

FOLLOW THE MAID

Domestic Worker Migration In and From Indonesia

Olivia Killias

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«Follow the Maid» is an examination of Indonesia's labour migration regime through following women migrating from Kalembah, a village in Central Java, to Malaysia, where they find jobs in middle-class households as domestic workers. While Killias' book focuses on the trajectories of Indonesian women undertaking this journey, the author also exposes the roles of multiple intermediaries (including state and non-state actors) in enabling and critically influencing the various processes involved. Her findings are based on 14 months of «multi-sited» fieldwork, which the author conducted mainly in Kalembah but also in Jakarta and Malaysia. Killias highlights the *process* whereby women become domestic workers and explores the frictions pervasive in global care chains. She conducted ethnographic research in Kalembah, living with families in the village, and also conducted to spend time in training camps in Jakarta. Her findings are based on interviews with brokers as well as employment agents in both Jakarta and Malaysia, and she visited Indonesian domestic workers who have found work in Malaysia.

Killias teases out the contradictions and tensions imbued in the process of «becoming a maid», a process both racialized and deeply gendered, with discourse on migration closely tied to the promise of progress and betterment, for individuals, families as well as the nation. It is a process that celebrates mobility but relies on labour immobility at particular junctures. Killias frequently emphasizes the importance of examining not just the spatial but the *temporal*, for the «migration *journey* is made of various moments involving different temporalities» (p. 9).

Each chapter in the book effectively charts a seminal part of the journey. Killias begins by examining Indonesia's colonial history and the parallels between indentured plantation labour and current labour migration regimes involving women

from Kalembah (who used to work on tea plantations). Under current transnational migration regimes, domestic workers experience many months of wage deductions after arriving in Malaysia, in which they are bound to employers they have not chosen and to fixed employment contracts they are not allowed to break (without the risk of firm penalties). Yet this system emerged as an attempt by Indonesia to «manage» migration; increased state intervention in the transnational migration of domestic workers, in partnership with private recruitment agents, has led to a highly bureaucratized system that is meant, in theory, to offer better protection.

It is clear, however, as Killias proceeds to document the journeys and transformations, that the insertion of additional State requirements – including mandatory training, pre-departure briefings and the standard contract – has not significantly improved recruitment processes or working conditions. Primarily, these requirements have not blunted the exploitativeness that undergirds arrangements between potential migrant workers and those who recruit, place, train and, eventually, employ them. Migration is a business, an industry that has blossomed around the various nodes of managing, maintaining and regulating this (lucrative) transnational care chain. It starts in Kalembah, where brokers – persons known and trusted by the potential migrant worker or her kin – play active roles in recruiting women and connecting them to employment agencies in Jakarta; these brokers, who are mostly male, also escort the women to such agencies. In Indonesia, women's social mobility is bound by particular norms that regulate their travel alone, which appears ironic since they are being prepared for an overseas sojourn, where they will be separated from family for a long period of time. Yet, as Killias astutely illustrates, it is precisely gendered expectations around domestic work and current employment conditions of migrant domestic workers – restricted move-

ment, constant supervision, living-in with families – that have enabled so many of them to undertake these overseas jobs with the express approval of their family/community, and with these flows actively facilitated by the State.

Killias shines in highlighting the inconsistencies and false binaries circulating in discourses surrounding transnational migration for domestic work. This includes the focus on «legal» vis-à-vis «illegal» migration channels, in which the State and private recruitment intermediaries vehemently emphasize the need to adhere to «legal» mechanisms and the monitoring and documentation it subjects women to at every stage; «illegal» migration, that is, bypassing bureaucratic demands to migrate overseas, is positioned as foolish and exceedingly dangerous. Yet legal channels bind women to many months of indebtedness and heighten their vulnerability to abusive working conditions. Killias also points out how the standard contract is often resented by domestic workers for the *obligations* it imposes on them, which appear more salient than the rights the contract is meant to provide them with. Circumventing cumbersome, expensive and debt-inducing migration channels is certainly risky and relies on a migrant worker's network and ability to secure overseas placements without formal intermediaries. Under current circumstances though, it can also be interpreted as a form of resistance, such as in the case of Arum (p. 173), who experienced much higher levels of autonomy: She could choose her employers, earn higher wages, and live on her own (not in the home of an employer).

Killias' observations and interactions at agency training camps, pre-departure briefings and employment agencies (in Jakarta and Malaysia), as well as conversations with employers in Malaysia, demonstrate the reinforcing nature of gender and racial stereotypes. They also reveal the roles recruiters, trainers and agents play in shaping expectations of domestic workers as well as employers. The mantra for domestic workers is to «finish contract», almost regardless of circumstances. It is a system that aims to mould and socialize women into a «reliable, docile and loyal labour force» (p. 62) similar to plantation labour. A strong «civilizing» discourse is evident, in which Indonesian migrant domestic workers who come to Malaysia from «rural» Indonesia are framed as poor, «backward» and «uneducated». This stigmatisation is evident even among State bureaucrats in Indonesia, who engage in forms of «paternalistic protection» (p. 51). The framing of Indonesian «village women» as «backward» justifies the need for mandatory «training», with agents and employers placing the onus of successful contract completion on domestic workers, whose «lack of skills» or commitment is often targeted as the cause of poor employment outcomes.

In examining the return – sometimes delayed return, even the non-return – of migrant domestic workers to Kalembah, Killias illustrates the risks involved in migration; the ruptures in relationships between those who left and those left behind, and the palpable ambivalence – by all parties – towards migration and what it represents. While there are clearly instances in which migration has improved material conditions and life opportunities for future generations, Killias also highlights how half-finished houses stand as «material testimonies both to the promises of labour migration, and to its risks» (p. 208). For the migrant «success story» in mainstream portrayals is a partial one, one that obscures the risks and the ruptures, the behind-the-scenes negotiations, the weight of social expectations, the intangible losses that accompany conspicuous (financial) gains. Killias' examination brings some of these to light. In speaking with second-generation migrants in Kalembah, she notes a shift in how and when they are considering migrating for work, and in so doing, are «also redefining the meaning of marriage and motherhood in relation to migration» (p. 199).

Binary representations of migrant domestic workers are prevalent: They are often victims or heroes, sometimes sacrificial figures to be valorized, or else threatening, «backward» persons that need to be properly trained and tightly supervised. Killias' book disrupts this narrative and demonstrates the value of rich and prolonged ethnography. Throughout the chapters, we gain insights into the complexity of relations among dense social and familial networks, which take place amidst broader social transformations within Indonesia as well as Malaysia, with multiple intermediaries playing key roles in enabling and shaping the transnational care chain so many have become embedded in and dependent on.