

***Report on***  
**Contemporary Perspectives on Asian Transnational  
Domestic Workers**

NUS, Singapore  
23 – 25 February, 2004

***Organized by***  
Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis  
Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

***In association with***  
Commission on Gender and Geography of the International Geography Union

***By***  
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There's a saying in the Philippines that when the light of the house is away at work, homes in the Philippines experience blackouts. The 'light' in question is the woman of the house, who in Filipino society is its paramount pillar. The condition of many of these and other women in developing countries who now journey as transnational domestic workers were critically examined when some 30 leading lights of their own respective institutions specialising in this area of research gathered at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The occasion was an international workshop on 'Contemporary Perspectives on Asian Transnational Domestic Workers' between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> February 2004.

Greatly illuminating the workshop with their insights from recent findings, 16 papers were presented at the workshop, which was organised by the Asia Metacentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis based at the NUS. Diverse perspectives were shed on complex factors that underscore the persistent flows of (mostly) Asian women as transnational domestic workers (TDWs), their major characteristics and the associated social, economic and health issues.

Day 1 of the workshop saw presentations on sending countries where richly textured papers from the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia were heard. Workshop participants were treated to a broad and fascinating survey of the situation of TDWs from the perspective of their home countries, filled with interviews and stories of women, whose own voices have been ironically marginalised so far. Salient themes which emerged concerned the agency of the women in deciding to leave for overseas to work; the channels of their passage which sometimes involved complex transnational social networks, the representation of the women by the media and the state; the consequences of their migration on their own family and children; and last but not least the historical patterns and culture of migration in Asia.

At the end of the day, such was the array of findings and analyses presented that some wondered if there was arguably a 'Pan-Asian Model' of transnational domestic work unique to Asia. It was also through such comparisons that workshop participants soon realised that at work was a process which 'normalised abnormalities'. Nation-states, communities and families were being transformed as a consequence of the flow of transnational domestic workers.

The next day of the workshop saw perhaps the 'abnormalising of normalities' when it was pointed out that the gendering of domestic work meant that even if men contributed to domestic work, it was not recognised as such. Throughout discussions of cases from receiving

countries of TDWs like Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, and Canada, questions were asked about what was meant by the term 'domestic work', leading to a reconsideration of feminist politics itself. Research on TDWs in these countries shows a range of motivation and coping strategies of these women, where the desire to return can no longer be presupposed. The roles of crucial actors in transnational domestic work were also examined.

An important issue that emerged was on the economic impact of Asian TDWs which extended beyond families and households to the nation-state as well. Added to this was growing evidence of the existence of 'secondary economies' running parallel to the more visible industries of employments agencies and remittances services for example. All this suggests that the politics of protection is highly complex. Research also reveals the segmentation of the labour market along lines of gender, geography and ethnicity. For Dr Vivienne Wee, such phenomena betray processes of not just 'othering' but also that of 'selfing'. Notions of self and the other were shown to be employed in a myriad of ways, often inconsistent to practices in other countries, to support the flow of transnational domestic workers.

By the third and final day of the conference, searching questions raised earlier were extended to the conference title itself, resulting in a catharsis of sorts, especially on behalf of the organisers. Even as new findings challenged conventional understandings, old perceptions remain entrenched. A consideration of Australia, South Korea and Japan showed that even in countries where there was less dependence on TDWs, domestic work (and its alternatives) in these countries remained highly gendered. It was noted that such creative tensions were apt at a workshop such as this one, where different perspectives on TDWs were sought. Both the organisers and workshop participants expressed hope for a follow-up meeting of minds, where the policy implications of the findings revealed here can be further considered.