



Domestic Workers in Transient Overseas Employment: Who Benefits? Who Profits?

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The process of labour migration must be seen within a historical context and understood within a comprehensive framework that considers the interaction between micro and macro factors. The former refers mainly to the situation of the domestic worker, that is, the numbers involved, working conditions, wage levels, remittances of wages, and so on. The latter includes social, cultural, ethnic and political factors such as class, background, household structure, political structures at national and international levels, and division of labour by gender. In proposing policy recommendations, it is important to obtain better insight into who benefits and who actually gains from the migration of women as domestic workers in transient overseas employment. To improve the

Photo: Asian Migrant Apr-Jun 1992





situation of these women, the individual domestic worker also has to be understood as located within her social network of family, kin, and community, whose interests may collude or conflict with those of her own.

The magnitude of the maid trade

The trade in maids is part of the export of labour from poorer to richer countries. Wages, employment, and the general security of people in some Asian countries have been affected by various factors, such as the decline in economic growth, falling commodity prices, political and cultural instability, ethnic and religious crises, currency devaluation and foreign debt. At the same time, some countries in the region have experienced relatively high growth rates and general political stability, which have resulted in the growth of the middle-class seeking domestic help. Many middle class women from the latter countries are entering and staying in the labour force, thereby increasing the demand for domestic help.

Due to these trends, the international migration of women from poorer countries as domestic helpers is likely to continue and even increase in the future, especially since the employment of a foreign domestic helper has become a status symbol of the newly prosperous in the richer countries. The richer countries thus have an excess labour demand, particularly in the domestic economy of households (too many jobs, not enough people), whereas the poorer countries have an excess labour supply (too many people, not enough jobs).

Proposals for action

The foreign domestic worker is relatively powerless. Through her labour, she is the producer of benefits and profits for others,

who often maximise their gains by exploiting her need to be employed. Therefore our proposals focus on enhancing the empowerment of the female domestic worker, so as to ensure that she gains from her own labour through better control of her economic and social situation. This process of empowerment would involve an examination of the domestic worker's relationship vis-a-vis the following people and institutions:

- the agents whose monopoly over jobs needs to be broken;
- the governments of sending countries who should protect their citizens overseas and re-integrate them when they return;
- the governments of the receiving countries who should protect the foreign workers who are contributing to the national economy;
- the employers whose conduct as employers needs to be monitored;
- other intermediaries who profit from domestic workers and whose activities also need to be monitored;
- the domestic worker's family, kin, and community, to whom she remits her earnings and from whom she must protect her savings.

Recruitment and job placement: Breaking the agents' monopoly of jobs

It is well known that agents and sub-agents for domestic workers charge exorbitant fees to both employer and employee. Such fees weigh more heavily on the working class employee than on the middle class employer. Many recruits go into debt or sell their property to pay their agents' fees.

While various concerned groups have lobbied the governments involved to regulate recruit-



ment procedure, it should be realised that the agents' extortion rests on their monopoly of scarce jobs. Women who seek jobs overseas have no access to such jobs except through the agents. Consequently, the agents are able to charge exorbitant fees.

To empower the domestic helper in such a situation necessitates breaking the agents' monopoly over jobs and labour. The imperfection of an international labour market which allows such middlemen to thrive, needs to be addressed. Potential employers and employees must have access to each other, as they would in a normal labour market within a country — for example, through newspaper advertisements.



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Immigration status: Making the best of a temporary situation

Since domestic workers in transient overseas employment have to work in a foreign country, the organization should be represented in both sending and receiving countries. It can then act as a liaison between (1) the governments of the sending countries who have the responsibility of protecting their citizens overseas and of re-integrating them when they return, and (2) governments of receiving countries who have the responsibility of protecting the foreign workers contributing to the national economy.



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Two informal strategies that have been developed on the ground by the housemaids themselves without the intervention of agents are the information "grapevine" and notice board ads.

The information "grapevine" is the informal network of domestic workers who know each other through kinship and friendship. This tends to be built on domestic workers coming from the same sending country, who use this information network for job referrals, comparison of wages and working conditions. One constraint of this network is the mobility of the worker outside her employer's home. If she has no days off, it is highly unlikely that she would be able to meet any of her compatriots.

To ameliorate the situation of the foreign maids, a lesson could again be drawn from the *amahs'* sisterhood in terms of their *kongsi fong* (communal quarters). At present, some organizations in some of the receiving countries offer temporary shelter to foreign maids. But these are mostly for abused maids who need temporary shelter before returning to their countries.

The most crucial problem is, however, the transient immigration status of the foreign domestic workers. Some foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong have requested that allowances be made for domestic workers to change status, that is to move from domestic to professional work, if they have the qualifications. This is a reasonable request, given that a number of foreign domestic workers are



over-qualified for domestic service and do possess skills that are urgently needed in the receiving country, for example, nursing and clerical work.

It is an advantage of both sending and receiving countries to allow qualified domestic workers to move into other sectors of employment, where there are vacancies. For the sending country, such upgrading would prevent the degeneration of skills among those who are over-qualified for their overseas jobs as domestic workers. For the receiving country, it would provide the needed skilled workers for sectors where there is a labour shortage.

Job mobility from being unskilled to skilled workers opens up the possibility of permanent residence. This could lead to better things, as the workers could learn new skills, take courses, change jobs, and upgrade their positions, thereby breaking out of a perpetual cycle of being domestic workers.

Workers' protection: Towards a collective arrangement between countries

Currently, new initiatives are occurring in the ASEAN region to create an economic caucus for the more efficient functioning of market and capital. It is equally important to think of labour protection and security of workers, particularly with the growth of international migration of labour across national

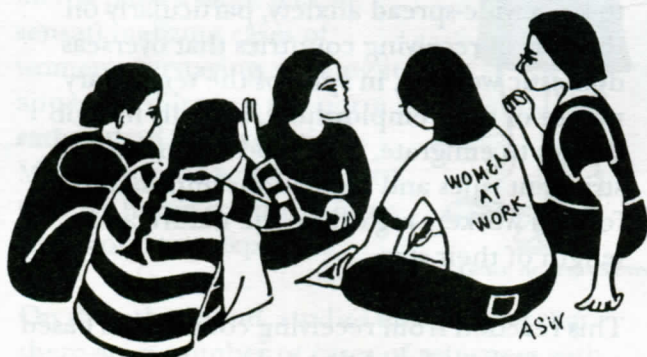
boundaries. Since structures have already been created between governments to dialogue on capital accumulation, it is possible to think about new extensions of this dialogue to cover at least minimum standards of workers' protection, acceptable conditions of work, standardised and regularised contracts, arbitration of conflict, and the like. Governments can then set up a labour liaison office within their embassies to monitor the situation. This is necessary because without such international regulations, wages and working conditions vary widely and at random, between and within countries.



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These minimum standards may be derived from a comparison of existing variations. In other words, we could compare the wage structures and working conditions between and within the different countries and choose the most equitable combinations.

The need for foreign domestic workers in the receiving countries is likely to continue, and even increase in the future. The labour of these foreign workers frees a pool of middle-class professionals who are much needed in the national economy. Through this chain effect, the foreign domestic workers are making a vital contribution to the economic development of the receiving countries, and deserve more rights.



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