CHAPTER NINE

STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE AMONG FILIPINA AND INDONESIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SINGAPORE1

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of women from developing countries crossing international borders to perform household chores and/or in-house caregiving work in more economically advanced nations has been the subject of active research since the late 1980s. Studies reveal a disparity between the experiences of female migrant domestic workers and “unskilled” or “low skilled” male migrant workers. First, women in domestic work tend to work alone in the insular environment of the home, thus they face a greater risk of experiencing ill-treatment and exploitation compared to men who mainly work in groups in public locations such as construction sites (Chammartin 2004). Live-in domestic work can be regarded as the most isolated job in the history of labor since it is performed in private (Arat-Koc 1989: 37). Second, a home is perceived as a private domain (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 1988, 2002), whereas the workplaces of male migrant workers are considered “real” workplaces. There has also been some discussions on how the so-called “sisterhood” between domestic workers and female employers, both supposedly belonging to the “subordinate” gender, can counter-intuitively be transformed into maternalistic exploitation by the latter (Anderson 2000; Romero 1988, 2002). Third, domestic workers’ experiences in relation to their own families, particularly their own children, are likely to be harsher than the experiences of male migrants. In fact, a significant number of migrant domestic workers must leave small children behind (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). These domestic workers are acquiring breadwinning roles, while being forced to respond to a gendered role of

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“caring” more than male migrant workers, which is painful for both migrant mothers and their children (Hochschild 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2002; Horton 2009; Parreñas 2001, 2005). Although migrant women in professional jobs experience similar struggles, these issues are more pronounced among domestic workers because of the difficulties of family reunification for domestic workers due to the immigration rules, etc. (Chin 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, 2002; Horton 2009; Parreñas 2005).

Despite the exploitation, victimization and marginalization of these women, previous studies have shown that they are not only passive victims, but also active actors. In examining the narratives of domestic workers, Parreñas (2001) reveals that domestic workers in Los Angeles and Rome abide by their employers’ disciplinary measures, but simultaneously subvert them by using various strategies and tactics. Domestic workers will utilize their family-like intimate relationship with their employer to solicit loans or legalize their status, look unhappy in order to make their employer apologize for offensive treatment or to ease the workload, and even cry to express loneliness. Similarly, Romero (2002) illustrates how domestic workers negotiate with employers to upgrade working conditions by using their own networks. Although these strategies and tactics, developed by domestic workers in the West and illustrated by major scholars, are highly insightful and encouraging, migrant domestic workers in countries with less stringent state regulation of employment agencies and employers might not find them useful. “Immediate struggles” (Parreñas 2001: 188) like these might easily lead to the termination of their work contract by employers.

Framework

In the major receiving countries of migrant domestic workers in Asia, forms of resistance are usually covert, passive and discreet. Constable’s study of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong presents various forms of resistance; for example, she elaborates on the function of jokes, which “symbolically reverse(s) the roles of employer and domestic worker” (Constable 1997: 174). Chin (1998), in her intriguing study of Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia, delineates how the women cope with and/or fight against female employers who spy on them. Some of the hidden strategies of domestic workers include talking back to an employer in a subtle way, performing acts of self-deprecation, taking advantage of an employer’s sense of gratitude, and persistently smiling at