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Productive and deferential bodies: the experiences of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia

Patricia Yocie Hierofani

Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the construction of the bodies of live-in Indonesian domestic workers in their employers' homes in Malaysia. Through an analysis of everyday practices at the micro level, this study suggests that the spatiality of domestic work is central to the bodily construction of migrant workers. Surveillance and mobility restrictions in the employer's home condition the worker's body to be constantly productive. The body, at the same time, is inscribed with gender, racial and class differences. It is marked as deferential as a result of its proximity to the employer's body in the enclosed space of the home. These practices take place at home, but they draw on practices by the host state and recruitment agencies. This suggests that bodily construction at the household level is inherently linked to national and global processes. Migrant domestic workers nevertheless may find themselves either adopting these constructions through self-discipline or resisting them to a limited extent. In doing so, the workers' bodily performances bring the home into being as a performative space of power.

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Introduction

Higher participation rates of women in the labour market, lack of state support in the provision of care, and unchanged gender roles result in increasing commodification of reproductive work globally. Migrant women are the regular army of labour who meet the demand of care and domestic work, including in times of economic crisis, often to the cost of their own reproductive needs (Farris 2015). It creates so-called global care chains (Yeates 2004, 2012), international division of reproductive work (Parreñas 2000, 2012), or global re-division of traditional gender roles and reproductive labour (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). The commodification of

CONTACT Patricia Yocie Hierofani patricia-yocie.hierofani@kultgeog.uu.se Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

reproductive work arguably situates migrant domestic workers at the intersection of gender, care and migration regimes (Lutz 2008). The seemingly 'mutual dependence', where migrant women need money and employers of workers, disguises nevertheless the reproduction of global market relations in the home (Anderson 2007). It obscures structural inequalities where social reproduction relies on economic disparities between countries, including between those in the same region, such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

The body of the worker is central to the provision of care and domestic work. As in similar types of employment in the service economy, the physical labour and embodied attributes of the body are essential to the market exchange. It is not only a matter of providing labour—often to service another body—but also about which body is employed and how the body itself is made presentable (McDowell 2009). Studies on migrant domestic workers have shown that migrant women's bodies are constructed through the narratives of global economy, nation and gender (Pratt 1998; Stiell and England 1997; Anderson 2007). States, sometimes in partnership with recruitment agencies, govern the migration of domestic workers through regulatory frameworks at the national and regional scale (Elias 2018; Kaur 2010). Rodriguez and Schwenken (2013) argue that other social actors, such as recruitment agencies, also draw on regulatory frameworks in producing the ideal migrant subjects. Servitude and deference, for instance, are behaviours that are demanded from domestic workers (Rollins 1985; Chin 1997). Rudnyckyj (2004) refers to the subject-making processes of migrant domestic workers as the technologies of servitude. In the country of employment, the bodies of the migrant domestic worker are further marked through the racialisation of occupation, where personal identities are conflated with occupational identities (Pratt 1998). The migrant women's bodies are marginalised as aliens and desexualised as women (Lan 2008).

These studies show that the construction of migrant domestic workers takes place through institutional processes carried out by states and recruitment agencies. This article aims to go beyond these traditional institutional processes. I argue that this construction takes place primarily at home as a result of the spatial character of domestic work. It is a construction of the body and its embodied attributes by the employers and the workers themselves in the enclosed space of the home. This construction, however, draws on institutional practices by the host state and recruitment agencies. Despite their transnational mobilities, live-in migrant domestic workers spend most of their time in their employers' home. At the same time, paid domestic work is largely excluded from labour law (Chin 1997; Molina and Mulinari 2013). It leaves work practices dependent upon negotiation between the employers and domestic workers (Yeoh and Huang 2010b; Lan 2003). As this study will show, this results in the employers' control over the workers' bodily labour.

The experiences of live-in Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia are the empirical foundation of the article. Feminists argue that a study of the 'local', such as paid domestic work at home, offers a good methodological entry point to understand how globalisation processes operate across scales (Nagar et al. 2002; Dyck 2005). An investigation of practices at home will hopefully show that processes targeting the bodies of migrant women are inherently linked to processes at the national and global scales.

Construction of the body through an analysis of power

The body is central to Foucault's conceptualisation of power. Foucault (1977) argues that power targets the body individually using subtle yet constant discipline and coercion. Institutional practices through discourse and discipline manipulate and transform 'docile bodies' in order to achieve efficiency and productivity (Foucault 1977, 136–137). The body is thus conceptualised *as* space, onto which discourse inscribes histories, narratives and values diffusely (Butler 1989). Reiteration of discourse is a mechanism through which narratives are inscribed on the body, and thereafter produces the intended effects (Butler 1993). Surveillance is another mechanism which conditions the subject to internalise power relations and to take part in the subject-making process through self-discipline (Foucault 1977). It is not only a matter of the body as space, but also the body *in* space. Surveillance is a subtle, invisible, yet continuous control over the body in an enclosed space.

Feminists are, however, critical of this Foucauldian conception of passive body-object. Butler (1999) argues that the inscription is merely on the surface as indicated by disruptive gendered bodies. Disruptive bodies suggest that the internalisation of gender discourse is fabricated and therefore the acts, gestures and enactments of the body are performative. As the body moves in space under surveillance, its performance articulates the power relations therein, and thus brings space into being (Gregson and Rose 2000). It shows the complexity of power relations where resistance is entangled with domination (Sharp et al. 2000). Mills (2007) suggests that we need to separate the institutional status of power from the local status of power. The institutional status of power is attached to one's position in the power hierarchy; meanwhile, the local status of power can be negotiated through one's skill and quick-wittedness. Scott's (1985) notion of everyday forms of resistance, for instance, is an example of the negotiation of the local status of power. Everyday forms of resistance allow those from relatively powerless groups to contest the authorities without directly challenging them.

This article draws on feminist Foucauldian analyses on body-subject construction and contextualises them in the global economic setting. The focus of this study is the construction of migrant workers' bodies at home by their employers. The participation of the workers in the construction, however, shows the entanglement of

domination and resistance. The spatiality of domestic work brings forth home as an important scale of analysis; however, the local processes draw on national and global processes.

After the methodology section, this article identifies institutional processes by the host state (Malaysia) and recruitment agencies. These serve as the background to understand national and global processes. This is followed by an analysis of bodily construction at home. Finally, I return to the linkage between practices at home and at a wider scale in the conclusion.

Research methodology

The data for this study was collected during three months of fieldwork in Indonesia and Malaysia in 2013–2015. Sixteen women were interviewed, mostly between 30-40 years old and typically married with a few young children at the time of migration. Almost all of them migrated to Malaysia at the end of the 1990s or the beginning of the 2000s, when the economic crisis hit Indonesia. They typically worked for two years (the standard length of employment contracts in Malaysia), but five worked for one year or less. Two, meanwhile, worked for over 12 years for the same employers. Three workers came through sponsors and became undocumented. Malay, Indian and Chinese are three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, and the employers came from all groups. The employers were either married or widowed with a few children, and typically worked in offices or owned shops or businesses.

I additionally interviewed two employers, two representatives of an employment agency, one representative of an employers' association, six Malaysian civil society activists, and three academics. The workers' narratives (in pseudonym), however, comprise most of the empirical material. The interviews were intended to explore the experiences of migrant domestic workers of the home as both a work and a private space. When analysing the material, the issue of control in the home over work and non-work aspects emerged as a strong topic across the interviews.

The choice of migrant domestic workers as the main informants is intended to bring out their voices. I also minimised editing the interviews when I translated them in order to keep their original narratives. The practices taken up in this study are thus based on the workers' perspectives. After all, political commitments drive feminism in the first place and we should connect our research to a larger agenda, in order to improve the situation of marginalised groups (Nelson and Seager 2005; Kobayashi 2003).

Construction of gendered and racialised bodies by the host state and recruitment agencies

Economic growth in Malaysia since the 1960s has created labour demand in the plantation, construction, manufacturing, services and domestic work

sectors. The state brings in labour from neighbouring countries to meet the demand. Malaysian labour migration policy is characterised by a repeated cycle of opening and curbing (Pillai 1999), whilst the government's fixation on ethnicity, nationality and gender complicates immigration governance (Kaur 2010). Low-skilled migrants are recruited on a temporary basis from selected countries when the need increases and are curbed when the demand diminishes. This trend suggests the construction of migrant labour as 'disposable' (Wright 2006), to be discarded and replaced when it loses its value.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Indonesia estimates that Indonesian workers constitute 1,215,000 out of 1,849,600 migrant workers in Malaysia. 24% are domestic workers and the figure does not even include the undocumented (IOM 2010). Economic reasoning is often the main driving force behind the migration of women as domestic workers, although not the only reason. Other reasons may include to escape a bad marriage, to experience another country or, for Muslims who migrate to Saudi Arabia, to do a pilgrimage (Parreñas 2001; Silvey 2006). The decline in agriculture, limited job opportunities and low education level render labour migration an attractive solution for many families in poor and rural areas of Indonesia. 'To help my husband' was the common reason for migration given by the research participants. Their husbands were typically employed in low-paid temporary jobs, such as construction. Higher income as a domestic worker abroad is a strong incentive. The wage received by research participants varied from 400 to 1,000 RM (80-225 EUR),[1] depending on their migration status, year and length of migration. Most workers sent remittances regularly or whenever necessary. Migrant women are thus the ideal migrant subjects for migrant-origin states because they are more likely to send remittances to their families (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

In Malaysian labour law, domestic workers are categorised as 'servants', rather than 'workers', so they are excluded from most stipulations. Non-governmental organisations in Malaysia have advocated for the recognition of domestic workers as workers, but interviewed activists reported that the progress has been slow (Al-Rashid, CARAM Asia, 9 October 2013; Das, Tenaganita, 6 November 2014). There is no organisation run by migrants in Malaysia (Piper 2006), and none of the research participants was a member of any organisation or union.

Malaysia signed bilateral agreements with migrant-origin countries, including Indonesia, to meet the shortages in domestic and care work. The state prefers to seek a new migrant-origin country rather than deal with the demand for protection from existing migrant-sending states. A few migrant-origin countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia, have issued bans following abuse cases of their citizens. The bans have presently

caused maid shortages and insecurity among the Malaysian middle-class women because their successful participation in the labour market and their class status rely on the employment of low-cost migrants (Elias and Louth 2016).

The regulation from the Malaysian Immigration Department, also reflected in bilateral agreements with migrant-origin countries, requires that a potential worker should be women, 21-45 years old, certified fit or healthy and without criminal record. The requirement that prospective women workers should be in the reproductive age suggests that care and domestic work is an extension of woman's motherhood duty as a citizen (Anderson 2000). Health and criminal certifications, meanwhile, suggest an alienation of the migrant's body as a source of health and criminal threats.

The host state inscribes socioeconomic inequality further onto the bodies of migrant domestic workers through selective recruitment policies. The approved countries for recruitment are Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam and Laos. Economic inequalities are the driving force behind labour migration corridors in the area (Kaur 2010), and this selective policy of recruiting workers from lower income countries reflects the situation. Employers are required to have a minimum income and to pay a personal bond in case the workers run away, with the amount varying depending on the workers' nationality. A prospective employer of an Indonesian domestic worker should have a minimum income of 3,000 RM (620 EUR) and should pay 250 RM (50 EUR) for the personal bond. This policy constructs which racialised body is suitable for the occupation (Pratt 1998; Stiell and England 1997; Anderson 2007). It also constructs a racialised distinction of migrants based on economic inequalities between the selected migrant-origin countries. At the same time, the policy underscores income inequality between employers, where employers with higher income have more options over which nationality to choose from.

Mobility of migrants, especially in Asia, is made possible through organisation by brokers (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012). Employers often rely on agencies to understand the employment procedure and to train the workers. These are examples of rules given by the agencies as shared by the workers:

> Work properly. We must be polite to the employer. Do not go out without permission (Melati, 16 October 2014).

> 'You should not put on makeup,' said [the agent] (Imas, 25 April 2013).

If a worker violates the rules or runs away, the agency may discipline them.

> We were not allowed to leave the agency. Someone did. She was beaten up (Citra, 25 April 2013).

Employers, however, have expressed dissatisfaction towards recruitment agencies due to exorbitant fees. Agencies charge 10,000-15,000 RM (2,000-

3,100 EUR) to recruit Indonesian workers. With the money, employers expect well-trained domestic workers; however, agencies often send untrained workers ('No Maids to Hire' 2014). Exorbitant fees charged by the agency affect the way employers treat the workers and reinforce the commodification of workers (Chin 1997). As an activist expressed it:

> An employer who recruits a domestic worker has a mentality that I have paid 15,000 ringgits to purchase you, so you become a commodity. That's when they take on the practice of master-servant relationship (Das, Tenaganita, 6 November 2014).

Agencies sometimes also present the workers according to the employers' expectations (Killias 2010; Liang 2011; Findlay et al. 2013). An agency, for instance, changed a worker's address as a response to the stereotyping of workers from her origin area in west Java.

> They [the agency] said that it was problematic in Malaysia to come from west Java. Less diligent in working or something. Those coming from east Java were more diligent, so it's faster to get a passport (Kokom, 15 October 2014).

Recruitment agencies use rules, discipline and violence to construct the workers as subservient and deferent in their employment, as part of the technologies of servitude (Rudnyckyj 2004). The worker's body is not only racialised through stereotypes based on its origin area, but it is also inscribed with deference and subservience deemed necessary for the employment, as part of the commodification of migrant workers (Rollins 1985; Chin 1997). These practices reflect state policies, from selective labour migration to categorisation of domestic workers as servants in the labour law. They also draw on the employers' expectations about ideal migrant domestic workers.

Construction of productive and deferential bodies in the home

Productive bodies through restriction of mobility under surveillance

For migrant women, transnational migration often renders them immobile in the host country (Lee and Pratt 2011). The visas of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia are tied to a specific employer. Once they migrate, they work and live in the employers' home. The live-in system restricts the mobility of migrant domestic workers and makes it difficult for them to leave in the case of exploitative working conditions. Employers typically forbid Indonesian domestic workers from leaving the house without permission and they often withhold days off, as shared by the workers.

> Ninik: No, I could not go out. I only went out to the supermarket, pushed the trolley for my employer.
>
> Wulan: I only went out to the yard to sweep. Anywhere else, I went with my employer.

> Citra: I only went out to wash the car.
> (Ninik, Wulan and Citra, 25 April 2013)

Two research participants could go out and received days off. It was unusual because they had worked for and developed trust with the same employers for over 10 years. The prohibition of leaving the house is founded partly on the regulation from the Immigration Department. Employers must pay personal bonds if the workers run away. Indonesian workers are particularly perceived as having a higher risk of running away due to the big Indonesian community in Malaysia (director of a recruitment agency, 7 October 2013).

In addition to the prohibition of leaving the house, employers and recruitment agencies withhold the workers' passports. This makes the workers vulnerable to detention and deportation. Two workers for instance never received the documents from the agents. They became hesitant about leaving the house due to fear of getting detained (Imas and Wulan, 25 April 2013).

Anderson (2007) argues that control over immigration status is an effective control mechanism over migrant domestic workers. The live-in system, prohibition of leaving the house, withholding of days off and withholding of passport are practices to control the mobility of the workers within the host country. These practices find legitimacy in immigration policies, despite being carried out at home. They result in long working hours and condition the workers to be constantly productive at home. Lita for instance decided to quit her job due to long working hours.

> I had to work from dawn, 06.00 to 22.00. Even then, my employer said it was still early for me to go to bed at 22.00 (Lita, 24 September 2013).

Komariah was required to be on guard during her sleep, in case her service was needed.

> There were five persons in the house. Someone arrived at home at 00.00, we opened the door. 01.00, opened the door. 03.00, opened the door. Until morning! All of them had keys, but they did not want to open the door (Komariah, 29 October 2014).

A few workers also experienced being put under surveillance, with or without a camera.

> When the employer was around, if she kept an eye on us, [we became] nervous. Sometimes she was watching us while watching the television. She could of course see us, right? (Melati, 16 October 2014)

Another worker who reported that the employer installed surveillance cameras in the home believed that it was a test of honesty.

> You know, she [the employer] had piles of money, a lot of stuffs with diamonds. Like a shop, I'd say. This outfit with this diamond, that outfit with that diamond. If I steal one, she would look for it! Money, ten ringgits, five ringgits. She had a lot of

> mirrors, cameras everywhere. She must be testing me or something (Komariah, 29 October 2014).

These practices resemble Foucauldian panoptic surveillance. The power is to be 'visible'—in the form of the physical presence of the employers or cameras—and 'unverifiable'—as the workers do not know for sure if the employers are watching or not (Foucault 1977, 201). Johnson et al. (2019) argue that the use of surveillance cameras in the home puts the focus on the body and bodily performances of domestic workers. It brings forward the spatiality and temporality of the organisation of domestic work. The workers are continuously under surveillance with no adequate private space to retreat to. Surveillance affects the productivity of the workers by conditioning them to adopt 'self-discipline' in their bodily performances (Foucault 1977, 202). Like Melati, who became self-conscious when the employer was watching television, or Komariah, who left the money and jewels untouched, Ratna would keep herself busy when her employer was at home:

> Even though it's already clean, we wiped it again, wiped it again, if the employer was around (Ratna, 25 April 2013).

Restriction of mobility under surveillance trains the workers to be constantly productive, to know when their bodily labour is needed and to retreat when not needed.

> We understood, if there was a guest, we would go to the back [the kitchen]. […] Although the employer was kind, we knew that we're only helpers, we should stay at the back. If in the kitchen there was a work to do, well, we worked (Kokom, 15 October 2014).

By retreating when their labour is not needed, the workers perform spatial deference (Rollins 1985; Yeoh and Huang 2010a). This manifests in the unequal use of space between employers and domestic workers. Lack of private spaces or spaces of respite renders the workers productive even when they are not under direct surveillance (Moss 1997), as shared by Kokom who continued working after she was out of the employer's gaze.

A few workers, however, break the control over their mobility through spatial resistance. Marni, for instance, decided to work as a part-time, live-out worker.

> That's why I do not want to work as a [live-in] domestic worker. I'm afraid. I have seen how other people did the work. So of course I'm afraid to end up in the same working [conditions] (Marni, 29 October 2014).

Imas decided to run away from restrictive and exploitative working conditions.

> [My employer] was always angry. I called the agent. I said that I could not stand, so the agent picked me up. The employer already paid 5,000 ringgits to the agent. That's why the agent picked me up at dawn (Imas, 25 April 2013).

Killias (2010) argues that 'legal', state-sanctioned migration is an instrument of subordination since it leads to 'legal' but bonded labour arrangements. The examples here show that regulations, such as the live-in system, visas and personal bonds, lead to employers' control over the workers' mobility. Practices of withholding passports, withholding days off or surveillance, at the same time, construct the body as constantly productive in the home. Workers may resist these state-sanctioned practices by working part-time, living out or running away, as done by Marni and Imas. This, however, may cause them to be 'illegal' and may lead to detention and deportation.

Deferential demeanour for 'efficiency'

Productivity and efficiency in doing domestic work are sometimes used to justify control over the workers' appearance, emotions and behaviour. Some employers require the workers to appear in a certain way for efficiency. It is usually influenced by the employer's individual expectation of what is deemed appropriate. Citra, whose employer was Chinese, was required to always cut her hair short and to wash her hair thoroughly because she took care of a baby (Citra, 24 April 2013). Kokom, whose employer was Indian, was told to wear shorts for convenience.

> When I just arrived, my employer bought me clothes for work. I liked wearing long pants, but she bought me shorts. 'For work,' she said, 'so it's easier' (Kokom, 15 October 2014).

Short hair and shorts for work are common among workers whose employers are Chinese or Indian. Sometimes the workers felt uneasy with the arrangement. Ita, whose employer was a Chinese Muslim, refused the arrangement.

> Ita was ordered to wear hijab, but with a short-sleeved shirt. [The employer] said, 'It's alright to wear hijab.' Ita refused. 'It is useless. Rather, it's better not to wear hijab' (Ita, 16 October 2014).

Yolanda, who had a Malay Muslim couple as employers, on the other hand, was suggested to always wear hijab to show decency.

> Yolanda: Only when I went to bed, I opened the hijab. When I cooked or did anything else, I wore hijab. [My employer] said, 'Yeah, it's better to wear hijab.'
> Yocie: Who said that?
> Yolanda: The wife. 'You look decent,' she said, 'you do not look messy. You look neat'
> (Yolanda, 16 October 2014).

The workers are generally not allowed to wear makeup or body care products. Some workers meanwhile considered it inappropriate to wear makeup due to their status as domestic workers.

> Yolanda: Well, we know our place.
>
> Melati: We felt as though being asked, 'Why do you, a helper, wear makeup?' (Yolanda and Melati, 16 October 2014)

McDowell (2009) argues that the bodily attributes of the workers are part of the exchange in service employment. Whether it is a body clad in shorts, covered by hijab, with short hair, or without makeup, it is a gendered construction of a deferential body that is deemed appropriate for domestic work. These practices are justified through arguments of convenience, efficiency, or decency in performing the work. The perception of the workers' body as a sexual threat to women employers, however, may have underlain the arguments (Lan 2008; Constable 1997). A worker expressed the frustration as the following:

> People here [in Malaysia] are like kings! They don't want to be called '*Kakak*' [sister]. We 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. It's because many Malay men like Indonesian [women]. If his wife has 4-5 kids, she cannot watch her weight. Really, Malay [women] do not like Indonesian [women] (Komariah, 29 October 2014).

Control over the body may be motivated by sexualised politics of proximities (Yeoh and Huang 2010a). The bodies of the workers and of the employers are situated close to each other in the home. The co-presence of the bodies in an enclosed space, such as the home, magnifies physical similarities between the two due to their gender and racial proximity. A way to mark the differences is by constructing the workers' bodies as (sexually) deferential to the employers'. In response to the sexualisation of the body, the workers either participate in the construction or resist the construction. Yolanda and Melati—who chose not to wear makeup and to 'know their place'—perform 'gestural deference' (Rollins 1985, 167), as a form of self-discipline and thus participate in the construction (Foucault 1977). Ita—who refused to wear hijab if wearing a short-sleeved shirt—meanwhile resists the construction and builds her own inscriptions.

Gender and class identities are also reproduced in the way the workers address the employers. As Komariah mentioned, employers sometimes refused to be addressed on an equal term such as 'Sister' ('*Kakak*'). The employers required the workers to address them as 'Madam' ('*Puan*' or '*Nyonya*'), which reflected the workers' servitude. Some workers were told to address the employers as '*Ibu*' ('Mrs'), which was a more equal term but still respectful. The workers, meanwhile, were usually called by their names. 'Linguistic deference' as such reproduces class differences between

employers and workers (Rollins 1985, 158). It articulates the servitude of one to the other.

Assignment of menial tasks is another way to construct deference and servitude. The workers typically take care of the children and do various domestic tasks, such as cooking and cleaning. Almost every participant said that the employers demanded a high standard of cleanliness and some even gave unnecessary tasks.

> I was tortured. I had to clean this and that. I had to clean the ceiling from spider webs every day (Imas, 25 April 2013).

> Her house had many 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 white stones one by one! All along the driveway! (Komariah, 29 October 2014).

Cleaning the ceiling every day or polishing stones on the yard are not crucial to keep the house running. The assignment of menial tasks suggests that domestic workers do not merely do the dirty work (Anderson 2000); rather, it constructs 'task-embedded deference' to reproduce the employer's middle-class status (Rollins 1985, 167). It is the reason why the scarcity of migrant domestic workers has now threatened the success stories of middle-class Malaysians (Elias and Louth 2016).

Domestic workers who took care of children said that employers required them to show affection and compassion and to hide negative emotions, such as anger or frustration.

> Once I was sprayed with water. The kid played with the water tap. When I was washing clothes, I was sprayed [with water]. I got wet, so I got angry. By that time the employer arrived home. 'What happened?!' 'Your kid is naughty, Ma'am.' She became angry. I was not allowed to say that her child was naughty (Melati, 16 October 2014).

McDowell (2009) argues that emotions, such as empathy and affection, in addition to physical bodily attributes, are part of the exchange in service employment. In paid domestic work, Rollins (1985) argues that the workers are required to convey subservient attitudes and to take pleasure towards their tasks. The expectation for deference and subservience in domestic work in Malaysia, however, may also be founded on the categorisation of domestic workers as 'servants' in the labour law.

Domestic workers may sometimes resist this construction. Wulan, for instance, chose to express frustration to her employer in her mother tongue, Sundanese:

> Wulan: I talked in Sundanese when I was angry, so she wouldn't understand.
> Yocie: Did the employer not ask you about it?
> Wulan: No … (laughs) … because she didn't understand. If I talked in Indonesian, she would understand.
> (Wulan, 16 October 2014)

By expressing her frustration in her native language, the worker resisted the employer's control over her emotions. Studies show that migrant domestic workers in Asia often use covert and discreet resistance (Constable 1997; Ueno 2009). This claims a symbolic superiority over the employer who is unaware of the resistance and creates a temporary illusion of equality. This form of everyday resistance can be equally pervasive without directly confronting the dominating power and hierarchy (Scott 1985, 33). It creates a safer space for workers to resist the employers' control.

Conclusion

The labour migration of women as domestic workers reveals counter stories to globalisation. The host state—in this case Malaysia—constructs the bodies of migrant domestic workers as 'disposable' (Wright 2006), even as threats, through selective labour migration policies. This logic is adopted by recruitment agencies through the commodification of the workers. The bodily labour of Indonesian domestic workers is important in meeting the demand for social reproduction in Malaysia at a lower cost. Selective recruitment policies, meanwhile, reflect economic inequalities in the region.

Although migrant domestic workers experience transnational mobility through migration, their immigration status limits their mobility to the employers' homes. Restriction of mobility and surveillance in the home condition the workers' bodies to be constantly productive. Sexualised politics of physical and racial proximities through the arguments of work productivity and efficiency, meanwhile, justify the control over the workers' appearance, emotions and behaviour (Yeoh and Huang 2010a). This is a practice to construct a deferential body as part of the requirements of the job.

An investigation of the bodily construction of migrant workers in the home reveals that the spatiality of domestic work is central in the construction of productive and deferential bodies. Gregson and Rose (2000) argue that space should be thought of as performative. In domestic work, the employer's home is a space where performative articulations of power take place. The restriction of mobility and surveillance over workers' bodies in the home are materializations of the employers' power. These practices draw on labour migration policy and the commodification of migrant domestic workers. The home is thus enmeshed in the commodification processes of domestic work at the national and global level.

Home as a performative space of power is also brought into being through bodily performances of the workers according to the employers' expectations. To dress the body of the workers in a certain way, to require the workers to hide negative emotions, to assign menial tasks, or to demand long work hours are means to construct productive and deferential bodies.

These practices reproduce gender, class and racial differences in the enclosed space of the home. The workers nevertheless contest the articulation of power through bodily performances of everyday/hidden resistance (Scott 1985; Constable 1997). The workers resist when they express dissatisfaction in a language foreign to the employers, refuse to be dressed in a certain way, or run away from exploitative working conditions. This resistance, however, contests only the local status of power rather than the institutional status (Mills 2007), because it does not change the power hierarchy.

Through investigating the construction of the body in the home, this study contributes to feminist critiques on the operationalisation of globalisation processes across scales. In paid domestic work, home is a contested space of power where the bodies of migrant domestic workers are enmeshed within the nexus of gendered and racialised global economic inequalities, immigration and social reproduction.

Note

1. In comparison, the minimum wage for a domestic worker in Jakarta in 2015 was 1,200,000 IDR (70 EUR).

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Notes on contributor

Patricia Yocie Hierofani is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Sweden. The topics of her research include migrant domestic workers, worker centres and civil society activism on the issue of migrant workers.

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