

Beyond assumptions about the domestic worker and the family in crisis

Monika Winarnita



Left: Indonesian Female Friends enjoying the Australian Indonesian Families Association 2012 Australia Day celebration. Credit: Australia Indonesia Family Association Canberra Branch.

ACCORDING TO the International Labour Organization's 2017 'Trends for Women' report,¹ Indonesia and the Philippines are the top two countries in Southeast Asia from which migrant workers originate. Indonesia recorded 4.5 million migrant workers worldwide, 70% of whom are women. Every year, some 119,000 domestic workers leave Indonesia. In comparison, the Philippines recorded 10.2 million migrant workers worldwide, of whom 80% are women; annually 150,000 domestic workers leave. Philippine and Indonesian migrant women have been the focus of a growing body of literature concerning the feminisation of labour migration from Southeast Asia. These studies have focused on the large numbers of women who migrate out of poor rural areas to undertake domestic work. In addition, the studies typically deal with a 'family in crisis' situation where increasing female mobility is affecting basic family structures, such as: decreases in fertility rates, a rise in divorce rates, a heavier burden on caregivers besides the biological mother, and the effect of long distance parenting on children left behind.²

An international collaborative project in which I am taking part – funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council, and involving researchers from the UK, USA, Canada and Australia – focuses on Southeast Asian women, family and migration in the

global era, and addresses a gap in this literature on the feminisation of labour migration. In particular, we counter the assumptions surrounding Philippine and Indonesian female migrants working as maids and nannies. Our research focuses on the intersection of reproduction and migration beyond the emphasis on low skill migration. We do so to unpack the notion of the family in the transnational flow of people and ideas, the mobility regimes affecting women and their families, as well as a global discourse of the 'good parent'.

A focus of our research is on absent children in the lives of these migrant women.³ Deirdre McKay looks at how Philippine migrant women working in the health care industry in the UK, might bear their children in the UK in order to confer UK citizenship, but subsequently send them back to the Philippines as toddlers to be brought up by their extended family. These women believe that their children will grow up in a better environment in the Philippines. Later, as UK citizens these children could sponsor their parents and extended family as migrants in the UK. In comparison, bearing children in Hong Kong, frequently out of wedlock, has proved enormously difficult for Indonesian and Philippine female migrant domestic workers. Nicole Constable has looked at how these women narrate their decision to give up or not to give up their babies for adoption. In addition to social stigma, the mobility regimes of the host and the originating countries may deny these children citizenship status and birth certificates. In Singapore, as in Hong Kong, where there is also high number of female domestic migrants, a different set of mobility regimes exists for skilled migrants. While similar practices of parenting from a distance and separation from their very young children existed for both domestic and skilled female workers, Leslie Butt found that skilled migrant women experienced multiple migration trajectories whereby Singapore becomes one of several

countries they have resided in to pursue higher tertiary qualifications and professional career aspirations.

My research in Australia, amongst twenty Indonesian professional migrant women working in the health and education sector in Melbourne, found a different narrative of absent children. Childless and divorced Indonesian migrant women working in the education sector are able to informally adopt their siblings' children in Indonesia; which is a culturally sanctioned practice. Thus, these skilled migrant women are able to sponsor their adopted nieces/nephews educational costs as a remitting aunt/transnational mother, as well as practice intensive parenting during their annual return trip to Indonesia.

Unlike the mobility regimes in Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada, Australia has no visa categories available for low-skilled workers or semi-skilled workers in the caregiving industry. Indonesian women in Australia have mainly migrated as either international students or marriage migrants prior to working as professionals or gaining the skilled migration qualification. Women constitute 56% of Indonesian born migrants in Australia with 82% recorded as migrating through the spousal visa category in the family reunion stream.⁴ The heteronormative and gendered ideal of becoming an *Ibu* [mother] and raising a family in Australia, is still a dominant narrative amongst the twenty Indonesian professional migrant women in the study; even if they are childless, they hope to fulfil this mothering role while pursuing their professional careers.

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- 3 For the examples given below by McKay, Constable, Butt and myself, see: Butt, L. (forthcoming 2018), 'Introduction to the Special Issue on Absent Children', *Global Networks*.
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Balinese migrant masculinities

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A TREND OF MALE outmarriage to female and male foreign nationals started in Bali with the rapid expansion of mass tourism in the 1980s. Now, in the 21st century, the practices of male outmarriage continue to increase, raising numerous concerns among Balinese cultural nationalists that "Balinese might become the other people".¹ Such concerns are not surprising in the cultural context where it is predominantly women who, upon marriage, move to the homes of their husbands. Portrayals of Balinese and Indonesian men's intimate encounters with foreign tourists in the beachside resorts in Bali in Amit Virmani's documentary *Cowboys in Paradise* (2010), had brought about heightened concerns about moral order and respectability of manhood and masculinities in Indonesia, leading to police raiding beachside resorts and arresting men profiled as 'beach boys'. The practice in which men mingle with foreign tourists and follow their wives, or male partners, to their countries, constitutes a major transgression to the Balinese gender order.

Marriage migration takes Balinese men to many different parts of the world, from Australia, New Zealand and Japan, to the various Euro-American nation states. My research on Balinese male outmarriage focused on the migration to the Netherlands, the former colonial empire of which Bali was a part, and where the establishment of the largest Balinese diasporic community begun in the late 1960s with the arrival of the prosecuted Indonesian left.² How are migrant masculinities transformed in the context of transnational mobility? What are the ways in which these conjugal unions are changing gender relations and well-established structures of kinship and relatedness?

I began this research with the primary interest to study the transformations of gender relations and family life, by focusing on what constitutes non-normative heterosexual relations both in Bali and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, rhetoric about freedom around ways in which gender and sexualities are lived has been an important part of how the Dutch nation imagines itself,³ yet the still existing expectation that middle-class women form families with men who are of equal if not higher educational and economic standing to them, means that marrying a Balinese man, who will likely come from an impoverished family, constitutes a transgression to the deep-seated heteronormativity that exists in Dutch society. Moreover, a rapid increase in xenophobia and Islamophobia following the 9/11 attacks in the US, and the murders of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn and Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh (in respectively 2002 and 2004), dramatically increased concerns about migrant men in the Dutch public sphere, and in particular about migrant men's presumed lack of progressive views about gender relations. While such concerns primarily emerged in relation to Islam, over time they became strongly associated with people who are in the Netherlands designated as non-Western foreigners.⁴

The residency of Balinese men in the Netherlands is processed under the family reunification scheme, a form of mobility that has often been portrayed by policy makers and right-wing politicians as the most dangerous, deceitful way to enter the country, and has been referred to as 'backdoor migration'.⁵ Following their arrival in the country, Balinese men, like any other non-Western designated permanent residents, undertake Dutch language and integration courses. The latter are primarily focused on Dutch values with regard to, among other issues, gender relations and family life – in which, for example, both spouses undertake child rearing and are equally involved in domestic labor.

The question of labor, both within the household and the labor force, has emerged in my research as a major factor in the transformation of Balinese migrant masculinities and gender relations in these unions. Qualifications such as middle or high school diplomas from Bali are either not recognized

in the Netherlands, or are valued only by a very limited job market. Thus, most of the men can only find work in low-paid manual labor. In situations where a Dutch spouse has a much higher annual income than the Balinese spouse (one of the main requirements for family reunification with a non-Western national is that the Dutch applicant is able to prove that they can financially support two individuals over a period of five years), Balinese men often take on most of the domestic labor and child rearing duties and often work part-time outside the home. Some of the men take on casual domestic work. Grounded in understandings of ethnicized domestic labor that draws on the Dutch imaginary of colonial servitude and obliging Indonesian workers, Balinese (and other Indonesian) people have easier access to the domestic labor market.⁶ Thus, Balinese men take on domestic and caring work, which in Bali is considered 'women's work'. Such shifts in gender relations leads to an ongoing negotiation of the masculine self.

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