

ADDRESSING DISPARITIES: NARRATIVES OF FOREIGN DOMESTIC
WORKERS

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One of the most concerning trends, in the global era, has been the plight of migrant workers, who, in search of relatively lucrative employment, find themselves as ‘domestic workers’ for those members of society who, as beneficiaries of neo-liberal policies that, while promoting development, have also resulted in structural and income inequalities. My research sheds light on, and assesses these issue in the Singaporean context, by analyzing the plight of unskilled migrant workers in general, and foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in particular. Domestic work, which includes childcare, eldercare services, and housekeeping, has been found to be conducted in confined, isolated environments, which can create ripe conditions for exploitation. This is an important area of research. for society and policymakers. The number of adult domestic workers worldwide is estimated at 67 million (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2017). They comprise a third of the labor force in Southeast Asian Nations (SEA) (Phua, Hui, Nodzinski, & Bacolod, 2012) and 239, 700 in Singapore (Ministry of Manpower (MOM), 2017).

I interrogate these questions by incorporating broad macro critiques of economic globalization, with micro-level research on individual experiences of FDWs. Such an approach requires mixed methods, including a three-year long ethnography, focus groups of several individuals, and facilitating advisory board sessions that engage FDWs, in communicating disparities and in addressing them in participatory ways. Doing so leads me to uncover new insights and innovative ideas for how inequality might be addressed that can give voice to some of the most disempowered members of society. In particular, I argue policies need to be formulated in ways that engage the voices of workers facing the everyday lived realities of these inequalities.

The Globalization Critique

Leading scholars argue that as globalization occurs, in the process freeing the flow of capital, services, and labor across national borders, institutions of power have emerged that have had damaging impacts for the global poor (Sen, 2002; Sen 2005). The processes of globalization reinstate social class formations in which a specific group of people in society exert economic, political, and social prowess, influencing the ways in which policies of the market come to be formulated, further exacerbating

the unequal distribution of resources globally (Dutta, 2011; Sen, 1992; Sen, 1999). At a more target level, one major effect of open borders is the acquiring of cheap labor for profit. This leads to economic migration of the global poor, compelled to move for employment opportunities, with customary livelihoods rendered out-of-date, precisely because of the effects of globalization (Bloche & Jungman, 2009; Dutta, 2008; Dutta, 2015; Grove, Zwi & Allotey 2007; Breman & Shelton, 2009). Hence, neoliberal reforms, framed as globalization are often sold as having benefits that will trickle down to the global poor, but the lived experiences of unskilled migrants, constituting the global poor, tell a more nuanced and complex story.

The Case of Foreign Domestic Workers

Unskilled economic migration is not without its cost, as the global poor have less access to education, health, and employment opportunities both in the host country and in their home countries (Dutta & Kreps, 2013). The condition of employment often exacerbates inequalities. In the case of domestic workers in Singapore, new workers arrive in Singapore without having clear knowledge on employment contracts or practices, while others choose the precarity of domestic work in Singapore, in order to provide resources for their families back home. FDWs are not covered under the employment act in Singapore thus, have little resources to ensure health and well-being during their time of employment. This translates to not having clear limits on working hours, no health insurance, labor rights, days off, or a defined minimum wage (Yeoh, Huang, & Gonzalez, 1999). Many leave without receiving their dues or justice in situations of exploitation. With marginal protection, workers are subjected to grueling hours of domestic labor, with only a day off in a week that can be taken away by employers, depending on the nature of the contract signed. Not knowing their rights and relying on employer benevolence to provide good working conditions, presents the communicative inequalities tied to information and knowledge deficits faced by workers. To further highlight, workers are unaware or unable to make sense of their contracts, because many do not have them or cannot read them. In seeking redress against employer abuse, FDWs find it challenging to articulate exploitative conditions, wrong, or unlawful acts. Those that keep silent about abuses, do so, unwilling to report, for fear of the lengthy investigative periods, taking away from their core need of earning a wage. To add, some narratives reveal not having the knowledge of various helpdesk information or services that can render assistance in exploitative scenarios.

FDWs face a range of structural challenges. For example, many domestic workers take on debts from third party agents to come to Singapore to work. When they arrive, many are not paid or paid minimally for three to six months. It is within this timeframe, FDWs have little room to negotiate out of exploitative working conditions. How then do we develop policies that attune to FDW interests in meaningful ways that are structurally transformative for domestic workers, especially with the stark imbalance of power between employer and employee, amplifying the communicative inequalities in seeking basic rights?

Policy Interventions Using the Culture-Centered Approach (CCA)

The culture-centered approach (CCA) attempts to invert the social, political and economic structures that keep silent and erase the narratives of the disenfranchised from dominant discourse (established behaviors and speech in society) (Dutta, 2008). At other times, those seeking to help disenfranchised communities can often reproduce the role of structural actors, by co-opting narratives, of disenfranchised communities, in articulating their experiences with inequality. The goal is in finding meaningful spaces to work together with communities, in creating accessible knowledge platforms (communicative infrastructures) for disenfranchised voices to be heard, recognized, represented, and reified in discursive spaces, where they are largely absent (Dutta, 2008). Policy makers can pay greater attention to grounded-up methods of policy building, by listening to communities, experiences with inequalities.

The ethnographic interview process, help us pay attention to FDWs expression of health, as having their basic rights respected. In listening to narratives, FDWs consistently reiterated as wanting to be humanized as workers. Therefore, developing the tagline for the two national campaigns as ““Respect our Rights” and “We are Humans too”. Adopting the tools of listening, we hear domestic workers articulate their health meanings as having their basic rights respected and to be treated like human beings. This inverts our top-down understandings of migrant health. FDWs emphasized not being subjected to exploitative conditions and having their fundamental rights respected, as vital to their health needs. In such informalized labor sectors, transformation included having sufficient food and rest, being paid as well as on time,

being granted a day off, not being physically, verbally, or sexually abused or threatened, and having enough rest hours (Dutta, Kaur, & Comer, 2014).

Through strategies of participation, CCA pries open entry points for workers to organize, resist, and empower, at an individual and community level. This often takes place during advisory board sessions, a crucial space where communities are mobilized to develop policy agendas and facilitate decision making. During the advisory board sessions with FDWs, they compiled fragments of their narratives that were important for stakeholders to hear, for example, “Don’t hit me”, “Listen to me, respect me”, “don’t confine me”, “don’t sexually abuse me”, “don’t lock me up”, all of which point to reinstating their rights as human beings, as workers. The advisory board sessions open up spaces for discussion on the constraints of structure and power, to emerge. These sessions facilitate processes that allow communities to decide in key ways, to influence public policy and discourse (Dutta et al. 2016). In the case of FDWs in our study, domestic workers felt that the enforcement of the law and structural support (legal aid, shelter, communicative channels and infrastructure, knowledge, and bureaucratic intervention) against poor employment practices, allow employers to treat them in dehumanizing ways. In consequence, limiting them from achieving their basic health needs.

The CCA, therefore, underscores the importance of participatory spaces for communities to articulate the disenfranchisement they face in their everyday lived realities but to also focus on locating solutions that are community centered. CCA informs policy makers, researchers, community partners to, therefore, attend to the very forms of knowledge production in policy building, that are vested in the sites of the community, without co-opting these spaces with already configured agendas (Dutta, 2008, 2014).

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