



Domestic Maids in Brunei: A Case Study

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Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Working Paper No. 14

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Gadong 2015

Editorial Board, Working Paper Series

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The Views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute of Asian Studies or the Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

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Abstract:

This paper is a case study of Indonesian domestic maids or referred to locally as amah working in Brunei Darussalam. It is an account of the lives, hardships, difficulties, and dreams of five eastern Javanese women, and how their position as domestic maids abroad has changed the dynamics of gender and power relations in their traditionally patriarchal households in Java.

Keywords: *Amah; Brunei Darussalam; Domestic Maids; Gender; Indonesia; Migration; Patriarchy; Power Relations*

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Working Paper No14. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015

Domestic maids in Brunei: A Case Study

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A domestic worker is a person employed specifically to assist in or take complete charge of the domestic work in a household. Essentially domestic workers are expected to perform tasks which range from cooking and cleaning, to taking care of the children or elderly in the household that they are employed in. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), currently more than 52 million people are employed as domestic workers around the world.

In most cases, a large number of domestic workers are migrants that originated from the developing countries. In the case of Brunei, most of the domestic workers employed are from either Indonesia or the Philippines. However, as a majority of the Bruneian population is Malay, there is more preference in hiring an Indonesian maid than a Filipino maid. The reason is because the Indonesians (mostly from Java) share a similar culture and language with the Bruneian Malays, and more importantly Indonesian maids are almost always Muslims therefore reducing the risk of conflicting beliefs and practices in the household.

¹ This paper is based on research undertaken for Migration, Mobility and Development Module in the first semester of our final year in 2014 at the University of Brunei Darussalam. I would like to thank the women that we interviewed for their cooperation, their stories have provided us with great insights. I would also like to thank Professor Lian Kwen Fee for his guidance and encouragement during this research. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the rest of the team for showing amazing teamwork and patience throughout the research.

In Brunei, domestic workers are often called and addressed as ‘amah’. The term itself has a negative connotation; for Bruneians an ‘amah’ is seen as someone that can be ordered around easily and quite often disrespected. Thus it is implied that an ‘Amah’ is a passive and powerless person that can be easily exploited.

Most, if not all, of the domestic workers in Brunei are women. Domestic workers are already easily exploited, but factoring in the fact that these are women that originated from developing countries and low income families, these women are even more vulnerable. Therefore in understanding the domestic workers, it is important to first understand what drove them to migrate overseas to do domestic work. This research will focus on the lives, aspirations and motivations of five Indonesian ‘amah’ working in Brunei.

Gendered migration and division of labour

Patriarchy has strongly influenced the experiences of migration for men and women, especially in developing countries (Garcia, 1996). While men migrate to achieve personal success and dreams, the decisions of women to migrate are often tied with their marital or familial obligations rarely do their motivations include self-gratification; they are either forced to follow their husbands, leaving behind their families and social support behind or are forced to migrate to provide additional financial aid to their family (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). The belief is that women often play passive roles in migration decisions, their path are chosen and their decisions are mostly not their own.

Labor migration is therefore gendered. Berger and Mohr (1975) wrote that in Europe, a majority of the migrant women work in the domestic services while the rest of them are factory workers. Male migrants often seek employment that is considered masculine undertaking heavy duty labour while female migrants engage in menial production tasks (Garcia, 1996). Society has been conditioned to believe that women are responsible for household operations, from child care to other domestic chores, therefore they would perform duties that complement their ‘feminine abilities’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

Female migrant domestic workers in Southeast Asia

Female migrant workers outnumbered the male migrant workers in Southeast Asia especially in light of the growing demand for women's labour, particularly in the domestic service sector (Borak, 2005). However, a large number of them entered the low skilled labor force, engaging in domestic work, care work, entertainment, or are working in factories (Ong, 1991). Furthermore, because receiving countries often do not have policies or protection laws to support them, the women find themselves in more vulnerable positions which could lead to abuse and exploitation, poor working conditions, and low wages (Piper & Uhlin, 2002).

Defining a domestic worker

The International Labour Organization defines "domestic work" as workers who work in a household and for the household. Domestic work involves performing a wide range of task such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, guarding the house premises, and driving the family car. While the term "domestic worker" means any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship, a person who is engaged on a part-time basis and live in or live out are also referred to as such. The International Labour Organization also specifies that a person who performs domestic work only occasionally or sporadically and not on an occupational basis is not a domestic worker (ILO, 2011).

Issues of exploitation of domestic maids

According to a study by Barbara Caracciolo, Guénola Henry and Steffi Rosenbusch, most domestic workers do not have access to social security benefits and do not have defined legal protections in Ghana, thus making them more vulnerable to exploitation (Barbara Caracciolo, Henry, & Rosenbusch, 2011). This can also be seen in Singapore because these migrants are exempted from social benefits and they often suffer under conditions that amount to forced labor. Thus the lack of protection policy often resulted in them being neglected even when there have been multiple complaints made to the local agencies (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Lyons (2005) in her research paper, *"Embodying Transnationalism: The making of the Indonesian maid"*, stated that women are kept marginalized and vulnerable by an

unspoken state support for practices that determine how they are allocated to employers and what work they do within the private space of their employers' homes.

Lyons (2005) said there are significant barriers created within the household, one of the most blatant mark of power by the employers is that these maids are to address them as either ma'am or sir. Very often, they are given separate items that are visibly marked as different from those used by other members of the households, including plates and cups for eating, or cheap brands of soap and shampoo for bathing. Strict curfew is a common rule for them even if they go out to buy groceries, dropping off or picking up the employers' children to or from school, and should they be late as a result, they will be entirely blamed and disciplinary action will be taken (Lyons, 2005). This meticulous disciplinary surveillance also extends to the maid's physical appearance. Some employers in Singapore demand that their domestic workers wear uniforms, there is conformity of dress amongst maids consisting of knee-length shorts and long T-shirts (Lyons, 2005).

The isolation of domestic maids is created by the employers by separating them from the other members of the household. Hence domestic exploitation does not mean only physical restrictions and sometimes violence but also includes mental exploitation from the ill treatment they receive from their employers.

Methodology

We conducted a series of informal interviews, often engaging our respondents in a conversational manner in order to make them more comfortable and at ease. We find that by actually talking to them rather than interviewing them, more information was obtained as the respondents became less opposed to sharing.

In order to achieve the best possible result, we decided to only focus on Indonesian maids. One main reason for this is because most of the maids that we have direct access to are Indonesian maids. Most of the maids in Brunei are working as live-in maids, therefore their movements are more restricted and their actions are controlled within the private sphere of their place of employment.

We quickly figured out that interviewing the maids that are employed by the people we have relations with was the best option, especially as we are touching on an extremely sensitive topic. As some of the maids already have frequent meetings with us prior to this research and because of the existing relationships that we have with their employers, consent does not become an issue.

Initially we actually asked the maids to introduce us to their friends or acquaintances in the hope of obtaining more respondents. However this proved futile as their friends were wary of talking to us and most of them could not be interviewed outside of their workplace. This of course could potentially create awkward moments and tensions as we would be outsiders in the homes of their employers. Trust and consent are of course a major issue, therefore we decided to just remain with the sample that we already have.

Out of the five that we managed to interview, only one of them is unmarried. While we did not manage to verify the age of one of our respondents, however from the other maids, we can deduce that the maids that we interviewed are between their late twenties to late thirties of age. In addition, all the maids originated from different cities namely Malang, Subang, Bogor and Jogjakarta – located in eastern Java.

Interview sessions

Since the interviews with our respondents were done within the confines of their work place, we allowed them to take full control over where and when they want to be interviewed. We had to be careful not to take too much of their time as they are working and as they are live-in maids. There are no definite working hours so there is no specific time to make an appointment. Thus there were times when some of the conversations were done while we helped them fold the freshly done laundry, prepare food, and washed the dishes. We found that by doing so, the maids became more relaxed and the tone of the interview completely shifted to from being an interviewer with her respondent to being just two people having a chat.

As some of the interviews were not done in one sitting, the times spent with each respondent vary. This was because some of the maids had more stories to tell than others. There were times where the conversations were done in an hour but there were also times when the conversation continued on throughout the day. By not restricting

the time, we managed to obtain spontaneous and honest responses from the maids as they were not subjected to the restraints and stress of the formal interview setting.

With no restraints on these conversations, the data we gathered were quite rich and extensive. The wealth of information we obtained however made data interpretation quite difficult; we quickly learnt that while exploitation existed in various degrees, each of these maids are subjected to difficulties that far extend beyond the workplace. Therefore, we decided that instead of focusing too much on exploitation, we focused on the strength and determination of these maids; we talked about their life stories, their journey on the road to being employed in a foreign country and about their feelings and dreams in regard to their position as live-in domestic maids.

Interviewer effect

While we worked hard to create a more natural and unrestrained interview environment for our respondents, there were times where our presence as researchers affected the interviews. Interviewees tend to consciously or unconsciously project a certain image – in what they thought would be favorable to them – towards the interviewer, such presentation is called the interviewer effect (Davis & Silver, 2003). Therefore some of the responses that we obtained seemed to be carefully thought out by these maids according to what they wanted us to hear.

This can be seen, as one of the maids was initially reluctant to give any negative views about her employer and how she was treated by the members of the household. However, they gradually lowered their barriers further into the conversation; as they became more comfortable with us they gradually became more willing to talk. We found that relaying our own personal experiences or anecdotes to them opened more doors to access their thoughts on certain issues.

There were also times when one of our respondents became immediately tense and alert once she saw a household member entering and passing by where we were having our conversation. There was a sudden movement where she suddenly sat up straight and became more rigid, her responses were done in quick short sentences and her voice was lowered to the point that they became whispers. Thus we had to steer the conversation into lighter territory in order to avoid trouble and to calm the nerves of our respondent.

Interview barriers

While Bruneians and Indonesians speak the Malay language, we found that the dialect is completely different. Initially we thought that there would be little to no language barriers and communicating would not be a problem. However during the course of the interview we realized that this is not the case. Often we had to translate and repeat our questions or reassurances to make them understand better. Below are few of the examples:

English: "It is okay, we are just chatting here"

Indonesian: "Engak apa-apa, iyaa kita ngobrol aja"

English: "If you miss your family, what do you do?"

Indonesia: "Kalau mbak kangen sama keluarga gimana?"

Also we noticed instances when their answers became short and timid and these were not related to the presence of any members in the employer's household. These tend to occur when they were recalling their families and their lives back home. The maids would have teary eyes and would give sad smiles, making it hard for them to continue thus we had to mediate and calm our respondents.

Findings

There are several common characteristics identified in the data of this research. One of the interesting ones was seeing what the effect of them migrating and becoming an amah had to their class and gender roles back in Indonesia. Truthfully, when constructing our questions prior to the interviews, we were quite one dimensional; more focus was given to exploitation as well as their vulnerability as an amah. However after learning stories of their determination, it gave us another insight to their characters and the significance this occupation had for these women. Thus we were able to obtain a very good understanding of the roles that these Indonesian women migrants play in their respective families and how their lives as well as determination change our views about the amah as demeaning, low-class and oppressive employment.

While all of the women that we talked to are currently working as maids in Brunei, some of them have in the past worked in other homes and took on other jobs prior to them working with their current employer. Most of these women may not fully realize the intricacies of the class and gender imbalance that they are changing and are a part of. In Brunei society, there is a stigma associated in becoming an ‘amah’, and the power imbalance is made more obvious especially when we consider that some of these tasks at the end of the day could easily be performed by the other members in that household. Initially we thought that for these women, working as amahs would keep them lower on the status ladder. While this is true in Brunei, their status – and their families as well – in their home country have changed. Most of the women we talked to did not fully realize this. They were all just thankful to be employed and thus they were unaware of the extent of the changes that this would bring to their gender and social roles and social status back home in Java.

One of the other interesting ideas that this research has uncovered is how domestic work can both be empowering and oppressive. For some of the women interviewed, domestic work is empowering because it gives them more freedom and more control from patriarchal forces at home. On the other hand, domestic work is oppressive because these women are working in an environment where considerable restraints are imposed on them especially as they are live-in maids. There is also a social stigma associated with working as a domestic maid as mentioned above. We find that the apparently contradictory issues of empowerment and oppression are worth highlighting.

Challenges in working as a domestic maid

While migration offers these women opportunities to better their lives and improve their economic, gender and social status, it also exposed them to abuse and exploitation. Experiences of exploitation are also made more glaring considering that these women are under the total control of their employer as they are working within the private sphere of someone’s home.

Before coming to work in Brunei, most of the maids were told in their job description that they were to help with the domestic tasks that their employers expected of them. These women were told by their respective employment agencies that they would only

need to care for the family's well-being; this includes cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the family. Once they settled in Brunei however, these maids came to realize that their tasks are more than what was described and promised to them.

There were instances when they were given tasks that were not in their original contract. Some of their employers engage in small businesses of tailoring, selling snacks, and even doing small catering businesses. Some of these businesses were set up mainly because the maids are there to help and did not exist prior to the arrival of these maids. Thus on top of performing the tasks that they are expected to do in the house, they also have to work double duty – they had to cook the food or snacks and package them according to how their employers want them to be packaged, they had to measure customers and tailor as well as sew their clothes, they had to clean and set up the trays for the catering business while also taking care of the entire family in the house. It was even more unfortunate that these maids were not compensated for these additional tasks; rarely do they receive commissions from what profit that their employer made from these small businesses.

What is also interesting is that these maids were expected to perform these additional tasks without proper guidance. While they were taught how to do the basics, they often had to learn as they performed. Thus they had to be consistently careful to avoid potential mistakes and being scolded. One of the maids who had to learn how to sew and tailor claimed that in the early months, she had to stay up and practice sewing with some of the old fabrics and clothes that she had with her. So she was often sleep deprived and was too tired to work efficiently during that period.

Sleep deprivation is a common challenge that the maids who do double duty had to face. Cooking and packaging food for a large number often took too much of their time, and these tasks are usually done during late nights or in the early dawn. Although eventually two of the maids working double duty were compensated after their years of service and loyalty, the situation unfortunately did not change for one of them. In fact, at times she claimed that she was rented out to other family members to help in the domestic tasks for family events and random occasions with very little pay.

Cold family treatment and dynamics within the household were also a common conflict that these maids are continuously facing. One of the maids mentioned that even though she has been working with her employer for many years, many times she was depressed due to their rudeness and coldness towards her. Thus she felt isolated in the household and she feels she has yet to fit in even though she has been employed by them for six years. This isolation led her to control her movements within the household and she felt restricted and suffocated under the very roof that she was living in. Thus she was not able to enjoy basic day to day activities such as cooking for herself. She claimed that there were times where she only ate rice with soy sauce as there was no leftover food for her to eat.

These maids were also sometimes subjected to unnecessary and unrealistic demands by their employers. There was one episode when one of the maids was given a whole chicken to cook for the week. However each of the members of the household became difficult and kept on demanding different chicken dishes in the course of one meal time. Therefore in order to meet the demands of the household, she had to ration and cook various chicken dishes at one go. At the end of the day the dishes were not finished and some were even thrown away, so eventually she was scolded and blamed by her employer because she was wasting the chicken when she was only following the orders of the other household members.

Difficulties connecting with their families

It was interesting to find that although the Indonesia maids shared similar values – as they are all Muslims – with their employers there should be minimal conflict in adapting; however they are still unable to fully fit in and belong. One of the common reasons for this is because most of them are homesick, for some of these maids this was the first time that they are away from their family for a long period of time.

Frequent contact was difficult as they had to carefully manage their expenses while they are here. The charge for overseas call from Brunei to Indonesia is quite high – about 50 cents per minute for Easi and DST users. Pay phones and Hello Cards are considerably cheaper, however they would only be able to access those facilities during their off-day (if they are given any) during the weekends. Furthermore, as pay phones

are now very few in number it became more difficult for them to converse with their family members back home.

Managing financial expenditure

While maids are often seen as minimally educated and possessing low to only basic job skills, we found that most of these women can be quite calculating especially in managing their expenses. Such skills did not first develop once they migrated but prior to their migration. In order to be employed as maid, these women would first need to pay their respective maid agencies, for their work permits and all other expenses that need to be covered.

There are certain cases where the employers would cover some of the expenses; however in the case of first-timers or less experienced domestic maids, they had to cover their own expenses. The amount that they have to pay range between one million to five million Rupiah, depending on the country that they are going to. According to one of the maids interviewed, she claimed that the further the distance they travel, the more expenses they have to cover. One of the maid said that in the case of Brunei, she had to pay over two million rupiahs just for the work permit, which is around 200 Brunei dollars. Most of the maids that we interviewed admitted that they had to pay for most of their expenses themselves prior to coming to Brunei as they were first-timers.

All of the maids that we talked admitted that they came from families with little assets and very low income. Thus they had to carefully manage their financial expenses in order to be able to pay the maid agencies. This proved to be difficult as most of the maids are married thus they also have to account for not only the day-to-day expenses as well as the various bills and needs for their children in school.

Most of them had to work in odd jobs such as working in stores, helping with several domestic tasks in other homes and performing menial tasks on the farms. Most of these jobs however have very little pay so some of them also had to resort to selling food and snack items. In one special case, one of the maids mentioned that she and her husband own a small plot of padi field, so she set up a savings account where she kept some of the profit obtained from the harvest sales to pay for the agency expenses. However it took her years to actually save enough money to pay the expenses.

Eventually however, some of these maids had to resort to obtaining loans from their acquaintances and family members to fully cover the expenses. In one instance, one of the maids had to re-draft her contract and borrowed money from her potential employer in Brunei. She had to sacrifice the first few months of her salary; about 50% of her pay was cut off for each month until she settled her debt.

Thus in the initial period of their time working as a domestic maid, these women not only had to set aside money to send to their families, they also had to set aside some money to pay for the loans of the agency expenses. Most of these women prefer to keep their savings with them as they claimed that setting up a personal bank account here can be difficult. Some of them sent the money to their family members, mostly female, to both pay for the loans and for the expenses of their family.

It is interesting to note that these women rarely spent money on themselves during their stay in Brunei. Their expenses here are only for food and calling cards, the bulk of their monthly wages are either sent to their family members back home, while the rest are saved for future purposes, more specifically these are savings that are intended to become financial capital for them to enter into small businesses once they return permanently.

Domestic maid as empowering occupation

With all the difficulties that these women face, we asked them what keeps them going as amahs. Once these women started to recount their lack of control and freedom in their own homes in Java, we began to see how their current occupation can be both oppressive but also empowering. Most of the maids interviewed came from small villages and from family with very traditional norms. Thus back home, these women were found themselves in the complete confines of the head of the household – either their husbands or their fathers. The patriarchal system is so deeply imbedded in their family that some of these women claimed that it was too suffocating for them, motivating them to migrate overseas.

One of the maids we interviewed was badly mistreated by her husband. Her husband was a gambling addict, so most of her income never saw the light of the day as her

husband had complete control over the financial activities and savings of her family. In order to survive, she had to work in various jobs to support her children to go to school and to support their daily expenses. At home she was constantly stressed because she had to manage all the household work, as her husband offered little help, only doing minor repairs and tool work. With very little time for herself, she became emotionally and physically exhausted.

For most of these women, marital problems should not result in divorce because it would mean publicly declaring that their marriage has failed. Divorce would bring shame to their families. For this woman whose husband was a gambling addict, the only way to escape the control of her husband was to move away and work in another country. Thus now she feels that she is finally able to take control of her life as well as her children.

From what we gathered, back home these women felt that they were trapped in an undervalued role in their household. Some of the maids we interviewed complained that if they did not migrate, they had to perform double duty; essentially working in the country means working outside and working at home. The system of patriarchy is so ingrained in their families that the gender roles and responsibilities have become so imbalanced in household maintenance. Thus if they were to stay in Indonesia, they work far more hours for less money and with very little appreciation.

The restricted lifestyle in their hometown and family was also a constant reminder for these women to stay as domestic maids and tolerate the occasional hardships in Brunei. Being one of the oldest in her family, one of the maids we talked to claimed that she was offered very limited freedom. She was not able to finish her high school education as her parents prioritized her younger siblings over her. Her limited education background did not give her much opportunity in employment, and what work she found her father would always find excuse to disapprove. The last straw was when her father forced her to marry a man that she knew very little of, even though he claimed that he would be able to help support her and her family. She asked her friend to help connect her with a maid agency in the city of Yogyakarta. Initially her father was furious as he deemed her an unfilial daughter, however eventually their relationship began to improve once she started to send money home. This is because both her parents

are not working (as her father is now too old to work in the 'ladang'), and her younger siblings are still in school, thus both she and her older sister – who works in the city – have to support the entire family.

So from the interviews, we can see that there is a shift in power balance within the family dynamics of the amahs back home in Java. Three out of the five amahs that we interviewed claimed that they now bear full support over their family's finances. The males who were previously the breadwinners in the family are now being supported by their wives or daughters.

The 'value' of domestic work as an occupation

Economic empowerment and freedom however are not the only factor in the determination of these women to endure the difficulties of migration. From the interviews, we realized that some of these women felt like they have something to prove, they believed that they can offer and gain so much more working as a domestic maid abroad. All of these women admitted to have received little education. In Indonesia if you are a woman, with little to no education, and coming from a small village, the chances for obtaining employment are extremely low in an overpopulated society.

One of the maids mentioned that becoming an overseas domestic worker is actually quite an accomplishment in her village since realistically the majority of the girls with her background would only qualify to work in menial jobs in the field or are unemployed and would eventually marry early. Admittedly, domestic workers are not seen as a job with a high value, but this is not the case for these women. The question of skills is not a problem here, as most of the skills that they need and the job that they are required to perform are something that they do not need to be trained in, as they have been doing them before they migrated.

This is echoed by one of the women as she said that while being a domestic worker is not traditionally a preferred work option for others, for her this is coveted. Being a maid has given her the opportunity to travel outside and gain experiences; she has worked in Taiwan before so she has gained an advantage in speaking Mandarin. This is an important skill to acquire because when she returns home, she wants to utilize the skills

that she gained to open up a restaurant. We find the dream to become entrepreneurs to be quite common amongst these women. A number of them have even accumulated considerable savings from their years of serving as domestic maids.

Conclusion

We find that although the amahs are often seen as weak and an invisible force in the household, they have incredible determination and strength inside which others have failed to see. While they have yet to become visible in fighting for their labor rights in Brunei compared to other countries, they have managed to slightly shift the balance of power back home through regaining control over their life and through their new role as the dominant breadwinner.

Another interesting finding of this research is that many of these women actually chose to become domestic maids. For many of the maids that we talked to, doing housework happens to be the only skill that they have and the one skill that they excel and are confident in. Thus while the women themselves may not be aware of this, the fact that they are able to market what others would see as basic skills and commodify them is empowering. Thus as migrant domestic maids, these women have managed to re-conceptualize the identity of house-maids as menial labour with little self-worth to something of value and even empowering.

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