels by the time they were interviewed. Komariah ran away from her employer before finding a job outside the house. Lita ended her employment as a domestic worker after working for her employer for one month; meanwhile, Windi started working as a cleaner after she finished her contract.

Lita said that she decided to end her employment as a domestic worker because the domestic work was too heavy (fieldwork notes, Kuala Lumpur, 24 September 2013). Her mother also did not want her to work as a domestic worker. And while she was still young she wanted to do something else. She felt that her work as a cleaner was lighter than when she worked as a domestic worker.

As a runaway migrant domestic worker, Komariah could sympathise with runaway workers about the precarity of the working conditions which caused them to run away in the first place and the risk of abuse the runaway workers might suffer if they were recaptured. Komariah shared the following story about an Indonesian she knew who ran an agency in Malaysia:

If a helper runs away, it’s the end for you – hit, slapped, hair pulled and cut, until [you’re] bruised, locked until [you’re] healed! It’s not only locked, [you’re] tortured! Not given food, once every two days [you’ll be] given food. Even though both are Indon39! I have never gotten myself into such a bad condition. That’s why, many people ran away, work outside the house like this. (Interview with Komariah, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)

After running away from her employer, Komariah took up different work. When I met her, she was working as a cleaner in the hotel where I stayed during the second fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur. Komariah stated that she enjoyed the freedom of working outside the house. As a cleaner, she had a regular work schedule. This allowed her to have time for herself outside the work schedule, including taking a part-time job once in a while to increase her income.

When Komariah was interviewed, her friend, Marni, also sat in and shared her experience of working as a contract cleaner in private houses. Instead of working directly with the employer, Marni had a “boss” who was responsible for mediating between Marni and her employer. Marni was responsible to the “boss” and the employer would talk to the “boss” if the employer had a complaint about Marni’s work. Marni chose not to work as a live-in domestic worker in

39 Popular term in Bahasa Malay (Malay language) to refer to Indonesians.
private homes. As Komariah shared her stories about the precarious working conditions as a domestic worker, Marni commented, “That’s why I don’t want to work as a domestic. Afraid. See [other] people working like this, of course I am afraid! I don’t want to work like this!” (interview with Marni, part-time cleaner, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014).

When Marni was asked to share her stories about why she preferred to work as a contracted, live-out cleaner rather than a live-in domestic worker, Marni also described how she valued the freedom of working according to a schedule, as shown in the following interview excerpt:

Yocie: What about you (to Marni)? What is your story?

Marni: Happier working like this lah. After work we can go home.

Komariah: Yeah, after work, for example at 7, we can go home. As a domestic worker, we are not allowed.

Marni: Exactly! [I] can sleep soundly the whole night, no one disturbs.

Komariah: If we work and go home at 7 p.m., then we continue working another job, go home at 11 p.m., imagine how much [money] we can get... Like her (refers to Marni), working and cleaning the house, one day two houses, she has a boss, [the boss] takes her everywhere, the boss takes the responsibility.

(Interview with Marni, part-time cleaner, and Komariah, former migrant domestic worker, Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014)

In a study about Indonesia-Malaysia labour migration discursive practices, Killias (2010) finds that the state-led discourse of regularisation of migration, including the combat against trafficking and “illegal” migration, in fact leads to the legitimisation of “legal” yet bonded labour arrangements. This discursive practice also reproduces the subordination of migration domestic workers. However, an Indonesian domestic worker who worked “illegally” in Malaysia, in Killias’ study, resists the “legal/illegal” discourse by deliberately avoiding the “legal” migration scheme.

A similar spirit is also found in the narratives of migrants who choose to work outside the house. Previous experience of working as a domestic worker or of hearing stories about the precarity of domestic working conditions encourages these women migrants to seek employment elsewhere as a form of resistance against abusive working conditions. In the end, however, globalisation processes continue to put them in certain types of work – as shown in their occupation as cleaners at the time they were interviewed – but for these women mi-
grants this choice allows them to gain better employment conditions than when or if they work as live-in domestic workers in the employers’ house. Nevertheless, runaway migrant domestic workers who try their luck by working elsewhere are still prone to the risk of being deported as a result of stringent labour migration schemes.

Conclusion

Despite the domination power of the employers, migrant domestic workers in the study succeed in resisting exploitation and gain temporary pleasure from their resistance, as shown in these different narratives. The nature of their work and their workplace, however, limit their resistance within the employers’ domination space, and therefore shape these particular forms of resistance. Complex power relations dictate why in certain situations these women accommodate the expectations and demands of their employers and participate in the reproduction of the normative ideals of a good worker.

Through spaces of respite, migrant domestic workers find the strength to continue with their resistance, or simply to cope with the hard domestic labour. In the meantime, the legal system discourages the workers from improving their working conditions – whether the labour migration scheme which prohibits migrant domestic workers from forming collective movements, or globalisation processes which condition women migrants to carry out certain types of work.

Nevertheless, any resistance – however minor, significant/insignificant, or intentional or not – should be recognised. By presenting the resistance of migrant domestic workers along with their accommodation narratives, the aim is to provide a more balanced analysis about the complex power relations involved in this situation.
IX. Paid domestic work and a geography of exploitation

Through their works, feminist geographers argue that the “local” is interrelated with the “global” (e.g. Massey, 1994; Nagar et al., 2002; England, 2008; Freeman, 2001; England, 2008). Feminists suggest that an analysis at the body and home/household level provides an entry point to understand the “local-global” relations—how the “local” is structured by wider power relations, such as globalisation. This section is intended to show the “local-global” relations in paid domestic work. I will show how the power practices at the home and the body that we have seen so far are related to practices at the national and the global levels. This study starts from an analysis about the home as a place where an economic exchange replaces the unpaid domestic work which is usually performed by women under family relations. Investigations about spatialized power practices by the employers at the home and the body reveal a geography of exploitation. These practices at the home are conditioned by practices at the national and global levels in shaping the embodied experiences of Indonesian women in their everyday lives.

This chapter intends to bring back the discussions based on the empirical findings to the relevant theoretical discussions. In this chapter I will analyse how migrant domestic workers are exploited on every scale. I will start the chapter by presenting an overview on how the four levels of analysis—the home, the body, the national and the global—relate to one another in a geography of exploitation in the context of paid domestic work. It is then followed by closer discussions on each level of analysis, starting from the home to the global, to see where and how these different power practices intersect. Through mapping out the geographies of exploitation of migrant domestic workers, I will argue that even the most private space such as the body of migrant domestic workers is inseparable from the globalisation processes.
A geography of exploitation in paid domestic work: the interrelated power practices

The home, the body, the state and the global are identified as important four levels of analysis in the context of paid domestic work. Although I refer to them as “levels of analysis”, I am not suggesting that they are hierarchical; it is also the reason why I avoid referring them as “scales” (on critiques on the concept of “scale” in human geography, see for example Marston et al., 2005). Treating these four levels of analysis as a hierarchical “scale”, where the global occupies the top tier and the body at the bottom, can lead to the subordination and exclusion of certain “scales”. As Nagar et al. (2002: 265) argue, researches on economic globalisation often treat nation-state as subordinate and ignore finer “scales” altogether, such as community, households and body. Rather than treating them as hierarchical, I suggest that these four levels of analysis should be seen as relational, which then creates a geography of exploitation in the context of paid domestic work.

At the centre of this geography of exploitation is the home, where paid domestic work takes place. Different actors and processes at the national and global levels condition the exploitative power practices by the employers at the home while at the same time limits the resistance practices by the workers. State regulations on the recruitment of migrant domestic workers and the lack of recognition of paid domestic work as work by the state, along with fragmented media portrayal of migrants and discipline practices by recruitment/placement agencies, institutionalise the power practices by the employers. At the same time, stringent state regulations on immigration and freedom of expression limit the resistance by the workers. Global practices on labour migration and re-division of global gender roles, meanwhile, are parts of globalisation processes which motivate the exercise of power by the employers. These processes at the national and global level leave the employers with an institutional power to determine the working conditions. The employers, then, exercise power over the body of the workers, where the body becomes a subjected body (through deference) and a productive body (through labour exploitation). In doing so, the employers also reinforce the global economic and gender inequalities. It suggests that national and global practices are embedded in the home, which in turn influence the construction of the body.

The state and the global are related to each other as they co-constitute the globalisation discourse on gendered division of labour.
based on economic and gender inequalities between countries. At the same time, this globalisation discourse relies on the “disposability” myths of the women workers as suggested by Wright (2006). She argues that global capitalism constructs paradoxical myths of disposable women and invaluably productive women to reap the most benefits and then discard and replace these women once they lose their economic values. While Wright (2006) uses the experiences of women workers in factories in northern Mexico and southern China, I think similar paradoxical myths can be found in the context of paid domestic work. One example of the practice driven by the myths is the selective migration practices by the host state which regulate where to find the labour sources to meet their reproduction needs. Rather than meeting the demand from the state of migrants’ origin to improve the working conditions of their citizens, the host state—in this case Malaysia—seeks new sources of labour.

At the same time, the state and the global directly dictate the construction of a subjected body to achieve a productive body through policies such as compulsory medical check-up or prohibition of family reunification. The relations between the state and the globalisation processes also influence the exploitation practices of other actors at the national level. Agencies, for instance, adjust their recruitment operations in accordance to the state’s policy on bilateral agreements with migrants’ origin countries. With their role as middle-men, the practices by the agencies directly influence the practices by the employers in the home since the agencies are often the main source of information for the employers. Here we can see how the practices at the national and global levels, both directly and indirectly, influence the body of the workers.

By mapping out these relations between the national, global and home levels, we can see that the body of the workers becomes central in the geography of exploitation. Different practices by the employers, the state, media and recruitment/placement agencies, and the globalisation processes lead to control and domination of the body in order to exploit the labour of the workers. The body of the workers is not simply a source of physical and embodied labour, but it also serves as a marker of economic inequality, and gender and racial hierarchies.

Yet at the same time the workers also use the body as a space of resistance. Since the body is the source of labour, the workers may resist the exploitation by stop working as a sign of protest, or by running away. Although the body is rendered immobile at the home (a control of the body in space), the workers find alternative ways to resist the immobility and isolation, from discreetly exchanging greetings, ex-
pressing anger or frustration in their mother tongue, to spatial avoidance. Space of respite, where the workers recover their bodily labour and revive their value as human, is also an integral part of their resistance to the employers control of the body as space. At times, the workers contribute to their own exploitation by accommodating the demands of the employers; the accommodation, however, is a deferential performativity which is necessary to secure their job.

Presenting the resistance of migrant domestic workers to the domination and exploitation of their bodily labour is a way to change the globalisation script as suggested by Gibson-Graham (2006). The resistance practices by the workers, however, are not in the same degree with the exploitation practices by the employers, nor with the structural power practices by the state or the global. As Parreñas (2001) concludes in her study about “dislocations” experienced by Filipina domestic workers in Italy and the US, the workers tend to resist the structural processes through resisting the dislocation they experience closely. Indonesian domestic workers in this study resist the structural exploitation by resisting the power practices by the employers in their everyday lives. The structural processes—both in the form of stringent immigration control by the host state and immobility as conditioned by globalisation—curtail the resistance options for these migrant workers. Here is the space for civil society organisations to support the resistance of the workers, both by advocating the protection of the workers’ rights at the national level and by joining the transnational advocacy networks in campaigning an international standard for decent employment of paid domestic work.

The intention of this section is to provide an overview of the relations between these four levels of analysis which a geography of exploitation. In the rest of the chapter, we will examine each level closely to see how these relations manifest in different power practices. I will start with the home as an entry level of analysis, followed by the body, and then the national, and lastly the global processes. The structure of these sections are intentional because the home is the starting point to investigate spatial relations embedded in the employment of migrant domestic workers. It is also a way to avoid the hierarchical discussion of these different levels, as I have mentioned earlier.
The home as a place of undervalued financial remuneration and unequal social relations

The issue of domestic work – or in other names, housework or social reproduction – has been a long struggle for feminists for decades. Ehrenrich (2002: 103) refers to it as feminists’ unfinished project. It is a struggle for recognition: recognition of domestic work as work, recognition of its inevitable role in the economic production process and recognition of its relations to power. Yet the arguments of care work as beyond (economic) value and of the natural attribution of domestic work to women’s femininity rebuff feminist calls for the recognition of domestic work. Even when the work is performed by someone outside of the family, domestic and care work are still undervalued and financially unrewarded. Paid domestic workers – whether under individual employment contracts or under cleaning service or care provider agencies – continue to be unrewarded and unrecognised as workers.

Although cleaning service or care provider agencies have gradually transformed the home into a capitalist-style workplace, Ehrenrich (2002) suggests that domestic work in the home performed by paid domestic workers predates capitalism, primarily because of its “conditions of work being still largely defined by the idiosyncrasies of the employers” (p. 93) – and this is also the reason why domestic work in the home is distinct from other types of work. Devaluation of domestic work and the absence of state regulation, or the lack of recognition of domestic workers as workers in the example of Malaysian labour law, leave employers with immense responsibilities, from managing the workers to determining the working conditions. This results in varying working conditions for domestic workers. Some domestic workers may be “lucky” in getting an employer who treats them with respect and kindness, but some may be unfortunate in being employed by an exploitative employer. Yet as criticised by Lee and Pratt (2011), we should not leave the analysis on the working conditions of migrant domestics on a matter of “luck”; rather, to return it to the globalisation discourse of choice and responsibility.

The hardship of domestic work does not necessarily result from the hard labour, but rather from the power relations underpinning the work. As Ehrenrich (2002: 88) argues, “Housework was not degrading because it was manual labour, […] but because it was embedded in degrading relationships and inevitable served to reinforce them.” When domestic work is carried out by women, it reinforces unequal gender relations in the home, and when domestic work is performed
by migrant domestic workers it reproduces not only gender but also racial/ethnic and class inequalities. Previous studies (Anderson, 2002; Constable, 2002, 1997) show that the employment of domestic workers serves as a symbol of status. Limitations and rules imposed by the employer – whether spoken or unspoken – are not only forms of control on the domestic worker; rather, “[t]hey also convey the employer’s sense of the domestic worker’s inferior position, and they clarify special boundaries between employers and domestic workers” (Constable, 2002: 141). While domestic workers sell their labour power, employers buy what Anderson refers to as “the power to command, not the property in the person, but the whole person” (Anderson, 2000: 113-114).

The employment of migrant domestic workers, in particular, reproduces in the home the economic inequality between countries as interlaced with racial/ethnic stereotypes. The stereotypes of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia as docile, caring, patient, rural, dirty and uneducated while at the same time likely to be runaways and thieves are often generalised to the whole group and contrasted with the stereotypes of other migrant domestic workers, such as the smart, clean, efficient, educated, but sexually free, or “easy” Filipinas. Similar stereotypes are even found between Indonesian domestic workers coming from different parts of Indonesia. The fact that the work is to be performed by workers from poorer countries also indicates the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities. It is not surprising that feminist studies on the relations between domestic workers and employers (e.g. Lan, 2006; Constable, 1997; Rollins, 1985) often find traces of maternalistic and superiority-inferiority characters as a result of the unequal power relations between the two groups.

The idea of the “Other” woman not only signifies the presence of any other woman in the home, but specifically a significantly inferior woman both in terms of the dirty work she does and the femininity she embodies. The relations developed in the home between employers and domestic workers are therefore often dominated by “exploitation and harassment but also affection, ambivalence and guilt” (McDowell, 2009: 92). These rather contrasting feelings represent the ambiguity of employers in employing domestic workers. As shared by Cheever (2009) in her dilemma as a working woman about employing a migrant nanny, there are elements of necessity, dependency, fear and guilt in employing migrant domestic workers.

The isolation of domestic workers in the home is another element of the work which differentiates it from other types of work, and the migration status of the workers complicates the situation further. The
confinement of migrant domestic workers in the home is clearly a limitation of space. It is true that most domestic workers in this study preferred to stay in the home rather than spending a day off outside the home, if they had such opportunities, but their narratives indicate fear of being in public spaces, whether fear of getting lost in a foreign city or fear of getting into trouble with the authorities as a result of their migration status (see Chapter VI and VII). As argued in the previous chapter (see Chapter VIII), the isolated character of their work also prevents domestic workers from organising themselves or from being mobilised by trade unions or civil society, unlike workers with other types of work.

While we can say that no workplace is neutral, the home is particular because it is a “living space of the employer, a space imbued with social meaning, embodying the aspirations of its inhabitants and the ways in which they live, as well as the material manifestations of relations of love and affection rather than market-based case exchanges” (McDowell, 2009: 83). As soon as a domestic worker enters the home, she too enters an embodied space of the employer. Inspired by, but at the same time critical to, Lefebvre’s approach to space and power, Allen (2003) suggests that

…it is the nature of the places themselves, how they are constituted through the practices and the rhythms of the different groups which inhabit them, which gives rise to tangled arrangements of power and their execution. (p. 171, italics in the original text)

With this, Allen brings back the spatiality of power—about the constitution of places and how in turn it facilitates the exercise of power. Allen argues,

When you are placed within a tangled arrangements of power relationships, the all too familiar spaces […] we thought were our own may look and feel quite different. (Allen, 2003: 10, italics in the original text)

Applying Allen’s idea in the context of the home as a place of paid domestic work, the presence of migrant domestic worker destabilises the constitution of home as a place of intimate social and familial relations. Once the worker enters the home, the employer’s lifestyle, habits, emotions and relations become known to the worker, an outsider. The presence of the worker in the home changes the power relations within the home. If the woman of the house used to provide care and do domestic work for the family, it is now the worker who serves the employer and the family with her bodily hard labour, from scrubbing the floor to cleaning up the employer’s mess, and her emotional
care labour, from caring for the employer’s children to making meals. Although the woman of the house still occupies a subordinated position to the man of the house in the context of gender relation, the presence of migrant domestic worker as an inferior gendered “Other” places the first woman superior in relation to the worker. The worker embodies the global economic and gender inequality; at the same time, the domination and exploitation practices by the employer operate to reconstitute and reproduce the subjected and productive body of the worker.

These different elements may be the reason why the struggle for the recognition of migrant domestic workers faces a number of challenges. It is not simply a matter of isolation in the home which conditions the work to be invisible, but also its proximity to the private life of the employers (Ehrenreich, 2002: 101). Although both the employers and the migrant domestic workers are predominantly women – and most of the time both are working women – we need to be careful to avoid drawing on the notion of “sisterhood” (Anderson, 2002). The struggle for the recognition of domestic work might have started from a critique of the politics of gender domination, but the struggle for the recognition of domestic work carried out by migrant domestic workers, nevertheless, is a fight against the politics of gender, “race”/ethnicity and class as a whole (c.f. Ehrenreich, 2002: 91).

Vulnerable body: migrating body, working body, resisting body

The narratives of Indonesian workers in this study show that the body is a subject of power practices by the employers. Immobilisation of the body in the home and within the home, social isolation, and surveillance are examples of the control by the employers over the workers’ body in space. Surveillance in public areas by the police, meanwhile, is an obvious example of the bodily control by the state. Appropriation of the body, controlling the clothes, or disciplining the eating habits, meanwhile, are ways to construct the deferent body of the workers. At the same time, the workers also participate in their own domination through self-discipline.

News articles on migrant domestic workers in Malaysia are often dominated by the abused bodies of migrant domestic workers (“Businesswoman charged with exploiting, abusing maid”, New Strait Times Online, 9 March 2015; Khairah, “Consultant charged with murder attempt on maid”, New Strait Times Online, 2 January 2015; Lim,
“Tenaganita: Most maids work 14-18 hours daily”, The Star Online, 6 October 2013). Migrant domestic workers in this study do show awareness of the dire working conditions in Malaysia and the risk of abuse or exploitation they may face. Those coming through informal channels also understand their vulnerability to being in a trafficking situation. Nevertheless, they still migrate to Malaysia to work as domestics. The question which is often asked, including by one of the researchers interviewed during fieldwork in Malaysia, is: Why do these women still migrate as domestic workers despite the risk of abuse or exploitation?

It is important not to limit the analyses of the reason why these women migrants take up domestic work and see them only as victims of structural forces. We need to recognise their agency in making the best of limited options (McDowell, 1999: 86).

In understanding the situation of migrant domestic workers, Butler’s (2014) conception of “bodily vulnerability” is useful. Bodily vulnerability is a deliberate exposure to power (Butler, 2014). With this, Butler argues that the body is dependent on the infrastructure, environment and institutional power. There is a relation of interdependency between the body and other powers.

In the case of migrant domestic workers, the vulnerability of the body is not only in relation to the power embodied by the employers, but also to the wider power as embedded in every step of the migration process. As soon as someone decides to migrate as a domestic worker, she immediately exposes herself to a wide range of vulnerabilities, from the devaluation of domestic work itself to the risks of labour, physical, emotional and even sexual exploitation. The body of an Indonesian domestic worker undergoes a series of medical check-ups in Indonesia and Malaysia, which decides whether the body is fit for work or not. Recruitment and placement agencies train the body to be efficient and affective before the body is placed in the employer’s home. Once the body is in the home, the body is vulnerable to the control and discipline of the employer.

Although Butler (2014) implies that we are vulnerable to and dependent on each other, in the case of Indonesian migrant domestic workers their vulnerability and dependency are in asymmetrical to the vulnerability and the dependency of the employers. Employers may be dependent on the domestic and care work provided by the migrant domestic workers to keep the household running smoothly. It is also true that the private life of the employers – lifestyle, habits, relationships – is exposed to the domestic workers, as argued in the previous
section. Domestic workers, however, are in no position to control or change the work situation, let alone the lifestyle of their employers.

On the other hand, the employers embody the institutional power to control and discipline migrant domestic workers, including the most “private” space of themselves, the body. According to the regulation on recruiting and employing migrant domestic workers issued by the Immigration Department of Malaysia (Immigration Department website, 2016), the employers are responsible for making sure that the workers undergo and pass the medical examination. They are also responsible “for the conduct and discipline of the FDH40 while she’s in Malaysia”. These examples clearly show how the institutional power is vested in the employers.

This is precisely what McDowell (2009) suggests with “working bodies” in the context of service economies, including in the type of work these migrant domestic workers do. Her book which is also titled Working Bodies explores the concept of “working bodies” to refer to the workers themselves as well as to the work they do on their body and other bodies as part of the service labour they provide (McDowell, 2009: 10). It is the body “at work, as an object of work and the role of emotions as the central element of work” (p. 12).

The body of migrant domestic workers is not only a source of physical labour which keeps the employer’s home clean and well-maintained. As part of their work, migrant domestic workers are also required to show compassion to the family they serve; hence, the emotions are an integral part of the body. At the same time, the body is also an object of discipline where the efficiency of the body in performing the work is the aim – a reason sometimes used by the employers to justify their interventions in altering the physical material of the domestic workers’ body as well as the habit and behaviour of the body, as demonstrated in Chapter VI. As McDowell (2009: 9) argues that embodied attributes of the service workers are part of the work, so do the gender, nationality/ethnicity and other socio-economic attributes of migrant domestic workers influence the decision of the employers in employing them and in disciplining the body of the workers according to the employers’ standards.

Let us return once again to the question raised earlier: Why do these women still migrate? The deliberate exposure of the body to power also implies the resistance of the body to its subjugation by the power. Butler (2014) argues, “[V]ulnerability, as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embod-

---

40 Foreign Domestic Helper (FDH) is the term used in the regulation from the Immigration Department of Malaysia.
ied enactment.” Just as the example given by Butler about how women walking alone at night is a form of embodied resistance to the patriarchal norm about women being alone in public spaces at dark, the migration of these Indonesian women to Malaysia in spite of their vulnerability to power can be understood as an embodied resistance to the structural (economic, social and political) power. The deliberate exposure of the body through migration is a resistance to the severe poverty in their area of origin, a resistance to the unavailability of work close to home in Indonesia, and a resistance to the patriarchal norm in the society which views men as the breadwinners for the family. Although the workers are aware of the risk of power practices by the employers, they take the risk as a resistance to the structural processes for the survival of the family. The resistance of the workers manifests in the migration of the body across national borders (body in space) and in the bodily resistance of the workers (body as space) as we have seen in Chapter VIII.

Migrant domestic workers in the eyes of the host state

Migrant domestic workers may provide their labour to individual employers in the home, but their presence in the host country is inseparable from its relations to the host state. The recruitment of migrants to work in the domestic sector in the host country is a result of the host state’s inability to meet the domestic and care needs which arise from the full participation of its citizens – men and women – in the labour market. The host state – in this case, Malaysia – regulates which workers are suitable for this highly gendered work, i.e. women in their productive age with a lower economic background. It is particularly crucial that immigrant workers are preferred because they are able to “provide the same flexibility as wives, in particular working long hours and combining caring and domestic chores” (Anderson, 2000: 190). In contrast to their fellow domestic workers who are citizens of the host country, migrant domestic workers do not have family obligations of their own in the host country; hence they are ideally able to fully dedicate their care to the employers’ family. The recruitment of migrant domestic workers from poorer countries such as Indonesia is, of course, also a part of the spatial economic inequality which defines which countries are the sources of infinite and cheap labour power, as we will discuss further in the next section (see the section “The female underside of globalisation”).
Previous studies (Lan, 2003; Anderson, 2000; Chin, 1997) show that despite opening their borders to migrant domestic workers who enter legally – and even actively looking for labour sources abroad – the host state often marginalises migrant domestic workers and prevents them from accessing any protection or rights. In the case of Malaysia, migrant domestic workers are excluded from most provisions of the Employment Act of 1955. Migrant domestic workers allow the women of the host country to exercise their citizenship rights by participating in the labour market while keeping up with their “political duty of motherhood” (Anderson, 2000: 190); however, the migrants are denied of their own reproductive rights or family reunification. In Malaysia, positive results for pregnancy or infectious disease in the compulsory medical examination immediately result in deportation. While migrant domestic workers contribute to the provision of welfare for employers and their families, the host state denies the workers’ own welfare and transfers most of the responsibilities, such as the health expenses of the workers, to the employers.

The transfer of responsibilities to the employers not only releases the host state from any costs related to the employment of migrant domestic workers; it also gives immense institutional power to the employers, as I have argued throughout the dissertation. The provision of work permits tied to individual employers is an obvious example of how the host state, in this case Malaysia, gives institutional power to the employers, leading to the control of migrant domestic workers by the employers. When exploitation or abuse occurs, migrant domestic workers are then forced to stay with the employers rather than seeking help for fear of being deported. This therefore creates state-sponsored, bonded labour arrangements and institutionalises the precarity working relations (Killias, 2010; Lewis et al., 2015). In the context of domestic work relations in the home, the host state automatically institutionalises the unequal power relations between employers and migrant domestic workers by giving these responsibilities to the employers. As Anderson argues:

> The fact that employers are citizens and the workers are not citizens formalises their unequal power relations – even outside of the employment relationship, workers and their employers are not equal before the law. This facilitates the persistence of the master/mistress-servant roles. (Anderson, 2000: 193)

In addition, in the event of abuse, the host state, such as Malaysia, often chooses to find a new source of labour rather than meeting the demands of the migrants’ country of origin to improve the situation.
This is again related to the argument of infinite sources of labour power in other countries. It contributes to the construction of “hierarchies of eligibility” (McDowell, 2009), as workers across the spatial canvas are placed in hierarchical order based on their social and cultural background as well as recruitment costs and monthly salaries.

The “female underside of globalisation”

The migration of Indonesian domestic workers to Malaysia is an example of the global phenomena of the movement flow of women from poor countries to rich countries to seek better income for the family. The era of globalisation is said to be characterised by features such as rapid movement, which facilitates people’s movement over longer distances. Yet globalisation discourses – mostly filled with words such as internet, capital flow, compression of space over time and so on – ignore this other narrative of globalisation; or what Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002: 2) call “the female underside of globalisation”.

While domestic work itself exists throughout history in its various forms, from slavery to kinship patron relations, globalisation has intensified the phenomenon. The movement of domestic labour is no longer limited to rural to urban, but now takes place across national borders. As women in rich countries increasingly take paid work, women from poor countries step in to fulfil the domestic and care needs of those in rich countries and leave their own domestic and care needs to the care of other women—often other family members, such as mother, sister, or older daughter—in their country of origin. This describes what Hochschild (2000) terms the “global care chain”.

The phenomenon thus requires a reflection on early feminist calls for gender equality. While women in rich countries enjoy greater participation in the labour market and in public spaces, it is at the cost of women from poor countries. This then raises the question: gender equality for whom? Such a demand for domestic and care work is precisely a result of an unchanged gender regime. Men do not take up more of their share of the domestic and care work at home; instead, the burden is to be borne by working women. At the same time, the success of women’s careers is determined according to masculine standards such as long hours of work and competition, which for example do not tolerate women leaving work early to pick up the children from day care.

Massey (1999) reminds us about the importance of being aware of power relations in “imagining globalisation”, both in the social sphere
that we study and in the power-knowledge relations which influence our conceptualisation. This may be precisely what we need in discussing this “female underside of globalisation”. Discussions about the phenomenon of the economic migration of women from poor countries to rich ones are futile without unfolding the underlying power relations.

The earlier argument about the greater participation of women in rich countries at the cost of women from poor countries, for example, should not be separated from the discussion about structural economic inequality across the world and the inability of rich countries to absorb care demands at the national level. The concentration of capital in global cities (mostly located in developed countries) and the recipe for structural adjustment programmes contribute to the uneven spatial distribution of capital, including within regions – as in the example of Indonesia and Malaysia, where both are countries in the global South – while at the same time maintaining the dependency of developing countries on international financial institutions. With pressing poverty and lack as well as loss of jobs in the origin country, women from poor countries take the “opportunity” to go abroad to earn money through work migration. Yet the “opportunity” is in fact precarious work with little, if any, protection. This is also related to the argument about vulnerability discussed in the previous section, about the exposure of migrant domestic workers to capitalist power. A decision by a domestic worker to migrate or by an employer to employ a migrant domestic worker is therefore a decision of an individual, but is instead a decision taken under complex capitalist power relations which create structural dependency through spatial economic inequality.

Women migrant workers not only become the backbone for the survival of their families and communities, but also the source of revenue for governments. Governments of origin countries therefore actively encourage the migration of women workers through slogans such as “remittance heroes”. Sassen (2002) uses the term “survival circuits” to refer to this phenomenon; the term “circuits” also indicates a degree of institutionalisation of the process which goes beyond individual actions. In the meantime, the money earned by migrant domestic workers is primarily used for meeting the daily needs of the family – perhaps to build a house for the family – and in a few cases a small investment in land or a house. Yet it is not sufficient to maintain the survival of the family. This then forces these women to migrate again, trapping them in a circular migration process. While Sassen uses the term “circuits” to refer to different actors benefitting from the institutionalisation of this migration process, we can extend the term to in-
clude the circular aspect of the migration process. This once again raises the question: development for whom? Even with circular migration, migrant domestic workers remain in precarious conditions, with no labor security and being subjected “to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development” (Standing, 2011: 16).

A discussion about the devaluation of social reproduction will continue to accompany the argument about unchanged gender roles at home, with the absence or lack of men’s participation in domestic and care work despite increasing participation of women in labour market. Although feminist scholars across the social sciences have developed a strong argument that social reproduction is an integral part of economic production, this brings about very little change in social policies and everyday practices. Working women in rich countries suffer from reductions in public care support, leaving them with the burden of care and domestic work and thus facing the decision to import domestic and care labour from poor countries to ease the burden. Men in rich countries, meanwhile, continue to enjoy their privilege, which releases them from taking part in care and domestic work. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002) suggest that we are now facing a global re-division of traditional gender relations. They say,

The First World (sic) takes on a role like that of the old-fashioned male in the family – pampered, entitled, unable to cook, clean, or find his socks. Poor countries take on a role like that of the traditional woman within the family – patient, nurturing, and self-denying. A division of labour feminists critiqued when it was “local” has now, metaphorically speaking, gone global. (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002: 11-12)

The current trend shows indications towards the formalisation of domestic work. Migrant origin countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines are now promoting skilled workers with capabilities suitable for taking care of children, sick people and the elderly. In the last few years, for instance, the Government of Indonesia has promoted a policy to stop sending unskilled domestic workers abroad by 2017. The employment of migrant domestic workers through agencies under part-time arrangements is also an increasing trend; however, they tend to have a different migration scheme from domestic workers coming under individual contracts. The ILO Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011), which partly is a result of years of civil society advocacy on the issue, along with the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990), create international standards for decent
employment of migrant domestic workers and the protection of their rights. Professionalisation, nevertheless, should not stop at fighting for labour contracts for migrant domestic workers; rather, it should also aim to respect migrant domestic workers as workers and recognise the personal relations developed as a result of the care and domestic work they carry out (Anderson, 2002: 113).

All of these things which aim for better valuation of the work of migrant domestic workers should be also accompanied with wider discussions about the (de)valuation of domestic and care work in the labour market and the restructuring of global gender relations to promote equal participation in domestic and care work between men and women. As Lutz argues,

[U]nless there is a debate about society’s differential valuation of paid employment and family duties as the expression of asymmetrical gender structures, no amount of discourse about professionalization will lead to models of work with any prospect of future sustainability. (Lutz, 2011: 9)

Conclusion

Dissecting globalisation using power relations analyses, as suggested by Massey (1999), unravels the relations between spaces. The employment of migrant domestic workers in rich countries highlights asymmetrical power relations, as shown among other aspects through spatial economic inequality and gender relations. The employer’s control over the migrant domestic worker’s body, for example, is not merely a matter of control and struggle over bodily space, or of relations between an employer and a worker within a household. It is related to state regulations and practices relating to migration, employment and gender which institutionalise such power for employers; spatial economic inequality across the world that maintains the dependency of citizens of poor countries on those of rich countries; and the global restructuring of gender relations which places migrant domestic workers at the bottom of the new gender hierarchy, followed by women employers, with men employers in rich countries enjoying the privilege at the top of the hierarchy. A closer study of the geography of exploitation of migrant domestic workers shows these linkages between the “local” and the “global”, the “private” and the “public”, and “production” and “reproduction”, in constituting the precarious working conditions for migrant domestic workers.
X. Dominated workers, resisting workers: conclusions

This dissertation starts with the aim of understanding the spatialised power relations between employers and migrant domestic workers in defining the work relations in the context of paid domestic work in Malaysia. As the workplace of these women is also the home of the employers, their working conditions are strongly influenced by the social relations between them and the employers. At the same time, the state continues to ignore this form of embodied labour and transfers the responsibility to the employers, leaving the employers with the institutional power to determine the working conditions for these women migrants.

In the last decade, studies of the situation of migrant domestic workers have flourished both in the academic world across various social disciplines and in the non-academic world by civil society working closely with the issue. Although a discussion about the precarious working conditions of these workers is unavoidable, this dissertation emphasises power practices that cause and reinforce the precariousness of this work. This study investigates a range of spatialised practices – from domination to resistance – by the employers and the workers in reinforcing and/or resisting the power inequality based on the intersections of gender, nationality/ethnicity (“race”), class and immigration status. Although the home and the body are the main levels of analysis for this study, they are inseparable from structural powers at the national and global level. In this concluding chapter, we return to the research questions guiding the investigation, review the findings of the study, revisit the theoretical contributions and offer suggestions for future research.

Reproduction and contestation of power inequality

*What kind of spatialised exercises of power by the employers can be identified in the context of paid domestic work? What kind of spatial-*
ised resistance practices by the workers can be identified to contest the exercise of power by the employers? How do the intersections of gender, nationality/ethnicity, class and immigration status inform these power practices?

These three questions guided this study in understanding different power practices which inform and reinforce the precarious working conditions experienced by these migrant workers. The dissertation departed from a Foucauldian understanding about the entanglement of domination and resistance practices (Foucault, 1978; Sharp et al., 2000). It was therefore important to investigate both the exercise of power by the employers in reinforcing the power inequality manifested in these precarious working conditions, and the resistance practices utilised by the workers to contest the exercise of power. The stories of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia inform unique spatialised practices since Indonesia and Malaysia are both situated in the global South with supposedly similar gender and cultural practices.

The study finds that the employers demonstrate two major forms of power practices – spatialised domination practices to construct the deference of the workers and spatialised techniques of labour exploitation. Through spatialised domination practices such as disciplining the body of the workers, ensuring the immobility and isolation of the workers in the home, and surveillance, the employers build the deference of the workers. The body and its embodied attributes of the workers – their habits, behaviour and emotions – are subject to these domination practices. Gender, class, national/ethnic differences and immigration status often underlie these practices. For example, the employers draw their gender identities from the construction of the inferior gendered, “Othered” body of the workers (disciplining the body). The employers confine the workers in the home and prohibit them from talking to strangers to prevent the workers from receiving information about better working conditions or work opportunities (immobility and isolation). The use of surveillance cameras in the home, dictating where and when the workers eat, and leaving valuable items lying around to test the honesty of the workers, are examples of surveillance practices by the employers to make the workers adopt self-discipline since the presence of the employers is invisible and unverifiable (Foucault, 1977). With these domination practices, the employers construct the deference of the workers (Rollins, 1985) – in terms of the behaviour and work ethics of the workers (gestural and task embedded deference), the language used by the workers (linguistic deference) and the use of space by the workers (spatial deference; including social spatial deference in the case of social isolation).
In addition to domination practices, the employers also use spatialised techniques of labour exploitation to create and maintain the precarious working conditions. Four techniques are found in the study: the exhaustion of labour, maternalism, paternalism and heaping blame on undocumented migrant workers. The employers put every moment of the workers’ time into maximum use, demand that the workers clean the house meticulously, require the workers to provide care and love to the family they serve, and withhold the salary of the workers as ways to exhaust the labour of the workers and to maximise the benefits from their labour production. With maternalism, the employers conceal the remunerative work relations with caring and familial relations. It is a problematic when maternalism technique creates the discourse of “part of the family” as an “Asian family value”, while in fact similar discourses are found in other studies of domestic workers all over the world. By applying paternalism, the man employers reinforce their “ultimate power” (Rollins, 1985) over the wives and the workers while at the same time diminishing the power of the workers to resist. The employers use the heaping blame technique (Ås, 2004) to make the workers guilty for being in an undocumented situation and for subjecting the employers to possible fines and/or prison time; meanwhile, the recruitment/placement agencies reap the most benefits from the situation. Since the workplace of these women is the home of the employers, the employers can easily use these different techniques of labour exhaustion. No matter which technique(s) the employers use, they are fundamentally exploitative. In the case of undocumented migrants, they are in a situation which is particularly vulnerable to exploitation as a result of their immigration status.

These two forms of power practices by employers build on each other for the maximum economic use of the body. Foucault (1977) argues that the body reaches its maximum economic use when it is a productive body and a subjected body. As we see here, the spatialised domination practices by the employers are aimed at creating a subjected body of the worker through the construction of deference. The spatialised techniques of labour exploitation, on the other hand, create a productive body. The intersections of gender, class and national/ethnic differences and immigration status inform the employers when applying these practices; at the same time, these practices reinforce these differences. By applying these domination and labour exploitation practices, the employers reproduce the precarious working conditions and reinforce the unequal power relations between the employers and the workers. Yet the narratives of the workers suggest
that they contest these domination power practices by the employers through resistance practices.

This study finds five forms of spatialised everyday resistance practices (Scott, 1989) utilised by the workers and two forms of additional resistance practices utilised by civil society and live-out/part-time/illegal domestic workers. The story of Ita in Chapter VIII represents the only experience of open resistance among the participants of the study. Other workers tend to exercise subtler forms of resistance which do not directly challenge the power practices of the employers. Challenging the employers often triggers an angry response from the employers for questioning their domination power, such as expressed in the title of this dissertation, “How dare you talk back?!”. Sufficient knowledge about the precarious working conditions in Malaysia equipped Ita to resist exploitation by her employer and to negotiate working conditions which could satisfy both herself and her employer. For some domestic workers, running away is the only way to end exploitation by the employers; this also allows the workers to leave the home, the space of exploitation, to get spatial distance from the employers. Running away not only contests the exploitation by the employers; it also represents the embodied fear, memory and desire/hope of the workers for better working conditions (Pile, 1997).

The workers resist their immobility and isolation in the home of the employers by applying spatial avoidance, discreet exchange of greetings and expression of emotion in their mother tongue. These forms of resistance practices allow the workers to avoid confronting the employers directly while at the same time maintaining the image of obedient and good workers. In certain situations, migrant domestic workers sometimes apply “deferential performativity” (Rollins, 1985; Butler, 1993; Butler, 1999) to accommodate the demands of the employers and to ensure the security of their jobs. Although the workers contribute to their own subordination by utilising this resistance practice, they are also motivated to succeed in their migration. Migrant domestic workers also create space of respite in the home of the employers where they can replenish their labour and rejuvenate themselves to continue working until the end of their contract. Since the home of the employers is also a space of exploitation, their space of respite is still vulnerable to intrusion by the employers.

As the workers are confined in the home of the employers, the role of civil society to resist exploitation becomes important. Stories from civil society activists, however, suggest that collective mobilisation of the workers fails as a result of persistent ignoring of this form of work by the government. The advocacy of such activism barely changes
anything at the institutional and structural levels, as the state continues to leave problematic labour law as it is, rather than changing the status of domestic workers from servants to workers. Previous precarious experiences as live-in domestic workers encourage some women to choose to live out of the home of the employers and to work part-time as ways to avoid repeated exposure to exploitation; some even choose to work outside the legal system as a resistance to a corrupt system.

These particular forms of practice show that resistance by the workers is strongly determined by the spatiality of their workplace. The immobility of the workers in the home of the employers prevents them from organising collective mobilisation; for this, they have to rely on the advocacy of civil society to improve their working conditions. Open resistance is barely an option due to the fear of losing their job and of failing in their work migration. Although the workers establish a space of respite to replenish their labour, it is prone to intrusion by the employers because it is situated in the space of exploitation.

It is important to present the resistance practices by workers here to create a more balanced understanding of power practices. By presenting resistance practices as entangled with domination and labour exploitation practices, this study suggests that workers contest the power exercises by employers while at the same time reproduce the power inequality between the two. This study shows that although the power practices of the employers and the workers are employed at the level of home and the body, these practices are situated in relation to national and global power practices.

The geography of exploitation in paid domestic work

In which way are the analyses of paid domestic work on the home and body levels interrelated with the analyses on the national and global levels?

The answers to this question were dispersed throughout the dissertation and brought together in Chapter IX. Analyses which relate the practices on the home and body levels with the national and global as shown in this study brought to light the interrelatedness of these different spatial analyses and the identification of different subjects involved in this exploitative migration process.

The study shows that the state, media and recruitment/placement agencies are involved in conditioning precarious working conditions. The host state, through its law and regulations, is involved in con-
structing the ideal image of the workers – lone “female” migrants in their (re)productive age with poor economic backgrounds and posing no health risk to the host society. The media plays a significant role in creating the public discourses on migrant domestic workers in Malaysia. The media, however, often politicise the news to cover only a fragmented reality of the workers’ conditions, constructing them either as victims of violence or perpetrators of crime. The discourses created by the media inevitably influence the perception of the employers, stereotyping the workers by generalising the news to all workers coming from the same country or area of origin. The recruitment/placement agencies, meanwhile, do whatever they feel is necessary to construct the ideal image of workers to meet the expectations of the employers, from falsifying the age or area of origin of the workers to disciplining and punishing the workers to create obedient workers, and therefore reinforcing the racialised public discourses on migrant domestic workers. The employers, meanwhile, develop a bittersweet relation with the agencies as a result of the practice of the latter of charging exorbitant fees for their services, but at the same time the employers have to rely on the agencies to recruit their ideal worker and to understand the formal procedures.

The identification of these different subjects is useful in understanding the different forces which condition the precariousness of the work situations for these women migrants, which then suggests the interrelated relations in these four levels of analyses. The analysis on the home level in this study, for instance, shows the undervaluation of paid domestic work despite the fact that the work is now based on remunerative work relations. The findings of the study also strengthen the argument that paid domestic work reproduces the unequal, exploitative power relations based on gender, class and nationality/ethnicity differences and immigration status. The body of the workers becomes a subject of power onto which the intersections of these socio-economic categories are projected, while at the same time the body serves as a marker of power inequalities based on these categories. Listening to the reasons why these workers choose to migrate unfolds the geographical imaginations of these women, which motivate them to choose Malaysia as a destination country, only to find that the real working conditions are often different from what they imagine. The migration of these women also suggest their bodily vulnerability, in which the workers expose their body to exploitation as a resistance to the economic pressure in the village, to the patriarchal norm of men as breadwinners, and to the power practices of employers.
An analysis on the national level brings us back to the role of the host state. The state continues to deny the recognition of this embodied labour as work, despite the contribution of the workers in meeting the reproductive needs of the host society as a result of the inability of the state to meet this demand. At the same time, the state gives such immense institutional power to the employer in determining the work relations and conditions. By situating paid domestic work in a context of globalisation, meanwhile, the study suggests that the exploitation of these women is inevitably a “female underside of globalisation” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). The exploitation of the workers is in fact a gendered structural exploitation. The workers’ decision to migrate is taken under economic pressure for the survival of the family. The workers themselves barely benefit from this arrangement; rather, other subjects enjoy the most benefits – from the host state, which is able to meet the reproductive needs of its citizens, the recruitment/placement agencies with their exorbitant fees, to the men served both by the managerial skill of the wives and the reproductive labour of the migrant workers.

By presenting the geography of exploitation in paid domestic work, this study hopes to contribute to the political commitment to improve the situation. The identification of the power subjects involved in the work migration process and the interrelated processes at different spatial levels of analysis are useful in developing a geography of responsibility in order to improve the situation of these women (Massey, 2004; England, 2008).

**Enriching the conceptualisation of space and power**

Through analyses of the empirical data, this study contributes to theoretical discussions in feminist geography, particularly to the conceptualisation of space and power. The findings in this study support feminist discussions about the fluidity and interrelatedness of space. The application of Foucauldian feminist perspective in analysing the findings, meanwhile, enriches the theoretical discussions about the spatiality of power practices. Each contribution will be discussed here.

**Contributions on space**

The narratives of the women migrants in this study about the power practices utilised by the employers contribute rich empirical data to
the feminist conceptualisation of the body as space and the body in space (see McDowell, 1999: Chapter 2). From the materials, we see that the domination and exploitation practices by the employers target the body of the workers and its embodied attributes as objects of power (the body as space). The body of the workers becomes a space for the employers to inscribe gender and cultural practices, while at the same time drawing their own identities through the construction of the “Other” body. Spatial practices such as immobilisation and isolation, or surveillance, on the other hand, are aimed at controlling the body in space; knowing where the body of the worker is at all times. At the same time, arrangements of domestic workers’ space, such as the placement of the worker’s bedroom and the (lack of) furnishing in the room, also contribute to the construction of the “working body” of these women. The body is a subject of power, both in terms of body in space (productive working body) and body as space (subjected working body).

The study also contributes to the exploration of the home as a paradoxical space (Rose, 1993). The materials here show that the home of the employers is a space of control/protection, exploitation/resistance, domination/respite, work/leisure and production/reproduction. The boundaries between these different spaces are permeable as a result of the spatiality of the workplace. The workers’ spaces, however, are prone to intrusion by the employers. One unique contribution of the study is the paradoxical space of the home as a manifestation of the power of the employers. Examples of surveillance practices by employers suggest that the representation of power is no longer defined by the bodily presence or absence of the employers. Surveillance practices induce the automatic functioning of power by the workers in the form of self-discipline (Foucault, 1977).

Lastly, studies of paid domestic workers like this one contribute to feminist arguments about the interrelatedness of spaces. Although the employers target the body of the workers in order to exploit their labour in the home, the exploitation of these women is linked to the forces at the national and global levels which condition the precarious work. This links the “local” with the “global”, the “private” with the “public”, and “production” with “reproduction”. By mapping out the geography of exploitation of these migrants, this study emphasises that the exploitation is part of the reproduction of spatial economic inequality which benefits from the unequal transfer of labour production; the global restructuring of gender relations, which puts these women migrants at the bottom of the gender hierarchy; and the bodily
vulnerability of the workers under which they resist exploitation by deliberately exposing their bodies to unjust power.

**Spatialising power**

The major contributions of this study are in spatialising the theoretical discussions on power within the specific context of gendered and radicalised migrant domestic work. The study particularly contributes in the spatialised Foucauldian feminist analysis of power, where domination and exploitation entangle with resistance. Through the analysis of spatialised domination and exploitation practices in the context of paid domestic work, this study strengthens Foucauldian feminist arguments about the body, along with its embodied attributes (the habit, behaviour and emotion), as subjects of power. The intersections of gender, class and nationality/ethnic differences, and immigration status, serve as the bases of these practices; as argued earlier, these differences are also reproduced by domination and exploitation practices.

Applying a spatialised Foucauldian perspective of power to the concept of deference and maternalism (Rollins, 1985), meanwhile, contributes to further development of these concepts. The study enriches Rollins’ concept of spatial deference to include the immobility of the migrants in the destination country, the confinement of the workers in the home of the employers and the social isolation of the workers (social spatial deference). The study also reveals spatialised maternalism, as shown in the surveillance of the behaviour of the workers by the employers, as well as the extension of maternalism beyond the home boundaries through the employers becoming involved in the workers’ personal lives.

One important contribution of this study to the Foucauldian theoretical discussion on power is the conceptualisation of resistance as entangled with domination and exploitation, as suggested by Sharp et al. (2000). Treating the two faces of power as entangled contributes to challenging the victimisation of migrant domestic workers which is often found in globalisation discourses. The study also provides rich empirical materials on embodied resistance practices by workers, where resistance is an embodied manifestation of the workers’ fear, memory, dream and hope (Pile, 1997). By recognising the spatiality of the workplace, this study argues that the resistance practices available to these women are in fact spatialised, creating particular forms of spatialised everyday resistance (Scott, 1989). Lastly, the analysis in the study suggests that migrant domestic workers employ deferential performativity. This is a concept developed in this study based on an adaptation of Rollins’ concept of deference (Rollins, 1985) and the
Butlerian concept of performativity (Butler, 1993; Butler, 1999; Gregson and Rose, 2000). With this concept, the study suggests that by accommodating the demands of the employers, the workers contribute to reproducing power inequality and reinforcing their own subordination, but at the same time they are motivated to succeed in the work migration process.

Looking into the future

Reflecting on the contributions of this study, there are some potential ideas for further research in the future. For instance, there is a need to study the increasing trend of the formalisation of paid domestic work. While the phenomenon of the employment – whether full-time or part-time – of domestic workers through agencies is increasing, it is a new trend in Malaysia as well as in the wider Southeast Asia region. As we can see in this study, the agencies tend to frame this form of formalised employment as a “Western (individual) value”, vis-à-vis “Asian family value”. It will be interesting to study this discourse further and to investigate how it affects the paid domestic work phenomena in the region.

Another possible research area is the increasing use of digital materials, such as blogs or other online social media. In monitoring the media and online platforms as part of this study, some digital materials were discovered which take more and more space in the construction of public discourses on migrant domestic workers; for example the role of parenting blogs in giving tips about managing migrant domestic workers, which inevitably attract responses from readers. The digital space is also a growing sub-discipline in human geography since everyday life is now affected by the use of digital spaces.

In terms of potential theoretical development, this study also suggests a few areas. Foucauldian analyses are, for instance, growing in human geography literature. This dissertation suggests possible explorations of the spatialised understanding of power, where domination and exploitation practices are entangled with resistance practices. At the same time, the spatiality of the workplace, as in the context of paid domestic work, determines the forms of power practices. Spatial exploration of the terms deference and maternalism is another potential theoretical development. This dissertation, for example, extends the definition of spatial deference to include other spatialised practices, such as social isolation as a result of the confinement of the workers in the home, or the immobility of the workers in the destination country.
Further theoretical discussions on spatialised maternalism can also be pursued further. As this study suggests, in the context of paid domestic work, maternalism exercised by the employers goes beyond the boundary of the home as the employers often become involved in the workers’ personal lives. Lastly, one potential theoretical development is the concept of deferential performativity. More studies are needed to document various forms of resistance practices by migrant domestic workers at various levels of analysis. Deferential performativity as a concept will fit into the growing literature of resistance practices because it contests the accommodation of the workers as simply a reproduction of their own subordination. Rather, deferential performativity suggests that accommodation is performative, both because the employers as the more powerful group demand it and because the workers want to succeed in their migration.
Appendix: details of the interviewees

Migrant domestic workers

Name (pseudonym); age; family status; work location, year and duration of work; type of domestic work; migration status; other work migration experience (location, year, duration and type of work); place and date of interview(s).

Citra; mid 40s; married with five children (aged between 5 and 22); in Johor, year unknown (by the time the third child was about 5 years old), for two years; taking care of a baby, cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; no other work migration experience; Karawang, 24-25 April 2013.

Hana; mid 40s; divorced with five children (the oldest is an adult with three children and the youngest has just finished high school); in Kuala Lumpur, 2000, for 12 years by the time of the interview (went home for a few years before returning back to the same employer); cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; no other work migration experience; Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014.

Imas; mid 40s; married with three children (aged between 18 and 26); in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Trengganu, 2008, for a total of two years; cleaning and cooking; undocumented migrant worker (came through a sponsor); Saudi Arabia, 1998, for two years, domestic work; Karawang, 25 April 2013.

Ita; early 40s; married with two children (teenagers); in Miri, 1994, for seven months; started by cleaning in the home, then minding the grocery shop owned by her employer; documented migrant worker; Brunei, 2007, for one year, childcare and domestic work; Karawang, 16 October 2014.
Kokom; mid 40s; widowed with three children (aged between 7 and 15); in Kuala Lumpur, 1997, for two years; taking care of children, cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; no other work migration experience; Karawang, 15 October 2014.

Komariah; mid 40s; married with one child (teenager); in Kuala Lumpur, year unknown, for one month; cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; Singapore, before working in Malaysia, for two years; Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014.

Lita; mid 20s; engaged; in Kuala Lumpur, 2010, for one month; taking care of children, cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; working as a cleaner in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur by the time of the interview; Kuala Lumpur, 24 September 2013.

Marni; mid 20s; single; in Kuala Lumpur, year unknown, length unknown; part-time cleaner in houses under a company; migration status unknown; no other work migration experience; Kuala Lumpur, 29 October 2014.

Melati; early 40s; married with one child (aged 23); Serawak, 1998, for one year; taking care of children, cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; Brunei, year unknown (before Saudi Arabia), for six months, childcare and domestic work, Saudi Arabia, year unknown, for two years, domestic work, Abu Dhabi, 2010, for two years, cooking (had the same work periods/arrangements as Yolanda); Karawang, 16 October 2016.

Ninik; mid 60s; married with two children (adults); in Petaling Jaya, 1996, for two years; cleaning at a children’s day care owned by her employers and cleaning in the home; documented migrant worker; no other work migration experience; Karawang, 24-25 April 2013.

Nur; mid 40s; second marriage with two children (teenagers), when she left for work in Malaysia she was widowed with no child; in Kuala Lumpur, 1997, for three years; working in a restaurant kitchen owned by the employer; documented migrant worker; Saudi Arabia, before working in Malaysia, for two years, domestic work; Karawang, 15 October 2014.
Ratna; late 50s; married with two children (aged 23 and 32); in Subang Jaya, 1999, for two years; cleaning and cooking; documented migrant worker; no other work migration experience; Karawang, 25 April 2013 and 16 October 2014.

Sari; late 40s; married with one child (teenager); in Kuala Lumpur, 2001, for 12 years by the time of the interview; first taking care of the sick husband of her employer, then after he passed away she continued working as a domestic worker for the family; documented migrant worker; Singapore, before working in Malaysia, for four years (two years each for two employers); Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014.

Windi; late 40s; family status unknown; in Johor, 2003, for three and a half years; taking care of children, cleaning and cooking; migration status unclear, possibly undocumented migrant worker because she came through a sponsor; working as a cleaner in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur by the time of the interview; Kuala Lumpur, 6 October 2013.

Wulan; early 40s; second marriage with three children (aged between 5 and 21); in Sadang, Trengganu, Milawati, Bukit Tinggi and Kuala Lumpur, 2008, for a total of two years; taking care of children (Sadang), taking care of a psychologically disabled person (Trengganu), taking care of children, cleaning and cooking (Milawati, Bukit Tinggi and Kuala Lumpur); undocumented migrant worker (came through a sponsor); no other work migration experience; Karawang, 25 April 2013 and 16 October 2014.

Yolanda; early 40s; married with one child (aged 22); place unknown, 1998, for one year; Brunei, year unknown (before Saudi Arabia), for six months, childcare and domestic work, Saudi Arabia, year unknown, for two years, domestic work, Abu Dhabi, 2010, for two years, cooking (had the same work periods/arrangements as Melati); Karawang, 16 October 2014.
Employers

Name (pseudonym); age; family status; occupation; type of work assigned to migrant domestic worker; duration of employment; other experience of employing migrant domestic workers; place and date of interview.

Caroline; early 80s; widowed with seven children (all adults); retired; cleaning and cooking; 12 years by the time of the interview; one Filipina caretaker and two Indonesian migrant domestic workers; Kuala Lumpur, 2 November 2014.

Christine; early 80s; widowed with three children (all adults); retired; cleaning and cooking; 12 years by the time of the interview; no other experience of employing migrant domestic workers; Kuala Lumpur, 5 November 2014.

Other informants

Name; affiliation; place and date of interview(s)

Diana Wong; Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia; Kuala Lumpur, 30 September 2013.

Director and staff of a placement agency; Kuala Lumpur, 7 October 2013.

Engku Ahmad Fauzi; Persatuan Majikan Amah Malaysia (Malaysian Maid Employers Association/MAMA); Kuala Lumpur, 2 October 2013.

Florida Sandanasamy; Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC); Subang Jaya, 29 October 2014.

Glorene Das; Tenaganita (Women’s Force); Petaling Jaya, 6 November 2014.

Maria Platt; Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore; Singapore, 26 September 2013.
Mohammad Harun Al Rashid; Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility – Asia (CARAM Asia); Kuala Lumpur, 9 October 2013 and 3 November 2014.

Parimala Moses; Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility – Asia (CARAM Asia), formerly at Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC); Kuala Lumpur, 4 November 2014.

Shanthi Thambiah; University of Malaya; Petaling Jaya, 10 October 2013.

Sharuna Verghis; Health Equity Initiatives; Kuala Lumpur, 11 October 2013.

Silam Hassan; Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC); Subang Jaya, 3 November 2014.


Massey, Doreen (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.


Geographica
Utges av Kulturgeografiska institutionen vid Uppsala universitet.
Published by the Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University.


Nr 5 Sofie Joosse: *Is it local?: A study about the social production of local and regional foods and goods*. Sweden, 2014


Nr 7 Jasna Seršić: *The Craftsmen’s Labyrinth and Geographies of Creativity*, 2015.

Nr 8 Magdalena Cedering: *Konsekvenser av skolnedläggningar: En studie av barns och barnfamiljers vardagsliv i samband med skolnedläggningar i Ydre kommun*, 2016.


Nr 10 Mattias Graden: *Storskalig vindkraft i skogen: Om rationell planering och lokali motstånd*, 2016.

Nr 11 John Guy Perrem: *Encountering, regulating and resisting different forms of children’s and young peoples mobile exclusion in urban public space*, 2016.

Nr 12 Patricia Yocic Hierofani: "How dare you talk back?!" *Spatialised Power Practices in the Case of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Malaysia*, 2016.

***


The series Geographica is published by the Department of Social and Economic Geography since 2013. The series was preceded by Geografiska Regionstudier. A list of early issues is presented below.
Geografiska regionstudier
Utgivna av Kulturgeografiska institutionen vid Uppsala universitet

Nr 1 Uppsala län med omnejd [The County of Uppsala with Environ], 1958;

Del I Gerd Enequist och Lennart Hartin: Folkmängd, odling och industri [Distribution of Population, Cultivated Areas and Manufacturing Industries].

Del II Björn Bosæus: Resor till arbete och service. Regionindelning [Travel to Work and Service – Regional Division], 1958


Nr 4 Hans Aldskogius: Studier i Siljanområdets fritidsbebyggelse [Studies in the Geography of Vacation House Settlement in the Siljan Region], 1968.

Nr 5 Maj Ohre-Aldskogius: Folkmängdsförändring och stadstillväxt. En studie av stora och medelstora stadsregioner [Population Change and Urban Sprawl – A Study of Large and Middle Size City Regions], 1968.


Nr 8 Hans Ländell: Analyser av partihandels lokalisering [Analysis of the Location of Wholesale Trade], 1972.


Nr 13  Jan Öhman: *Staden och det varjedagliga utbytet* [The City and the Everyday Exchange], 1982.

Nr 14  Magnus Bohlin: *Fritidsboendet i den regionala ekonomin. Vart fritidshusägarnas pengar tar vägen* [Second Homes in the Regional Economy – Where the Cottagers’ Money Goes], 1982


Nr 18  Roger Andersson: *Den svenska urbaniseringen. Kontextualisering av begrepp och processer* [The Urbanization of Sweden – Contextualization of Concepts and Processes], 1987


Nr 22  Naseem Jeryis: *Small-Scale Enterprises in Arab Villages – A Case Study from the Galilee Region in Israel*, 1990.


Nr 25  Erik Westholm: *Mark, människor och moderna skiftesreformer i Dalarna* [Modern Land Reforms in Dalarna, Sweden], 1992

Nr 26  Margareta Dahlström: *Service Production – Uneven Development and Local Solutions in Swedish Child Care*, 1993


Nr 35  Staffan Larsson: *Lokal förankring och global räckvidd. En studie av teknikutveckling i svensk maskinindustri* [Local Embeddedness and Global Reach – A Study of Technological Development in the Swedish machinery Industry], 1998.


Nr 38  Anna-Karin Berglund: *Lokala utvecklingsgrupper på landsbygden. Analys av några lokala utvecklingsgrupper i termen av platsrelaterad gemenskap, platsrelaterad social rörelse och systemintegrerad lokal organisation* [Local Development Groups in the Countryside of Sweden – Place-Related Communality, Place-Related Social Movement, System-Integrated Local Organisation], 1998.


Nr 41  Jan Amcoff: *Samtida bosättning på svensk landsbygd* [Contemporary Settling in the Swedish Countryside], 2000.

Nr 42  Susanne Stenbacka: *Landsbygdsboende i inflyttarnas perspektiv. Intention och handling i lokalsamhället* [Countryside Living From the Perspectives of Newcomers – Intentions and Actions in the Local Community], 2001.


Nr 44  Eva Andersson: *Från Sorgedalen till Glädjehöjden – omgivningens betydelse för socioekonomisk karriär* [From the Vally of Sadness to the Hill of Happiness – The Significance of Surroundings for Socio-Economic Career], 2001.


Nr 46  Kristina Zampoukos: *IT, planeringen och kommunerna* [Information technology and Municipal Planning in Sweden], 2002.


Nr 66 Camilla Palander: Områdesbaserad politik för minskad segregat-
ion – En studie av den svenska storstadspolitiken [Area-based po-
licy to stop segregation – a study of the Swedish metropolitan po-
lcy], 2006.

Nr 67 Åsa Bråmå: Studies in the Dynamics of Residential Segregation,
2006.

Nr 68 Thomas Niedomysl: Migration and Place Attractiveness, 2006.

Nr 69 Lena Molin: Rum, frirum och moral: En studie av skolgeografins
innehållsval [Space, Curriculum space and Morality. About school
geography, content and teachers’ choice], 2006.

Nr 70 Ingegerd Landström: Towards Collaborative Coastal Management
in Sri Lanka? A study of Special Area Management planning in Sri
Lanka’s coastal region, 2006.

Nr 71 Danielle van der Burgt: “Där man bor tycker man det är bra.”
Barns geografer i en segregerad stadsmiljö [”Where you live you
like it”. Children’s Geographies in a Segregated Urban Environ-
ment], 2006.

Nr 72 John Östh: Home, Job and Space – Mapping and Modelling the

Nr 73 Henrik Mattsson: Locating Biotech Innovation – Places, Flows

Nr 74 Magnus Lagerholm: Kunskap och innovation i ett moget kluster –
En ekonomisk-geografisk studie av aluminiumindustrin i Småland-
Blekinge [Knowledge and Innovation in a Mature Cluster. An Eco-
nomic-Geographical Study of the Aluminium Product Cluster in
Småland and Blekinge, Sweden], 2007.

Nr 75 Dzamila Bienkowska: Arbetskraftens rörlighet och klusterdynamik
– en studie av IT- och telekomklustren i Kista och Mjärdevi [La-
bour mobility and cluster dynamics – A study of ICT clusters in
Kista and Mjärdevi, Sweden], 2007.

Nr 76 Atle Hauge: Dedicated followers of fashion – An economic geo-

Nr 77 Daniel A. Bergquist: Colonised Coasts – Aquaculture and emergy
flows in the world system: Cases from Sri Lanka and the Philip-
pines, 2008.

Nr 78 Petra Sundlöf: Segregation och karriärposition – En studie av bo-
stadsomgivningens betydelse för utbildning, sysselsättning och in-
komst bland yngre i Stockholmsregionen, 2008.

Nr 79 Emma Holmqvist: Politik och planering för ett blandat boende och
minskad boendesegregation. – Ett mål utan medel?, 2009.

Nr 80 Frida Andersson: Performing Co-production: On the logic and
practice of shopping at IKEA, 2009.

Nr 81 Kenny Jansson: Tillsammans: Bidrag till den etniska boendesegre-
gationens geofilosofi, 2009.


Nr 86 Jenny Sjöholm: *The geographies of (making) artwork. The field, the art studio and the art scene*. 2010.

Nr 87 Jörgen Lindell (red.): *Storstäder och tillväxt. Om storstadsregioners roll, betydelse och utmaningar för hållbar ekonomisk utveckling*, 2011.

