

Chapter 8

Domestic Maids (*Amah*) in Malay Households in Brunei Darussalam



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Abstract This chapter is a case study of the everyday lives of Indonesian domestic maids (*amah*) working in Brunei Darussalam. It gives an account of the lives, hardships and dreams of five Javanese women employed in Malay households. The chapter also reveals the ways in which their roles as domestic maids abroad have altered the dynamics of gender and power relations in their own traditionally patriarchal households back home in Java, albeit by degrees.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Domestic maids (*amah*) · Gender · Indonesia · Migration · Power relations

8.1 Introduction

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2022a), more than 75 million people are currently employed as domestic workers around the world. A large proportion are migrants from developing countries and over three-quarters are women. They are employed to assist in or take charge of domestic work in the

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households of others, and are expected to perform tasks that range from cooking and cleaning to childcare or looking after older household members (*ibid.*). In the case of Brunei Darussalam, most of the domestic workers employed are from either Indonesia or the Philippines. Moreover, given that a majority of the Bruneian population identify as Malay, there is a preference towards hiring Indonesian maids (mostly from Java) who share some cultural and linguistic similarities with Malays; perhaps most importantly though, Indonesian maids are invariably Muslim.

Domestic workers are often called and addressed as ‘*amah*’ in Brunei.¹ Most, if not all, are female migrants and come from low-income families. The following case study examines the day-to-day experience of five Indonesian domestic workers employed in Brunei—their hardships, aspirations and motivations—to reveal a nuanced account of fortitude, adaptability and agency behind the ordinariness of their everyday lives.

8.2 Methodology

For the purposes of the study, a domestic worker is defined as someone who works in and for a household, and performs a wide range of (mostly household) tasks ranging from cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, guarding the premises and driving the family car either on a full or part-time basis, and may either live in or live out.

Data collection was conducted through a series of informal sessions and observation, often engaging respondents in a conversational manner to make them more comfortable and at ease. The process of talking to respondents rather than interviewing them lessened some of the barriers and opposition they had to sharing. As trust and consent are major ethical considerations in this type of study, the sample was carefully selected. A decision was made to focus on Indonesian maids due to the preference towards hiring them in Brunei and access considerations. Most domestic workers in Brunei work as live-in maids which restricts their movements beyond the private sphere of their place of employment. Some of the maids in the study already had frequent prior contact with us due to existing relationships with their employers and facilitated participation consent. An attempt at snowball sampling was made through gaining further introductions by the respondents to their friends or acquaintances. However, this proved difficult as most were wary and could not be interviewed outside of their workplaces.

Of the five respondents, only one was unmarried. While one of the respondent’s age remained unverified, the other maids were in their late twenties to late thirties. They all came from the environs of different cities in Java, Indonesia, namely Malang, Subang, Bogor and Yogyakarta. All respondents and their responses have been anonymised.

¹ See Ooi Keat Gin (2013: 405) on the historical etymology of the word ‘*amah*’ and its link to migrant domestic workers in Southeast Asia. In Brunei, an *amah* is largely seen as someone who is passive, humble, loyal and compliant.

8.3 Situating Gendered Migration and Domestic Work

Forms of patriarchy shape the experiences of migration differently for men and women, especially in developing countries (Ullah et al. 2016; Baird et al. 2017). While men often migrate to achieve personal success and fulfil their dreams, the decisions of women to migrate are more often tied to their marital or familial obligations. Rarely do their motivations include self-gratification. Women are either compelled to follow their husbands and leave familial and social support behind or driven to migrate to seek additional financial aid for their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). An assumption in much of the literature is that women often play a passive role in migration decisions—their paths are chosen for them and their decisions are mostly not their own. The gendered dimensions of labour migration are also apparent in the types of work undertaken. Male migrants tend to seek out employment that is considered ‘masculine’, as construction labourers, security guards and so on, while female migrants engage in more ‘menial’ tasks (McAuliffe et al. 2017). This is related to societal expectations and pressure that women perform work that complements their ‘feminine abilities’ in childcare and other domestic chores.

8.3.1 *Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia*

There are an estimated 11.6 million migrant workers in the Southeast Asian region, of whom a little under half—5.2 million—are women (ILO 2020a; Spotlight Initiative 2020: 5). Large numbers of women have entered the low-skilled labour force, ranging from domestic work and care work to the entertainment sector and manual factory work (Ong 1991; Hugo 2006; Baird et al. 2017; McAuliffe and Khadria 2019). Due to the fact that many receiving countries in Southeast Asia do not have adequate social policies or legal protections in place to support them, these women often find themselves in vulnerable situations (both mentally and physically) where the potential for abuse, poor working conditions and low or withheld wages is high (Piper and Uhlin 2002; Picos 2021). For instance, in Singapore migrants are exempted from social benefits and face a lack of protection, which means they often suffer under conditions that amount to forced labour even after multiple complaints to local agencies (Human Rights Watch 2005: 3, 11, 99–100). This situation is replicated in many other countries in the region (ILO 2022b).

According to Lenore Lyons (2005: 3), ‘[w]omen are kept marginalised and vulnerable by tacit state support for practices that determine how they are allocated to employers’, how they are treated ‘and what work they do within the private space of their employers’ homes’. An indication of their subjugated status is when employers insist that their maids address them as either ‘Madam’ or ‘Sir’ (ibid.: 12). ‘In many cases, [they] ... may be given separate items that are visibly marked as different to those used by other members of the household, including plastic plates and cups for eating, or cheap brands of soap or shampoo’ (ibid.: 11–12). Strict curfews are

common even when they go out to buy groceries and drop off or pick up employers' children from school. Lateness is chastised and disciplinary action can occur in the form of financial penalties or loss of day-off privileges (*ibid.*). Disciplinary surveillance extends to the maid's physical appearance; some employers in Singapore, for example, dictate what these women can and cannot wear with 'knee-length shorts and long T-shirts' being the 'de-facto uniform' of most domestic workers (*ibid.*: 12). The isolation of domestic maids is also maintained 'by separating [them] ... from [the other] members of the household' (*ibid.*).

Having situated the gendered dimensions of migration and domestic work in Southeast Asia and the challenges these workers face, we now turn to the locus of this study and the day-to-day experiences of five Indonesian domestic maids working in Brunei, their hardships, aspirations, motivations and agency.

8.4 Domestic Maids in Brunei Malay Households

8.4.1 Interview Sessions

While Bruneians and Indonesians speak a similar Malay language, dialect differences sometimes make mutual understanding difficult. During conversations there was often a need to translate, repeat and reassure for ease of understanding. For example:

Malay	<i>Tidak mengapa, kami hanya berbual di sini.</i>
English	It is okay, we are just chatting here.
Indonesian	<i>Engak apa-apa, iyaa kita ngobrol aja.</i>

Malay	<i>Sekiranya anda merindui keluarga, apa yang anda lakukan?</i>
English	If you miss your family, what do you do?
Indonesian	<i>Kalau mbak kangen sama keluarga gimana?</i>

Interview sessions with respondents were carried out within the confines of their workplace. This allowed them greater discretion over where and when they would talk. Some of the sessions were not completed in one sitting and the time spent with each respondent varied. Care was taken to ensure interview sessions did not impinge too much on their time as they were busy working (as will be elaborated later). There were times when some conversations unfolded while we helped the respondents to fold fresh laundry, prepare food or wash dishes. This afforded us a level of intimacy and trust that relaxed the respondents and shifted the tone of the session from one of interviewer and respondent to something more akin to two people having a chat. Some respondents had more to talk about than others. Conversations ranged from under one hour to those that continued throughout the day. Removing time restrictions was a way to mitigate the constraints and stress of a formal interview and elicit more spontaneous and honest responses.

While we worked hard to create a more natural and unrestrained interview environment for our respondents, there were times where our presence as researchers did

affect the interviews. As Darren Davis and Brian Silver (2003) note, interviewees tend to project, consciously or unconsciously, a certain image—of what they think would be favourable to them—towards the interviewer. Such a presentation is called the ‘interviewer effect’. This was reflected in some of the responses we obtained. These answers seemed to be carefully thought out by the respondents according to what they wanted us to hear. For instance, one of the respondents was initially reluctant to give any negative views about her employer and how she was treated by the members of the household. Another respondent immediately became tense and alert once she saw a household member entering and passing by where we were having our conversation. If there were any sudden movements, she immediately sat up straight and became more rigid and responded in quick short sentences with her voice lowered to a whisper. Moreover, a noticeable change in tone tended to occur when they were recalling their families and their lives back home. Respondents often became teary-eyed and gave sad smiles, making it hard to continue due to the highly emotional nature of the conversations. However, with time, patience and relating our own personal experiences and anecdotes to them or steering conversation to lighter territory, they gradually lowered their barriers further into conversation on certain issues. This allowed us to obtain quite in-depth information. It became apparent fairly quickly that while the respondents experienced forms of employee exploitation to varying degrees, each of them was further enmeshed in difficulties that extended far beyond the workplace. In turn, this moved the inquiry more towards unpacking and interpreting their life stories, their migratory journeys, and their feelings and aspirations as live-in domestic maids. Doing so revealed hitherto largely invisible and underlying levels of strength and determination in their everyday lives, as detailed in the next section.

8.5 Findings

Data collection revealed certain common characteristics in the difficulties the respondents faced, but also the effects that migrating and becoming domestic maids had had on their class status and gender roles back in Indonesia. While all of the women were working as domestic maids in Brunei at the time of the interviews, some had previously worked in other homes and taken on other jobs prior to their current employment. Their stories of determination provided insights into their characters and strengths, the roles they played in their respective families and the significance their occupation had for these women. It certainly altered our preconceptions and unstated assumptions about the work of domestic maids as a form of demeaning, low-class and oppressive employment.

In Bruneian society, there is a stigma associated with domestic maids and this power imbalance is made more obvious when we consider that many of their tasks could easily be performed by members of the household. Initially, our assumption was that working as domestic maids would keep these women locked into a lower status. While this is the case in Brunei, their status—and that of their families too—in

Indonesia had altered. Yet most of the respondents had been unaware of the extent to which their employment would change their gender and social roles and status back home in Java. Data indicated contradictory dynamics at play in the ways domestic work can both empower and subjugate women. For some of the respondents, their domestic work empowered them as it gave them a degree of freedom and control over patriarchal forces at home. On the other hand, domestic work was stigmatised and they inhabited an environment where considerable restraints were imposed on them, especially as live-in maids.

8.5.1 Challenges of Working as a Domestic Maid

While migration offers these women opportunities to better their lives and improve their economic, gender and social status, it also exposes them to potential abuse and exploitation as they are under the total control of their household employers. Before coming to Brunei, most of the respondents were told they would be helping with domestic tasks; their respective employment agencies indicated that they would only need to attend to the family's wellbeing, including cooking, cleaning and taking care of the family. Once they settled in Brunei, however, these domestic maids found that their tasks extended far beyond what had initially been agreed upon.

Some instances where they were given tasks that were not in their original contracts included helping their employers who were engaged in small businesses such as tailoring, selling snacks and catering. Some of these businesses were set up mainly because the domestic maids were there to help since they did not exist prior to their arrival. On top of performing the tasks that they were expected to do in the house, the maids also had to work double duty. Depending on the nature of the employers' small business, they were expected to cook the food or snacks and package them according to their employers' instructions; they had to measure customers and tailor as well as sew their clothes; they had to clean and set up the trays for the catering business. All of this was expected while also taking care of the needs of the entire family in the house. The respondents were often expected to perform these additional tasks without proper guidance. Sometimes they were taught how to do the basics but mostly they learned by doing, and they indicated that they had to be constantly careful to avoid potential mistakes and being scolded. Most were not compensated for these additional tasks, and they rarely received any commissions from the profits earned by their employers' small businesses. Although two respondents were eventually compensated for this double duty after years of dutiful service and loyalty, the situation did not change for one of them. In fact, she claimed that she was also sometimes sent to help out extended family members with domestic tasks for family events and other sporadic occasions for very little pay. Another respondent had to learn how to sew and tailor in her early months in service and stayed up late to practise with old fabrics and clothes that she had with her, and this led to sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation was a common experience among the respondents who did double duty.

Cooking and packaging large amounts of food often took up much of their time, and these tasks were usually performed late at night or in the very early morning.

Cold treatment on the part of the family and conflicting dynamics within the household were also common challenges faced by the respondents. One mentioned that even though she had been working for her employer's family for six years, she was frequently depressed due to their rudeness and coldness towards her. She felt isolated in the household and had yet to fit in. This sense of isolation led her to control her movements within the household as she felt restricted and suffocated. It was difficult for her to enjoy even basic day-to-day activities such as cooking for herself. She also claimed there were times when she only ate rice with soy sauce as there was no leftover food for her to eat.

Respondents were also occasionally subjected to other unnecessary and unrealistic demands by their employers. A respondent recounted an episode when she was given a whole chicken to cook for the week and each member of the household became difficult and kept demanding different chicken dishes in the course of one mealtime. In order to meet their demands, she had to ration and cook various chicken dishes in one go. As a result, some dishes were not finished and thrown away. She was scolded and blamed by her employer for wasting the chicken even though she was following the orders of other household members.

8.5.2 *Familial Separation*

Despite sharing similar values with their employers, as they are all Muslims, respondents experienced challenges in relation to fitting in and gaining a sense of belonging in Brunei. A common reason behind this issue was that many were homesick; for some it was their first time spending an extended period away from their family. Their situation was exacerbated by the difficulty in maintaining frequent contact with their families as they had to manage their expenses carefully while working in Brunei. The cost of international calls from Brunei to Indonesia was quite high—around BND0.5 per minute for Easi and DST users. Pay phones and Hello cards were considerably cheaper, but respondents could only access them during their days off at the weekend (if they were given any) and in any case there are very few pay phones in Brunei.

8.5.3 *Managing Financial Expenditure*

All the respondents came from families with limited assets and very low incomes. While maids are often perceived as minimally educated and low skilled, the interviews revealed that they were astute and intelligent, especially in managing their expenses. Many had developed such skills prior to migration in having to deal with their respective employment agencies, sorting out work permits and other expenses to facilitate their move. The amount they had to pay ranged from IDR1 million to

IDR5 million (BND95–480), depending on the destination country. According to one respondent, the further the distance they travelled the more expensive it was. Another stated that in the case of Brunei, she had to pay over IDR2 million (nearly BND200) just for her work permit. Most of the respondents had to pay for the greater part of their expenses themselves prior to coming to Brunei as they were first-timers. They carefully managed their expenditure to pay back their employment agents. This often proved challenging for many as they were married with families, and had to account not only for their own day-to-day expenses but various additional family expenses and needs for their children's schooling.

The data indicated no shortage of ingenuity and determination in dealing with these challenges. Most respondents had also previously worked in stores, helped with domestic chores in other homes and performed menial tasks on farms for minimal pay. Others resorted to selling food and snacks. One respondent mentioned that she and her husband owned a small rice plot, and she was able to set up a savings account where she kept some of the profit obtained from the harvest in order to pay for agency expenses, although it took years to save enough money. Several of the respondents had to rely on obtaining loans from acquaintances or family members to cover their expenses in full. Another respondent had to redraft her contract and borrowed money from her employer in Brunei. As a result, she had to sacrifice the first few months of her salary; about 50% of her pay was deducted for each month until she had settled her debt. Most of the respondents indicated that they preferred to keep their savings with them as they claimed that setting up a personal bank account in Brunei was not straightforward for them. Some sent remittances via MoneyGram, Western Union and other similar agencies to their family members (mostly female) to help pay for both loans and expenses for their families. Significantly, respondents rarely spent money on themselves during their stay in Brunei. They limited their own expenses to food and calling cards, with the largest portion of their monthly wages either sent to their family back home or saved for the future, mostly in order to start a small business when they would return.

8.5.4 Occupational Empowerment

Given the difficulties these women faced in their day-to-day employment, it is important to glean some insight on what motivated them to keep going. When respondents recounted a lack of control and freedom in their own homes in Java, they began to disclose how aspects of their experience as domestic maids can also be empowering. As most of the respondents come from small villages with traditional family norms, they were subordinate to the head of the household—either their husbands or fathers. Some claimed their situation was suffocating for them and this motivated them to migrate overseas.

One respondent had been badly mistreated by her husband. He was addicted to gambling and most of her income was drained by her husband as he had control over the family's finances and savings. In order to get by, she took on various jobs to

support her children's schooling and daily expenses in addition to all her household work. At home she was constantly stressed as her husband did little to help out, only doing minor repairs and work with tools. She found this emotionally and physically exhausting. Given their traditional backgrounds, marital problems do not result in divorce because of the familial shame attached to publicly declaring a failed marriage. Her only recourse was to move away for work in another country. As such, she felt she was able to gain some control over her own life and that of her children.

The data indicated that many of the respondents felt trapped and undervalued in their own homes in Indonesia. Some complained that if they had not migrated, they would have had to perform double duty regardless, working outside and working at home. The imbalance of their gender roles was so prescribed that if they stayed in Indonesia, they would have worked far more hours for less money and little or no appreciation. The data suggested that reminders of these situational contexts allowed respondents to tolerate and endure the hardships they experienced as domestic maids in Brunei.

For instance, as one of the oldest in her family, one respondent claimed she had limited freedom and she was not even able to finish high school as her parents prioritised her younger siblings. Her lack of education reduced her employment opportunities, and whatever work she found met with the disapproval or dismissal of her father. Matters came to a head when her father forced her to marry a man she barely knew, claiming that he would be able to help support her and her family. Instead, she got a friend to connect her with a maid agency in Yogyakarta. Initially, her father was furious and castigated her for being an unfilial daughter. However, their relationship improved once she started sending money home. Neither of her parents worked as her father was too old to work in the fields, and her younger siblings were still in school. Her remittances and those of her older sister, who worked in Yogyakarta, were the only means of supporting the entire family. This example indicates a shifting power balance within family dynamics at home in Java. Three out of the five maids claimed that they bore the full burden for their family's finances. The men in their families who were previously the main breadwinners in the family were now being supported by their wives or daughters.

8.5.5 Finding Job Value

Respondent data also suggested that some of the domestic maids felt they had something to prove. Although they had received little in the way of education, they believed they could offer their families better opportunities in the future and gain more by working as domestic maids abroad than if they stayed in Indonesia where their life chances and prospects for gainful employment were limited. For instance, one of the respondents claimed that becoming an overseas domestic worker was quite an achievement in her village as the majority of village girls with a similar background ended up doing menial agricultural jobs in the fields, unemployed or married off early. This was echoed by another respondent who coveted her position. Being a

maid had given her the opportunity to travel out of Indonesia and gain life experience; she had worked in Taiwan and learned to speak Mandarin. She viewed these as important skills that she could use to open a restaurant on her return home. The interviews demonstrated that entrepreneurial aspirations were quite common among the respondents, with several having accumulated reasonable if modest savings from their years as domestic maids.

8.6 Conclusion

Despite the common perception of domestic maids as mostly passive and largely invisible, this chapter has revealed significant levels of fortitude, strength, emotional resilience and ingenuity in their everyday lives. While they face many challenges in Brunei, their agency has also brought about slight shifts in circumstances at home in Java through their new role as the dominant breadwinners. Although becoming a domestic maid is a rather bounded choice, it is one they are confident in and have tried to make the best of. Others may view their skills as basic and the jobs as menial, but the respondents of this study have managed to find degrees of value and even empowerment in what they do. That is to say, it seems as though there is value where they create it and meaning where you see it.

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