Migrant domestic workers in Asia: the case of Singapore

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Push/pull/mediating factors in labor migration
Push factors in sending countries:

- Human export policy, high unemployment rate, instability of job, low level of salary, successful stories about migration, collective dreams regarding migration, idea of filial piety, individual life planning, domestic violence, political corruption, despotism, etc.
Successful story with bike
Pull factors in receiving country

- higher wage created by economic growth
- vacuum of care prompted by high level of female labor participation
- government policy regarding migrant domestic workers
- insufficient social welfare coupled with Asian familism, etc.
Mediating factors

- rapid growth of employment agency
- business
- informal network
- language, etc.
The origin of migrant domestic workers and development of its policy in Singapore

- labor shortage in late 1970’s — policy of economically inactive women entering or re-entering the labor force
• Foreign Domestic Workers Scheme (1978)

• 1980’s — introduction of regulatory measures (a two-year working contract, prohibiting marriage to a Singaporean, and mandating employers’ payment of security bonds and monthly levies)
The number of migrant domestic workers in Singapore

- 20,000 in 1987
- 40,000 in 1988
- 50,000 in 1989
- Over 100,000 in 1999
- 170,000 in 2007
Foreign workers policy in Singapore

- dual-track* policy since the early 1970s
  1. employment pass (for professionals)
  2. work permit (for construction, manufacturing, and marine workers, migrant domestic workers, etc.)

* skilled workers (for skilled workers) since 2004
No quota system for migration domestic workers

The government does not encourage Singaporeans to work as domestic helpers.
Asian type of familism with the help of migrant domestic workers, which is enforced by government.

- Aging population
- Concern for low birth rate
In August 2004, the monthly levy for foreign domestic workers was reduced from S$345 to S$250 for a Singaporean citizen with a child under 12 years of age or with an elderly person aged 65 and above.
Control on migrant domestic workers by Singapore Government

- 8 designated sending countries of domestic workers (majority are from the Philippine and Indonesia).
- 23 (previously 18) years of age and have a minimum of 8 years of formal education, with documented proof of that education.
A prospective migrant domestic worker is required to pass an entry test within three days of arrival in Singapore before she can be issued a work permit. (The test assesses knowledge of housekeeping, labor and safety regulations, and English language ability).

All migrant domestic workers are live-in under the legal responsibility of the employers.
To apply for work permit for a migrant domestic worker, a prospective employer is examined by ministry of manpower with a tax record, etc.

Generally, a recruitment is done through agency — purportedly more than 600 employment agencies in Singapore.
Two categories of migrant domestic workers*

“CV maid” — women who are in their own countries.

“transfer maid” — migrant domestic workers who are already in Singapore.

* wage differs from the countries of origins.
Becoming a migrant domestic worker

Indonesia – through both a training center/employment agency in Indonesia, and employment agency in Singapore

Philippine - through both an employment agency in the Philippine and that in Singapore, or only the latter
Becoming a domestic worker in case of Indonesians
Sponsor

Paid by the training center (employment agency) to recruit the candidates for migrant domestic workers

Guideline for recruitment
- junior high school above
- good health
- no malformation
- 150 height above
- 21-35 age range
Training center

- Physical checkup → fit, pending, unfit

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  sent back to home by her sponsor

- Inspection on her belongings

- Training (language, general housework, care work, job interview)

- Hair cut, self introduction video
English textbook used in training center.
Training center
Working at employer’s house

- All types of household work (cleaning, washing (ironing), cooking, gardening, painting, taking care of children or other family members with physical or mental impairment, looking after school homework, sewing, etc.
- During a debt period of 4-11 months, there may be no day off.
- In some cases, no day off for two years.
The plight of migrant domestic workers

“Free exchange plan” practiced by employment agencies
Singapore Immigration Act

Employer’s security bond (S$5,000) to be forfeited and the migrant domestic worker is repatriated at once if she works in a location other than the employer’s house, becomes pregnant, disturbs the order of society, or overstays in Singapore without proper authorization.
Two years’ working experience in Singapore: a portal for what?

- Gaining an economic power in the family back home
- Trap of migration
- Forming informal network
Occupational trajectories abroad

Shuttle type
- Singapore repeater

Asian regional type (typically for Indonesians)
- (Malaysia or Middle east) → Singapore → Hong Kong/Taiwan

West Type (for Filipinas)
Singapore as a stepping stone to Canada
THANK YOU