

# **"Transnational Systems of Care and Women's Labour Migration: A Study of the System of Indonesian Domestic Workers to and in Malaysia".**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to build on the ongoing debates about care in Gender and Migration Studies from the perspective of 'care circulation' among migrant domestic workers (MDWs). The massive cross-border migration of women as domestic workers in the last four decades calls for a reassessment of concepts and frameworks as well as of impacts. The erosion of care systems caused by the transfer of care and domestic labour from low-income to high-income countries has sometimes been referred to as the 'care crisis' or 'crisis of social reproduction', but these studies have only partially captured the multi-directional paths of care flow and the diverse forms of caring relations that concern transnational families. This study provides a multi-layered analysis (macro-meso-micro levels) of the relations between the cross-border circulation of women's domestic labour and the transformation of care systems, and of how the rights of MDWs are invisibilised in different layers of power relations in the processes of cross-border migration.

The study focuses on the system of female live-in MDWs from Indonesia to and in Malaysia, which are respectively amongst the main sending and receiving countries of MDWs in Southeast Asia. Due to the historical interactions as neighbouring countries, labour transfer has taken place through internationally recognised entry points as well as through relations that pierce through the borders. MDWs have also constructed social spaces across borders using contemporary communication technologies.

In this regard, this study adopts transnationalism both as a concept and a set of research perspectives distinctively different from methodological nationalism. The dissertation's methodological approach is based both on multi-sited fieldwork (Karawang district, Indonesia (migrant sending site); Jakarta, Indonesia (migrant departure site as well as site of ASEAN headquarters); Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (migrant receiving site)), as well as extensive use of other observations and secondary sources. The study uses a mixture of qualitative methods to collect information on the experiences and perspectives of multiple actors in the process of cross-border migration from Indonesia to Malaysia and on the meanings assigned to 'care', 'domestic work' and 'migration'.

This study also proposes a theoretical perspective that connects debates on domestic labour, care and social reproduction, for a more holistic understanding of the transnational migration of domestic workers. It discusses the emerging analytical reorientations to capture the specific experiences of women's transnational migration as domestic workers, their social obligations to care in multiple locations, and how their practices can contribute to a new perspective on transnational forms and practices of care and the social reproduction of the family as an institution.

In order to explicate the multiple layers of power relations in the cross-border transfer of care and domestic labour from Indonesia to Malaysia, which have direct implications on the recognition of rights of Indonesian MDWs and their family members, the study first shows the transnational migration system between Indonesia and Malaysia, historically built on the basis of their geographical, cultural and religious proximities, and the governments' politics over the rights of Indonesian MDWs to and in Malaysia. This transnational migration system enhances transferability and circularity of domestic labour between two countries, but with only limited protection of MDWs' rights, and contributes to the transformation of the care systems in both countries.



Then, the study analyses the social dynamics behind the continued inflows of MDWs into Malaysia, which reflect the resilience of the gender structure and division of care responsibilities in Malaysian households, combined with the government's policies on mobilisation of women's labour into economic production (industries and services). It shows that the transformation of care systems (care entitlements arising at the levels of the state and firms, and the provision and associated arrangements in the household) in Malaysia has increased both the structural dependence on MDWs, especially Indonesian female MDWs, and vulnerabilities and insecurities of the live-in MDWs.

The dissertation also provides a local case study of variant forms of gendered labour migration and how they reshape care relations and duties within the household in Indonesia, based on research findings in one of the major migrant-sending sites in West Java, Karawang Regency. The socio-economic transformation of Karawang under the national development programme has fostered the formation of local variants of the transnational family through which caring duties are enacted, and familial bonds have been maintained through the transnational space formed by new technologies of cross-border communication.

Lastly, the study examines transnational activism of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the defence of Indonesian MDWs' rights to and in Malaysia and those of their family members, in the contemporary regional context provided by ASEAN and its declared principles of regional solidarity. After explicating how CSOs in ASEAN address the policy gap for the rights of migrant workers, especially MDWs, using opportunities and promises provided in the ASEAN Community building processes, it gives critical attention to the scope and limitations of the CSOs' transnational cooperation at the regional, national and grassroots levels.

Based on the research findings, the study shows the discrepancies between the slogan of 'One Caring and Sharing Community', pledged by the ASEAN leaders, and current realities and the plural meanings and forms of care practiced by Indonesian MDWs who work in and move to and from Malaysia. The study argues that unless the rights of MDWs are guaranteed, it is extremely difficult and sometimes impossible for Indonesian live-in MDWs to maintain not only their own security and safety in the destination country Malaysia but also the quality of caring relationships with their stay-behind children, husbands and family members at home.