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## **CAPITALIST PERIPHERIES: PERSPECTIVES ON PRECARISATION FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND NORTH**

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## **Migrant Domestic Work: From Precarious to Precarisation**

STUART ROSEWARNE

The negotiation of the ILO Domestic Work Convention (C189) marks a significant watershed in efforts to extend the reach of employment regulations to a category of work which is overwhelmingly the province of women. This is work that is located beyond the formal sphere of the economy and generally not subject to regulations that set minimum employment conditions and standards. In including provisions that incorporate migrant domestic workers, the Convention is particularly significant for migrant domestic workers and is especially important for the ever-increasing numbers of workers recruited across South East Asia as well as South Asia over the last three decades to work in households in East and South East Asia as well as in the Middle East. Lacking the standard protections that are afforded most occupations, and, as migrant workers, subject to quite restrictive work visa and employment requirements, and with the right to organise proscribed in most destination countries, the migrant worker experience is characterised by precariousness. For many of these women, migrating to work as domestic labour is their first experience of waged employment, and it is an experience that is frequently defined by vulnerability and insecurity, exploitative working conditions and emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Precariousness has been a defining feature in the making of this transnational work force, and C189 holds out the promise of rectifying this situation because countries that ratify C189 would be committing to gazetting minimum standards that could go some way to reducing the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers.

However, the measure of this ambition is immense, not least because of the pervasiveness and scale of the exploitative and abusive employment conditions that migrant domestic workers are subjected to (Amnesty International 2014, 2013; Human Rights Watch 2014; International Domestic

Workers Federation 2014; ILO 2013: 29-30). These studies demonstrate that while the measure of the exploitative and abusive conditions varies from one destination country to another, while the employment experience often differs depending on the origin of workers, their ethnicity, religion, levels of education and/or age, the absence of employment regulations, or the restricted nature and limited policing of such regulations where they do exist, points to a general uniformity in the migrant experience. The continuing geographic reach of labour recruitment, drawing in workers from new labour source countries, underscores this. As innumerable investigations and reports by civil society organisations, domestic worker advocates and academic researchers attest, with the absence of migrant domestic workers' labour and human rights, contemporary labour migration is placed at the heart of our understanding of the global labour market transformations associated with the ascendancy of precarious work (Goldring/Landolt 2012; Standing 2011; Vosko 2010; Fudge/Owens 2006). In so doing, we are confronted with a timely reminder that the preoccupation with exposing the so-called process of 'precarisation' as representing a retreat from the norms of the standard employment relationship – and with this one of the defining features of the neoliberal era – is somewhat misplaced.

Precariousness, from the outset, has been a defining feature in the making of this transnational labour force. The distinctive nature of the transnational employment contractual relation is critical to this, and it is essential that this be placed in the context of the gender norms and a range of other norms – race, ethnicity and nationality, religion, age and educational attainments – that frame the definition of migrant domestic work and distinguish it from other categories of work. But if our understanding of the deep-rooted character of precariousness is to be fully appreciated, our oeuvre must not be limited to focusing only on the employment relationship. It must also reflect on the different stages of the organisation of this global labour supply chain and the various stakeholders who contribute to this. It is also incumbent upon such reflection on the organisation of the labour supply chain to examine the nature of its development in the broader context of the transformation in social relations across countries that have spawned the rise of the global care chain. In so doing, this paper advocates understanding the process of precarisation in terms of a constellation of power relations that shape the migratory process, and

the organisation of domestic work as a paid activity. This entails reflecting on the array of ways in which precariousness is written into the making of migrant domestic work as well as how precariousness is being contested.

### **1. Precariousness, precarisation and the making of the transnational domestic worker**

The migration of women from across South East Asia and South Asia to work as domestic workers in other countries, and especially within the region and the Middle East, has been one of the most significant aspects of labour force formation. Women account for between half and four-fifths of all labour migration from the principal source countries of the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, with an estimated three million women from South East Asia and South Asia employed as migrant domestic workers (ILO 2013), and this pattern is being bolstered as more and more women from other Asian countries migrate for work.

A range of factors have impelled women's employment in migrant domestic work. My field research and a large body of published research identify the prospect of a regular source of income, and the ability to escape high unemployment and underemployment in the local economy, as key motivations for migration. Overseas employment provides a potential means of improving familial as well as personal economic wellbeing, or for meeting some of the costs in providing for one's family's material needs, and/or education and health services, or for pursuing a measure of economic independence especially in the context of familial breakdown. Governments in migrant workers' origin countries have also proved enthusiastic in their support for labour migration, regarding migration as a means of addressing poverty and, much more importantly and especially with the prompting of the World Bank and other international institutions, a critically important source of export revenue in the form of remittances. Indeed labour migration has become a central plank in the economic policies of the governments of South East Asia and South Asia, and most have committed to promoting and supporting the establishment of elaborate private-sector based architectures that organise and manage labour migration.

Of course, the expansion in women's labour migration would not have been so sustained were it not for the ever-increasing demand for domestic workers. In some contexts, the increasing labour force participation of women in, for instance, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, prompted recourse to employing others to undertake the work of maintaining the household and caring for children and others. In other contexts, and this is more the case in Malaysia and the Middle East, cultural factors, such as the prestige associated with employing a migrant domestic worker, are a more important criterion. In any case, the institutionalisation of migrant domestic work is grounded in the organisation of global care chains, a transnational division of labour that, in turn, is predicated on various norms, including gender, ethnicity and religion, that justify the recruitment and employment of women from the global South on terms and conditions which would not be countenanced by their employers in their employment.

The overwhelmingly precarious nature of migrant domestic work is well documented. Women are recruited into the labour markets of most destination countries in which there are either no, or in the case of Hong Kong and to a lesser extent Singapore some limited, substantive employment protections. Labour market institutions that prescribe minimum employment standards and protections, including time free from work responsibilities, are virtually non-existent. In all destination countries, authorities issue work and resident visas that are contingent upon workers being engaged with a particular employing household; employment is offered only on a live-in basis. The absence of employment regulations can be largely attributed to domestic work being regarded as different from other occupations. The convention that household labour, including the care and nurturing of children, cleaning and preparing meals, is women's work is one dimension of this distinction. That this work is carried out in the private domain, in the intimate space of the household, and thus in the informal realm of the political economy, is another. The occupation is also unlike most other forms of waged labour insofar as it does not result in the production of a good or service that can be sold to generate revenue. Subject to the direct and personal supervision of the householder, the management of migrant women's labours vary according to the whim and prejudices of the householder, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitative practices, and psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

Moreover, the deployment of migrant women to undertake work that contributes to what is generally regarded as meeting familial needs for a defined period of a family's life cycle affirms the convention to view recourse to migrant labour as meeting a short-lived need, a reliance that is not considered an enduring or integral element in the economic life of the nation however much it has become so, and this justifies the resistance to recognising and regulating this work and to institutionalising limited-duration employment. The precarious position is exacerbated by the fact that the restrictions arising from being contracted to work for and in one household are underwritten by severe limitations on the ability of workers to break contracts and seek alternative employment. There is virtually no scope for employment mobility in the Middle East because when an employment contract is broken or expires, workers are required to exit the country, while in Hong Kong and Singapore there is a quite limited time horizon in which workers are able to seek to re-contract before they lose their resident visa. Work and visa regulations inscribe vulnerability, subservience and insecurity, and are invariably designed to circumscribe workers' industrial and human rights.

The deleterious consequences of precarity do vary across the various destination countries. Some 14 to 15 percent of Indonesian domestic workers returning home upon the completion of employment contracts report that they have experienced problems in their employment. These include breaches of the terms of their contract, underpayment or non-payment of wages, passport and identify documents being confiscated, inadequate or no private and secure accommodation, being charged exorbitant recruitment costs, and being abused (Bazzi et al. 2014). The evidence indicates that these problems are the most pronounced in Middle East destinations, and are also a real cause of concern for those employed in Malaysia (Anti-Slavery International 2014; International Trade Union Confederation 2014). One way in which the Indonesian government has sought to manage transgressions has been to ban from time to time issuing travel visas for destinations such as Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. The government has followed the lead of the Philippines in providing consular support and establishing refuges for women escaping abusive or exploitative conditions. Another response has been to try to negotiate Memorandums of Understanding with governments in destination countries with a

view to setting agreed minimum employment standards. Yet such arrangements do not necessarily afford much protection, and this is likewise the case in contexts such as Hong Kong and to a lesser extent Singapore, where there are clearly specified employment regulations where Indonesians, as well as other migrant domestic workers, are subject to exploitative practices (Amnesty International 2013; Asian Migrant Centre 2007).

Notwithstanding migrant domestic workers' subordinate standing in the global labour market, the ostensible success of migrant domestic work as an economic programme, at least as measured in terms of remittance flows, has prompted more and more governments in the global South to embrace the export of labour as a solution to economic malaise. Yet, while migrating for work is presented as a panacea to alleviate the material insecurity and uncertainty across South East and South Asia, the millions of women who seek to escape the vulnerability engendered by this malaise end up being confronted by an entirely different source of vulnerability. Asian women are drawn into the transnational labour force as waged workers, on terms in which their engagement in the global care chain is coloured by employment uncertainty and precariousness and susceptibility to a range of abuses, each of which is widely documented.

This recourse to employment in the global labour market is particularly significant because for many women, migrant domestic work is their first ever experience of working for a wage. These women's metamorphosis into waged workers becomes aligned with precariousness. The deleterious consequences of the process of proletarianisation, and its alignment with precariousness, are particularly pronounced for those young women with limited educational backgrounds, recruited from villages to work in the less appealing destinations of the Middle East and Malaysia. The link between the proletarianisation of young Indonesian women who have never worked for a wage and precariousness is well documented (ESCAP 2013; Bazzi et al. 2014).

Nor is the process of proletarianisation as the basis of women's entry into migrant domestic work unique to Indonesia. This is played out in other established labour-source countries, with increased recruitment of women from more remote provinces in the Philippines, most notably Mindanao, most of whom are being engaged in waged work for the first time, and in Sri Lanka where women with no history of working for a wage are being

recruited in former conflict zones to work in the Middle East (Looi et al. 2009; Caritas Sri Lanka 2013; Usher 2014). There are hundreds of thousands of Burmese women who have sought refuge in Thailand employed in waged work for the first time, and a similar story is evident in Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia, which have more recently become sources of domestic labour.

It is thus constructive to reflect on precariousness as being a corollary of the proletarianisation process that is integral to the making of the migrant domestic workforce. Marx (1968 [1845]: 37) contended in *The German Ideology* that “the utterly precarious position of labour power [...] presupposes the world market through competition”, so there is nothing new in the association proposed here. However, as has been argued, precariousness is not simply the product of the construction of the employment contract. It reflects the conjunction of a range of factors. It is a product of the lack of opportunities for advancing material wellbeing in the global South and the pressure that is brought to bear on women to enlist in the transnational labour force, to assume more responsibility by stepping into the world to seek out the means to provide for themselves and to become more self-reliant and alienated from their family and community in the process. It is as much the product of labour-export states that promote migration as a means of combatting economic malaise. And it is also the outcome of the gender contract forged on the foundations of women from the global South assuming a subordinate position in the global labour market, in the global care chain, their status framed by the intersection of gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, age and education. In recognising the multiplicity of forces at work, we can begin to speak of the broader process of precarisation.

## **2. Precariousness, proletarianisation and the formal subsumption of labour**

Debate on precarious employment generally emphasises the impact of labour market deregulation, which is argued to have resulted in employment contractual arrangements that infuse the work experience with inse-

curity and uncertainty, increasingly evident in contingent forms of work, flexible and non-standard employment, atypical and temporary work (Standing 2011; Vosko 2010; Vosko et al. 2009; Fudge/Owens 2006). Some critics have advocated a broader framing that reaches beyond the immediacy of the employer-employee contractual relation. These map precariousness by linking employment insecurity and uncertainty with measures of income insecurity, working-time insecurity, representational insecurity and social benefits and entitlements and the broader social forces that define the employment experience (Burgess/Campbell 1998; Vosko 2010). The employment histories of migrant domestic workers conform with this narrative, and, as a large body of research has documented, migrant workers more generally are particularly susceptible to being locked into categories of work that are characterised by these features. Institutionalised discrimination and the insecurity associated with the absence of enduring resident and/or citizenship rights, including blocking access individuals have to welfare entitlements, are seen to compound the labour market disadvantage that defines the migrant employment experience (Ellis et al. 2007; McDowell et al. 2009; Wills et al. 2010).

The reference point in the elaboration of precariousness is generally the establishment of the standard employment relation as a feature of the era when Fordism and the Keynesian welfare state prevailed. However, as Vosko argues, this was not a norm which governed employment relations and practices across the entire spectrum of the labour market. Insofar as it defined the terms of employment in some industries and occupations, the standard employment relation also gave rise to a counterpart set of norms and practices that became embedded in other occupations and industries, and this was most evidently reflected in the 'male breadwinner model' and its associated counterpart, the 'gender contract', entailing women's employment being restricted to occupations that were less secure and less rewarding, and more likely to be part-time or casual in nature (Vosko 2010: 4-7; Butler 2009). A further manifestation of this complementarity was evident in how citizenship demarcated access to the benefits afforded by the standard employment relation (Vosko 2010: 9-12).

This provides a basis for further reflection on the position of migrant domestic workers whose employment is not only constituted in terms of a global gender contract but one in which the employment relation is trian-

gulated. While household labour continues to be defined as women's work, employing a migrant domestic worker transforms the form of the 'gender contract' because it inscribes citizenship in the recasting of the domestic role. And this recasting is founded on legal restrictions that bind the migrant worker to the household, restrict her physical and employment mobility as well as the security of employment by limiting the duration of the employment contract. Moreover, unlike most other waged work that is premised on an extended social division of labour *and* the socialisation of labour, domestic work is an isolated activity, and the restrictive nature of the employment contract and the concentration of work within the physical bounds of the household compounds the isolating effects of gender and nationality.

Some sense of this was illuminated in field research undertaken among Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore in the early 2000s and again more recently. Filipina women were the established mainstay of the migrant domestic labour force in Hong Kong, but over the course of time they had developed a strong sense of community manifest in the large regular gatherings of women on their work-free days at a number of locations around the city. Supported by migrant advocacy organisations and faith groups, they had also set up quite robust pressure groups and were assertive in pressing their employment rights. Partly because of this, there was increasing recourse to recruiting Indonesian women to work in Hong Kong and Singapore, where they were as a rule paid less and subject to more onerous working conditions. Placement agents promoted the employment of Indonesian domestic workers on the understanding that they were passive and compliant, whereas Filipina workers were regarded as assertive and strong-willed. Indonesian women were paid lower wages, and this was justified on the grounds that they were less well educated, had a poorer command of English and were less likely to be acquainted with domestic technology and thus deemed to be less productive and responsible. With a generally more limited personal history of involvement in social movements than their Filipina counterparts and no faith-based organisations which could support their organising, Indonesians were not as well informed about their rights and employment standards, and understandably more circumspect about asserting their presence in public spaces. Gendered ascriptions of the migrant workers were overlaid by national

ascriptions, and in these early years of Indonesian women's employment in Hong Kong, the isolation of working in the privacy of the household was compounded by relative invisibility in public spaces. This invisibility was more pronounced in Singapore, where the government discouraged any form of collective organisation, while the constraints on migrant domestic workers appearing in public, let alone organising, are far more institutionalised in the Middle East.

These distinctions – the identification of the 'gender contract' and citizenship/nationality – provide an important pathway for developing a critical focus on precariousness, which has obvious bearing on understanding the dynamics of the terms on which Asian women workers have been incorporated into the transnational labour force. This is most obviously the case with respect to the historical treatment of the domestic work undertaken by migrant women, relegated to the informal domain of the economy and not warranting any form of regulation. But there is a further aspect of Vosko's critique of precarious employment that provides another approach to considering the dynamics of migrant domestic work. Vosko contends that in analysing labour market restructuring and the organisation of work, it is necessary to reflect on distinguishing between the function and form of the standard employment relation. This is an important distinction because too frequently reflections on precarious employment overlook the relation between function and form. However, there is a hint of something more on offer here because in elaborating on what constitutes the form of the standard employment relation, which is argued to be organised around three key 'pillars' – working time, continuous employment, and employee status – Vosko argues that it is crucial to identify the function of the standard employment relation. For her, the employment relation has assumed a particular form in order to secure a particular outcome. In the case of the standard employment relation the outcome was bound up with "achieving [worker] subordination [...] and of limiting employer control" (Vosko 2010: 5).

In focusing our attention on distinguishing between the form and function of the non-standard employment relation that is migrant domestic work, we can extend the scope for delineating the distinctive pressures that shape the degree of vulnerability and precariousness of this work. One instructive approach frames the scrutiny of waged domestic work through

the lens Marx draws between the ‘formal subsumption of labour’ and the ‘real subsumption of labour’. The former refers to the actual contract of employment which formally subordinates labour to the employer while simultaneously setting limits on the extent to which the employer can dictate the intensity of work, as Vosko noted. The latter turns the focus to the different ways in which work is organised and designed to extend the employer’s control over work. This distinction, we contend, provides a valuable basis for interrogating the forces that shape the exploitative and precarious character of migrant women’s domestic work.

There is a substantial, if not absolute, lack of symmetry in the bargaining equation that places employers in a strong position with respect to negotiating the terms of employment. This is on one hand structural, and the labour export states must assume some responsibility for this because historically they actively encouraged the migration of women in the knowledge that there were virtually no employment protections mandated in destination countries (Pizarro 2002). On the other hand, this lack of symmetry is also personal because workers are engaged to work in the household under the direct and unfettered control of the employer. The disadvantage is compounded by the limited ability of workers to enforce employers’ compliance with employment contracts.

In setting out a series of minimum standards and conditions, the Domestic Worker Convention provides a template for governments to adopt measures that would enhance employment certainty for domestic workers, and clarify and strengthen the terms of employment, which would be legally enforceable. Article 8 of C189 advocates that migrant domestic workers be provided with: “a written contract that is enforceable in the country of employment, or a written job offer, prior to travelling to the country of employment”. This clause goes to the heart of some of the problems that have institutionalised the vulnerable position of and exploitative relations experienced by workers recruited into the transnational labour force. Employment contracts are often not provided to workers, and in some destination countries are provided in a language in which workers are not literate. Contracts often lack transparency in failing to detail the terms and conditions of employment prior to the worker taking up the position, and it is not uncommon for workers to find that upon arrival in the destination country the terms and conditions and rates of remuneration that

had been offered to them when they initially agreed to a contract have been unilaterally changed to the worker's detriment.

Even if governments commit to C189, there remains the challenge of ensuring compliance and enforcement. Hong Kong has reasonably comprehensive regulations specifying minimum conditions and standards of employment, and yet this has not prevented violations of the terms of Indonesian domestic workers' employment contracts (Amnesty International 2013). A comparable problem is evident with the recent endeavours of the governments of two of the most significant labour export countries in Asia to mandate minimum conditions for migrant women workers. Responding to criticisms that governments were not doing enough to protect the interests of migrant workers, the Philippines and Indonesian governments have decreed that the issue of visas is now contingent on employment contracts meeting minimum rates of remuneration and a number of employment conditions. However, the difficulty of enforcing such arrangements has become apparent with reports of workers who signed onto contracts that do meet these conditions being presented with substitute contracts upon arrival at the place of employment, an apparently common occurrence in the Middle East.

Bilateral agreements between governments of workers' origin and destination countries to make commitments on standards and the enforceability of employment contracts continue to be frustrated by the differential treatment of domestic work, the regulation of which continues to remain outside the realm of mainstream labour law. The continuing designation of domestic work as occupying the informal economic sphere is compounded by the very fine line between informal and illicit employment. When there are few real protections afforded to workers pursuing the regulated route to work, when it is in employers' interests to engage workers, often at a lesser cost, and when unregistered labour agents are able to recruit and place workers with employers with impunity, it is not surprising that, as one estimate suggests, up to 70 per cent of migrant domestic workers who are employed by Malaysian households are undocumented, most recruited from Indonesia and Mindanao (Usher 2014; Looi et al. 2009; Phillips 2011). This problem can be exacerbated when governments mandate minimum wages and improved conditions, prompting workers to consider irregular recruitment arrangements for fear that they

could lose employment opportunities to workers not subject to such standards, which appears to be in evidence with increased undocumented Filipina and Indonesian migration. Indeed, these fears might well be justified because the Hong Kong administration and the Singapore government have both launched initiatives to broaden the reach of countries from which domestic workers can be recruited in order to ensure the continuing supply of labour at competitive rates of remuneration (Rosewarne 2014).

### **3. Precariousness, real subsumption of labour and precarisation**

The uncertainty and vulnerability engendered by transnational employment has much deeper roots than just the formal contract of employment. The passage of Asian women's entry into the comparatively unregulated transnational labour market has been the product of a chain of organisational and institutional arrangements. The labour supply chain is critical in the making of the transnational labour force. This is especially the case for those pursuing this journey for the first time. Their entrée into global employment usually proceeds with the prospective migrant approaching or being approached by local labour agents. The agents, who invariably are not licensed, advise on the possible employment opportunities, provide some indication of or promise on the terms of employment and how these might align with the individual's preferences and ambitions. The Indonesian government mandates training programmes for domestic work, which are designed to better equip women with the skills and the appropriate temperament to assist in acculturating them to transnational domestic work. The training programmes are of varying duration and quality, and in Indonesia some are up to six months in duration, and most are normally undertaken in the capital, in Jakarta, rather than locally. Most programmes are operated by the recruitment agencies, which are licensed to negotiate placement in households with labour agencies in the destination countries. Recruitment agencies also include in their service provision for organising the appropriate travel documents, freeing their clients from the somewhat onerous and time-consuming task of navigating the bureaucracy themselves. Workers are also required to subscribe to a migrant worker insurance policy.

The recruitment process is thus not an uncostly one, notwithstanding that it is supposed to be the employing household that is normally expected to meet most of the costs associated with recruitment and placement. Prospective workers face an upfront expense, and given most individual's financial circumstances, they have to call on family resources or seek loans from money lenders or the recruitment agencies. The evidence indicates that loans are commonly secured at a relatively high rate of interest.

Indebtedness is thus a routine feature in the constitution of this transnational work force, and successfully engaged workers can dedicate the first few months of their earnings to servicing the debt and repaying the loan. Interestingly, while rates of remuneration vary considerably from one destination to another – with Hong Kong offering the highest wages and the Middle East and Malaysia the lowest – as a proportion of actual earnings the relative cost of the recruitment and placement seems not to vary all that much across the spectrum of employment locations. The charges imposed by recruitment and placement agencies are generally in proportion to the relative rates of remuneration (Rosewarne 2014). Although the practice is supposed to be prohibited, there are frequent reports of the placement agencies sequestering a proportion of workers' wages to ensure that loans are serviced and debts repaid.

The multi-tiered employment chain has the effect of subordinating migrant domestic workers to the organising functions of a range of stakeholders engaged in the business of migration, the so-called 'merchants of labor' (Martin 2005). The real measure of migrant domestic workers' labour market subordination has to be considered in the context of the labour supply chain, to look beyond the actual employment contract to understand the role that different stakeholders play in contributing to the definition of the employment relation. The Indonesian government, like many others, handed responsibility for the recruitment and placement of workers to the private sector limiting its own direct role in recruitment and placement. This labour supply chain has institutionalised a system in which several stakeholders have a vested interest in promoting migrant domestic work as a profit-making enterprise, and this can be pursued by fair or foul means. Each engages a link in the chain with the object of making a claim on the wages of labour migration, and this engenders a number of ways that worker subordination can be effected. Indebtedness

lies at the heart of this system and, in such practices as bonded (or forced) labour, forms the lever for pressuring delivery on the claim.

There are still further stages to the ways in which workers can be subordinated in this transnational labour market. Perhaps the most canvassed of these is the high cost of transmitting income to workers' origin country. Money transfer agencies charge exorbitant rates for managing the repatriation of money, and many workers avoid this costly exercise by deploying the services of friends who are returning home. This is not an altogether secure means of remitting income to family because while they may have absolute confidence in their friends, there is always the prospect of border control officials confiscating monies from returning workers. In fact there is evidence of migration and border control officials exacting financial advantage from these workers. For example, the Indonesian government established dedicated entry arrangements to expedite migrant workers' return through 'Terminal 3' at the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, ostensibly to provide a safe-entry point, although what has transpired is the opportunity for corrupt officials to fleece workers of some of their accumulated earnings (Silvey 2007: 265-66).

The transnational labour supply chain is infused with multiple ways in which workers can be subordinated to endure exploitative practices and labour market vulnerability. Importantly, the character of this labour market position is exaggerated because there is by and large next to no regulation governing the links of the chain. The gendered and racialised nature of migrant domestic work, and the constraints on workers' employment as well as civil rights, is inscribed in a chain organised across different national jurisdictions, and this has locked in precariousness as one of the more concrete manifestations of workers' real subsumption. The challenge in combatting this requires regulating particular points along the labour supply chain, and this is no easy task given that it calls for national governments to enhance the management of recruitment and placement and to try to do so through bilateral or multilateral agreements between labour source and labour destination countries. When more countries in the global South, and South East Asia and South Asia in particular, are promoting labour exports as an economic programme, and that this is occurring at the same time as governments in destination countries are looking beyond the established labour-source countries, such as Indo-

nesia, to Bangladesh, Myanmar and elsewhere, to shore up the supplies of labour and contain the costs of securing migrant domestic workers, the global foundations of the labour market presents a structural impediment to combatting precariousness.

#### **4. Global labour supply chains, global care chains and precarisation**

In recognising the norms of women's primary role as carers and nurturers as the ingredient in the making of the migrant women worker, it is also crucial to not lose sight of the fact that the spatial framing that concentrates only on the exercise of labour within the destination country hides another oeuvre in the spatial construction and precariousness of women's labour. The gendered nature of domestic work, encapsulated in the organisation of the 'global care chain', is founded on both a gendered and racialised construct, on women's presumed role as nurturers and carers in their country of origin and of their ability and willingness to conduct this role at a lesser cost, as well as more intensively, than the host employer. For many, this gendered and racialised ascription reflects a concrete reality, one based on enduring familial connections and responsibilities in workers' country of origin. In considering precariousness, it is crucial that some accounting be made of the difficulties and the risks associated with many workers having to organise their labour across the spatial plane (Isaksen et al. 2008). The challenge in having to reconcile and manage domestic and care responsibilities across multiple households can engender a suite of uncertainties and vulnerabilities for transnational labour.

Viewed in the context of the transnational labour market, migrant domestic work has to be considered in terms of an employment relation that is constituted both within and beyond the waged workplace. The personal challenges of being thrust into the intimate context of the host-employing household require deft manoeuvring on the part of the domestic worker. The migrant domestic worker has to navigate her inter-personal relations with the different members of the household as well as the various calls upon her physical and affective labour and how these interactions are structured by the established, and likely shifting, social and power rela-

tions within the household. As a live-in worker, there is little opportunity to escape from the incessant 24/7 grind of these dynamics. Moreover, given the isolated, and isolating, physical context of the household workplace, there may be limited opportunity to seek the solace of fellow work colleagues. Indeed, there are many employing households, particularly in the Middle East, that in fact proscribe such interactions.

Extensive research on the global care chain has highlighted the deleterious consequences of migrant domestic workers' physical absence from their families (Parreñas 2005). The capacity to sustain and manage the affairs of workers' home country familial responsibilities can be very much compromised by the demands of the host employing household, and this makes for a considerably mix of emotions when families have played a part in the migration decision (Amnesty International 2014). This may also play out most directly with calls made on workers' earnings, especially when this is related to having to accommodate the demands of family members who have acted as guarantors for loans that had to be secured in order to fund the entry into the transnational labour force.

Migrant domestic work thus has a Janus-faced character, where work is organised across the two jurisdictional and responsibility planes, but where one site becomes privileged. Because one of the possible consequences is that the functioning and integrity of a worker's familial relations can be compromised, the insecurity and vulnerability that frames the migrant domestic worker experience cannot be regarded as simply the product of the waged workplace. The assumption of responsibility, or the instances recounted to me of husbands or mothers-in-law placing responsibility upon young Indonesian women to join the global labour force in order to generate money for the household is one integral feature of the process of precarisation. In taking on the task of contributing to the financial security of her family, the worker is introduced to the uncertainties of the global labour market. She has to navigate the vulnerabilities associated with maintaining a place in the global care chain, enduring and surviving the exploitative practices that are writ large in the employment relation, as well as the difficulties in contributing to maintaining the integrity of her familial household, and all the while trying to maintain her personal integrity and psychological wellbeing.

## 5. Conclusion

The development of the global care chain, and particularly the increased numerical significance of migrant domestic work and the ever-broadening reach in the sourcing of workers, is a remarkable illustration of the pernicious character of precarious employment. There is nothing really new in this. It has been part and parcel of the process of labour being transformed into a thing to be bought and sold in the market place. Precariousness is the corollary, and it is underscored in the case of migrant domestic work because of the refusal to recognise and accept, indeed the resistance to accepting, the value of what is defined as women's work. And it is not only women's work but work of a lesser value because it is undertaken by women recruited from the nations of the global South.

The Domestic Worker Convention is a product of the concerted endeavours to challenge the exploitative nature of the global care employment relation, to draw out from the shadows of the informal economy work that remains largely unregulated. This has been a remarkable development, and it is one that continues apace for the resolution of C189 has set in train a coordinated international campaign that brings together those groups and organisations, which have been exposing and campaigning against the exploitation and abuse of migrant women, to focus on lobbying governments to ratify the Convention. This has injected a fresh momentum into organising and campaigning for migrant domestic work rights, and we can observe this in the rejuvenation of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union in Hong Kong.

However, the precariousness of migrant domestic work is not only the consequence of an asymmetry in the employment relation. It is also the outcome of a chain of unequal relations, the global labour supply chain, where those organising women's progression through the different links of this chain seek to profit from that involvement, staking a claim on women's earnings. And driving the promotion and organisation of this labour force are the governments that invest in the prospect of labour migration being the panacea for alleviating the economic malaise of the global South. In effect, individual workers, and their families, are charged with the responsibility for generating the export income that is regarded as the salve for this malaise, while the demand for migrant domestic workers is fuelled by

a comparable imperative, of individual familial responsibility for organising the household in the absence of institutional support for social provisioning. The precariousness that defines the world of the migrant domestic worker is not simply the product of the employment relation, but rather the reflection of the multiplicity of forces that have impelled the development of labour migration as the solution to the structural inequities in the global political economy and their translation into the organisation of the private sphere of the political economy.

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## **Abstract**

Migrant domestic work is the archetypal manifestation of precarious employment. In most countries into which women from Asia are recruited, the absence of regulations prescribing minimum employment conditions or protections makes for exploitative and abusive work practices, and limited-duration work visas underscore this embedding of insecurity and uncertainty. We look beyond regulating employment conditions as a remedy for precariousness to highlight how gender and racial norms frame the formation of the global care chain, which in turn rests on the making of a new class of worker. The actors involved in this process of proletarianisation – the state, labour agents, recruitment and training enterprises, insurers, bureaucrats, employment placement agencies and money remitters – lay claim to workers' earnings and contribute to the more transformative process of precarisation.

Von MigrantInnen ausgeführte Hausarbeit ist die archetypische Verkörperung prekärer Arbeit. In den meisten Ländern, in denen Frauen aus Asien beschäftigt werden, bereitet die mangelnde Regulierung minimaler Beschäftigungsstandards oder von Arbeitsschutzrichtlinien den Boden für Ausbeutung und Missbrauch im Arbeitsalltag. Befristete Arbeitsvisa verstärken diese Einbettung von Arbeitsverhältnissen in Unsicherheit und Verunsicherung. Wir richten unseren Blick über die Regulierung von Arbeitsbedingungen als Abhilfe für Prekarität hinaus, um aufzuzeigen, wie Normen von Gender und ethnischer Zugehörigkeit die Herausbildung globaler Pflegeketten prägen und diese wiederum die

Schaffung einer neuen Klasse von ArbeiterInnen. Die an diesem Prozess der Proletarisierung beteiligten Akteure – der Staat, ArbeitsvermittlerInnen, Betriebe, die auf Rekrutierung und Ausbildung spezialisiert sind, Versicherungen, BürokratInnen und Arbeitsvermittlungsagenturen sowie Finanzdienstleister – beanspruchen ihren Anteil an den Löhnen der ArbeiterInnen und tragen somit zu einem stärker transformativen Prozess der Prekarisierung bei.

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