

women



*gender, migration*  
and DOMESTIC SERVICE

edited by  
JANET HENSHALL MOMSEN

place



## GENDER, MIGRATION AND DOMESTIC SERVICE

Global political and economic restructuring has led to more women seeking paid employment and to stronger flows of female migrants. The decline of the extended family, demographic changes and the shrinking of the welfare state are forcing middle-class women to seek assistance with domestic duties, as they spend more time outside of the home at work. This is coupled with a situation where affluent households affirm their middle-class status by the employment of domestic help. All of these factors result in an increase in demand for domestic workers, which is encouraging the migration of women from rural areas to cities, and from poorer countries to wealthier ones, to fill positions in domestic service.

*Gender, Migration and Domestic Service* examines a wide range of migration patterns that have arisen, both on a national and international scale, exposing the tensions and difficulties inherent in this kind of movement. These include legal issues, both in terms of immigration laws and the contractual agreements (or lack of them) available to domestic workers; cultural and language diversities and barriers; the impact of the disruption to families caused by females moving to live-in employment, and thus away from the family home; and empowerment issues on two levels—where the employer experiences an increase in status from employing domestic workers, and where the domestic worker experiences a change in status by contributing to the family income, or by their workplace providing an arena for social interaction which would otherwise be unavailable.

Case studies are taken from Europe, North America, South America, Asia, and Africa, and are based on fieldwork using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The various crosscutting aspects such as class, status, race and ethnicity, gender relations, violence, state controls on migrants, and motives of migrants are drawn out, and regional and national differences exposed.

**Janet Henshall Momsen** is a Professor of Geography in the Department of Human and Community Development, University of California, Davis. In 1988 Professor Momsen founded the Gender Commission of the International Geographical Union and is currently a Director of the Association of Women in Development.

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# GENDER, MIGRATION AND DOMESTIC SERVICE

*Edited by Janet Henshall Momsen*



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## PREFACE

The idea for this book came from a realization that many of my graduate students were choosing to do research on domestic service, as were many of the best young social science academics. At a conference in South Africa in 1995, organized by the Commissions on Population and Gender of the International Geographical Union, on the subject of 'Gender and Migration', many papers focused on migrant domestic workers. Two years later, a conference sponsored by the International Geographical Union Gender Commission on 'Women in the Asia-Pacific Region: Persons, Powers and Politics', held in Singapore, also saw many papers on domestic service. Clearly, this was an important contemporary issue that needed to be considered in a global context.

I was also intrigued by the interest shown in the topic by young women who had never had experience of employing domestic help. Almost without exception, their research focused on the maid as victim. One of these individuals has recently admitted to me that as soon as her first child arrived, and she had to look for childcare herself, her ideas and attitudes changed. As mothers and employers we cope with feelings of guilt and ambivalence. For Asian and African researchers who have usually grown up with servants, studying these workers often creates feelings of guilt for not having realized earlier the difficulties faced by domestic servants. Remembering my own problems in searching for childcare almost thirty years ago, before transnational networks and agencies were as formalized as they are today, and my dependence on friends in the Caribbean and Europe to identify and interview candidates, I am amazed at how quickly the global system of such employment has grown.

Studies of domestic service are unusual, in that they demand such reflexivity on the part of the researcher. If the maid is perceived or defined as having some form of 'otherness', then we are so defining ourselves and have to struggle with feelings of sisterhood, guilt and dependence in relation to the worker. I am very grateful to all those whom I approached for their efforts in meeting my deadlines, and for responding so positively to my suggestions for changes to their first drafts. I am especially appreciative of the efforts of the five contributors who produced babies during the gestation of the book.

I am also extremely indebted to my research assistant, Molly Mugnolo, for all her help and efficiency in chasing up details and additional information from

contributors, also for implementing my editorial scribbles and formatting the chapters. Any mistakes are my responsibility.

Finally, I should like to dedicate this book to my mother, Marjorie Eileen Henshall (1904–97), who died while the book was in production. She was always there to support me and to take care of my children, while I did fieldwork or taught in places as disparate as Rio de Janeiro, St. Lucia, Grenada, Barbados, Nevis and Montserrat, as well as Calgary, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and California. She was a truly transnational, global, and very adventurous mother and grandmother, and is sorely missed. I wish she could have read the finished book.

# 1

## MAIDS ON THE MOVE

### Victim or Victor<sup>1</sup>

*Janet Henshall Momsen*

There is a growing interest in the marginalised, invisible, subaltern voices of our globalizing world. Amongst the most ignored have been those of migrant domestic workers, the vast proportion of whom are women (Phizacklea 1983; Lawson 1998). Until recently, women were statistically invisible in migration data and by taking up jobs within the private domestic sphere remained largely unrecorded in censuses, and often out of reach of labour unions and non-governmental organizations. Feminist scholars, in recent years, have analysed paid domestic service as a means through which asymmetrical, intersecting relations pertaining to gender, race, culture, class and citizenship status are structured and negotiated (Pratt 1997). They have argued that negotiations in the reproductive sphere are as crucial as (and cannot be divorced from) those within the productive sphere, in producing the hierarchies and matrices of domination and subordination which underpin gender relations. This is particularly pertinent in the light of the current climate of global economic restructuring, with major implications for the international mobility of female labour and the structural positions of women.

In migration, women may choose domestic work as the only legal way to cross international boundaries. Sometimes this movement is illegal, as in the case of Paraguayan women working as domestic servants in Buenos Aires, or Hungarians crossing the border daily to clean houses in Vienna, or else it is largely undocumented, as in Singapore. Elsewhere, this international movement of women to work as domestic servants is highly regulated by governments. Today, migrant domestic workers, whether different in terms of citizenship, ethnicity or rural upbringing, now constitute a social 'other', subordinate directly to their employers and more generally to the urban host society. To explain the dynamics of the social relations of dominance and deference, a traditional explanatory framework has examined the phenomenon of domestic servants working in employers' households as a culture-contact situation, wherein the tensions and relations between the foreign worker and the employer are read in terms of cultural oppositions. Not only does the framing of the 'other' operate at different levels, it often does so in mutually reinforcing ways. The 'other' is not monolithic but consists of degrees of 'otherness', accentuated by the coming together of different cultural worlds which diverge from and/or resonate with one another in multiple ways.



Hitherto, studies of migrant female domestic workers have tended to focus on one recipient country (Cock 1980; Bunster and Chaney 1985; Romero 1992; Gill, 1994; Huang and Yeoh 1996; Chin 1997; Constable 1997) or region (Jelin 1977; APDC 1989; Chaney and Garcia Castro 1989). This volume brings together an international collection of case studies from Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Asia. It includes both inter-state and intra-state migrant domestic workers, and considers the worldwide commonalities in the experiences of these women, and the distinctive differences related to local conditions. Such comparisons, based on detailed field studies, provide new insight into the increasingly valuable and widespread phenomenon of the contemporary 'maid trade'.

### **Domestic service in historical perspective**

Secular trends in domestic service work have most often been explained in terms of the process of industrialisation and modernisation, but regional differences have been persistent. From the Middle Ages, servants were more common in northern Europe than in southern Europe and despite the ending of feudalism and the growth of new industrial jobs, by the mid-nineteenth century early censuses revealed that these patterns continued. In France, in 1872, servants made up 6.5 percent of the total population (5.2 percent of men and 7.6 percent of women), while in Belgium, in 1890, 11.5 percent of the population were servants (13.7 percent of men and 9.6 percent of women). In contrast, in Spain, in 1860, 1.3 percent of all men and 1.5 percent of women were servants, and in Italy, according to the 1861 census, 1.5 percent of men and 2.9 percent of women were servants (Reher 1998:208). Industrialisation and urbanisation are said to encourage the growth of the domestic service workforce, because they produce a servant-employing middle class and a surplus of unskilled female labour. Coser (1973) sees domestic service as a premodern occupation which is obsolete in a modern society. Similarly, Boserup (1970: 103) argues that 'it is a characteristic feature of countries at an intermediate stage of economic development for a large number of women to be engaged in paid housework'. According to this model, the number of domestic workers declines rapidly as new opportunities for female employment become available, the size of middle-class families declines, and the mechanisation and commercialisation of household tasks eases the burden. The high number of domestic servants, amounting to one-fifth of the female workforce in many Latin American and African countries today, is seen as being related to their intermediate stage of development, but also to the low level of commercial services and to the polarisation of incomes (Kuznesof 1989).

In those countries where slavery continued into the mid to late nineteenth century, as in Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States, or slave-like arrangements prevailed well into the twentieth century, as in East Asia, the industrialisation model may not be so relevant. Higman (1989) argues that the model does not hold for Jamaica, where the dual economy and the emergence of

a new bourgeoisie as the servant-employing class led to a decline in the social status of servants, with potential workers preferring to remain unemployed despite the improved wages available.

In the nineteenth century, mechanisation of agricultural work drove many rural young women to seek employment as servants to the new middle classes in the cities. Around 2 million women were employed as servants in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, especially in southern England, when domestic service occupied over 40 percent of employed women, compared to 3–5 percent of the male labor force (Gregson and Lowe 1994). However, during the Second World War, many servants took up new occupations, as employment opportunities for women opened up. After the war, live-in servants disappeared from most middle-class homes and the feminine mystique persuaded women that they should do their own housework, although, as late as 1951, 1.8 million people worked in domestic service in Britain, of whom 1.3 million were women.

In the mid-nineteenth century, lack of employment opportunities for women and a shortage of prospective husbands, encouraged many young, single, and even married, European women to emigrate as servants. Some moved within Europe and the Mediterranean as wet-nurses and maids: Miklavčič-Brezigar and Barbič (Chapter 10 of this book) describe how rural Slovenian women exploited such opportunities in Egypt, following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. In the United States, most female servants in the north were Irish immigrants, but in the southern states they were predominantly Afro-American. Following the northward migration of southern blacks, it has been estimated that domestic service occupied three-quarters of the United States black female labour force by the 1920s (Katzman 1978). In Canada, Australia and the United States, the servant crisis of the late nineteenth century was met by encouraging the immigration of single women from Britain (Buckley 1977; Jackson 1984). In tropical and sub-tropical colonial areas, young rural women were sent to the cities by their families to support themselves as servants (Radcliffe 1990). Governments such as those in Mexico and Argentina ‘were known to place “vagrant” women arbitrarily in positions as domestic servants, in order to protect their morals and provide them with an education’ (Kuznesof 1989: 28). In China, many young rural women were forced into indentured servitude under the *Mui Tsai* System. Under this system young girls, sometimes under 10 years old, from impoverished families, were sold or adopted for their domestic services. Wages were rarely paid, but food and shelter were provided. Often, the *mui tsai* became a concubine of a male member of her employer’s household, or was married to a man of her employer’s choice and remained as a domestic servant. Others, although officially destined for domestic service, were sold to brothels. In the early twentieth century, there was a shortage of workers for household duties in Malaya and Hong Kong, and many *mui tsai* were brought from China. In 1934, almost 3,000 *mui tsai* were recorded in Malaya (including Singapore), and it was estimated that about 60 percent were ill-treated (Heyzer 1986). Today, the *Mui Tsai* System has been eradicated, but in many

contemporary societies variations of this system operate, encouraged by increasing rural poverty in many parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Even after such slavery was forbidden, Chinese women continued to seek domestic work in these neighbouring areas (Lai 1997). Long term patterns of urban families repeatedly seeking servants in the same villages and rural areas, are illustrated for Chile, by Pappas-DeLuca ([Chapter 6](#) of this book), and for Indonesia by Elmhirst ([Chapter 15](#) of this book). Yet, even in the global South, as city services such as the provision of water, electricity and garbage collection improved, and schooling expanded, the increased emphasis on mothering and the development of privacy as a family value, influenced households to employ fewer servants.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary demand for domestic help is very different. The dual-career family emerged in the 1960s as a new family form (Gregson and Lowe 1994) but one that could only function if there were surrogates to take over the wife's domestic role. Sometimes, household tasks were shared between partners, and children or kin, usually the maternal grandmother, assisted. However, it is still a rare family in which women do not undertake a majority of the domestic tasks, even if they have a full-time job. It has been argued that by employing someone to undertake housework and childcare, the traditional household patriarchal system is preserved (Duarte 1989). The double burden of middle-class working mothers is reduced at the expense of increasing the burdens of the servant, who is often also a mother, as illustrated by le Roux ([Chapter 11](#) of this book) and Yeoh and Huang ([Chapter 17](#) of this book). In many countries, the 1980s saw a reduction in public social services provision, forcing families to turn to private hiring of workers to cope with childcare and elder care. In France, where state provision of childcare is more widespread than in most other western countries, domestic servants are mainly needed for household cleaning chores, as described by Narula in [Chapter 9](#). Even where few women work outside the home, as in the Middle East, having a servant has become an important middle-class status symbol, according to Ismail ([Chapter 14](#) of this book) as it has in Malaysia (Chin 1997) and in Europe ([Chapter 7](#) of this book), despite growing participation of women in the labour market in these regions.<sup>4</sup>

The growth of dual-career families and the economic prosperity of the 1990s in the United States, has led to what *The Economist* (1998a:73) called the 'nanny bubble':

Rich investment bankers with lots of children are moving into huge mansions where they need not one but often two live-in nannies. But there are not enough to go round. So the price of nannies...has soared. The hourly babysitting rate is nudging towards \$20, while a live-in nanny can cost up to \$700 a week, not to mention the costs of essential perks, such as a car and tennis lessons.

At the other end of the scale, politically, economically and geographically, in China, ‘the thousands of rural young women in Beijing permit even ordinary urban residents to employ rural women as maids.... When migrants return home during the Spring Festival, life in Beijing becomes “very difficult”...for all these essential services [housework, child and elderly care] remain undone’ (Roberts 1997:272). As shortages develop, more women in poor countries are encouraged to migrate by rising expectations of good salaries, which are often not realised (as described by Pratt *et al.* in [Chapter 2](#) of this book). Employers also expect more, and the dual stress of role strain (Gregson and Lowe 1994) and financial burdens may lead to increased violence towards domestic servants. In most households, the migrant worker is seen as substituting for the labour of the wife, with the wife’s income paying for the cost of employing this surrogate housewife (see [Chapter 2](#)). In this way, domestic patriarchy is maintained (Duarte 1989) yet, at the same time, society is imposing a backlash on working mothers.<sup>5</sup> Despite such problems, demand for domestic workers remains high, and in modern Britain there are now more maids than coal miners (see [Chapter 8](#)).

### **Migration for domestic service**

Female contract labour for overseas employment is now highly organised, both by sending and receiving governments and by recruitment and placement agencies. These agents intervene between employee and employer by constructing representations of both. Even when such jobs involve only internal migration, regional stereotypes are reinforced by agencies and advertisements (Gregson and Lowe 1994; Bakan and Stasiulis 1995; Pappas-DeLuca in [Chapter 6](#) of this book; Cox in [Chapter 8](#)). Rural residents are often preferred, as they are considered more malleable according to Elmhirst ([Chapter 15](#) of this book) and docile and adept at domestic chores (Tyner 1996). Workers see migrating from the countryside to work in relatively wealthy urban homes as a way of becoming ‘modernised’, if only in terms of using household equipment, suggests Elmhirst (see [Chapter 15](#)). In Ecuador, this process is also seen by prospective maids as a step towards upward social mobility, epitomised as ‘whitening’, according to Radcliffe ([Chapter 5](#) of this book), although black Ecuadorians scoff at such an ideology of social and cultural miscegenation. Most domestics also face culture shock in ways that are not always appreciated by the employer.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Religion***

For many employers, this is a very important characteristic of the person who is to care for their children. The Roman Catholicism of Philippine workers benefits them in Italy and Spain. Sri Lankan Muslims are so heavily in demand by Middle Eastern employers that they command higher wages and do not have to pay fees to the recruitment agencies or their air fare. Without this debt, they can leave their jobs more easily than other Sri Lankans, and so are seen by the agencies as more

troublesome (Ismail and Momsen 1997). Yet, the ease of marketing Muslim maids is reflected in the fact that, although only 7.4 percent of the population of Sri Lanka is Muslim, they make up 23 percent of the domestic workers (see [Chapter 14](#) of this book). Indeed, Samarasinghe (1998) argues that some Singalese Buddhists convert to Islam and adopt Muslim names in order to benefit from this religious preference in the job market. On the other hand, Malaysia is not so welcoming of fellow Muslims from Indonesia, because it is feared that they can blend in too easily with the Malay population, become permanent residents, and change the nation's ethnic balance (Chin 1997).

### *Vulnerability and violence*

Domestics and workers in the entertainment/sex industry are 'increasingly recognised in the international community as the most widely exploited and most vulnerable to abuse and violence' (Stasiulis and Bakan 1997:32) among migrant workers. One of the problems is the fluidity between these two occupations, as perceived by employers, and as sometimes created by unscrupulous recruitment agencies. In Singapore and Malaysia, female domestic workers have to undergo government-ordered regular pregnancy tests, supposedly to ensure that maids do not develop a sideline as prostitutes. Violence against domestics is hard to quantify, but it falls into various types: physical violence, ranging from rape to repeated slapping; overwork, including having to work for more than one household and being refused days off; non-payment of wages or a reduced salary; and poor living conditions, including lack of food and privacy (see [Chapters 7](#) and [14](#)). In the first quarter of 1996 alone, thirty Filipina domestic workers returned home in caskets, mainly from Hong Kong and Singapore (Nova 1997). Refusal to allow communication with families, withholding of passports, overwork and unpaid salaries were most prevalent in Saudi Arabia among Middle Eastern countries (Kanlungan Centre Foundation 1997), but the Philippines cannot stop sending workers to Saudi Arabia, because that country is the source of their oil supply (Javate de Dios 1995:8). Most workers suffered from more than one type of violence, and the trauma of their experiences affected their ability to reintegrate into society when they returned home (Nova 1997).

There is a basic asymmetry in the relationship between the migrant domestic worker and her employer, in terms of the status and rights associated with citizenship. This makes the migrant worker more vulnerable to mistreatment, however, the work itself is seen as making citizenship or permanent residence possible, especially in Canada (Stasiulis and Bakan 1997), the United States (Colen 1990) or Europe (Sørensen 1998). In spite of this, many migrant workers are illegal, and choose to work as live-in domestics because it is an occupation which provides a place to live for newly-arrived immigrants, and is least likely to be checked by immigration authorities and employers, who often do not worry about the legal status of their worker (Kossoudji and Ranney 1984; Mattingly in [Chapter 4](#) of this book; Anderson in [Chapter 7](#)).<sup>7</sup> These workers are the most

vulnerable, as they are denied the right of appeal to even the weakly enforced contract regulations of their natal countries, their country of residence or a recruitment agency. In Italy, domestic workers are predominantly part of the large black economy (Campani 1993; Barsotti and Lecchini 1995; Miklavčič-Brezigar and Barbič in [Chapter 10](#) of this book) and migrant women domestic workers (legal and illegal) are thought to be more prevalent in Italy than in other European countries.<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that there are seven times more illegal than legal Indonesian migrant workers, and that 60 percent of Sri Lankans migrate outside official channels (Stasiulis and Bakan 1997:37). In Singapore, in 1994, 95 percent of Filipino overseas contract workers did not have work permits from the Philippine government, and, despite the ban on the deployment of domestic workers to Kuwait imposed by the Philippine government in 1988, 24,000 Filipinas were working there as domestics in 1995 (Stasiulis and Bakan 1997).

Public awareness of the extent of illegal Filipina workers came about as a result of the Flor Contemplacion 'mega drama' (Cooper 1997). Flor Contemplacion was hanged in Singapore on the March 17, 1995, for the murder of a fellow Filipina and the child of her employer. Her execution occurred in the run-up to a fiercely fought election in the Philippines, and led to the resignation of two Cabinet members and a temporary ban on the employment of Filipinas in Singapore as maids, as well as to a reduction in the level of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The situation soon returned to normal, with between 70,000 and 80,000 Filipina domestic helpers in Singapore in the fiscal year 1996/7 of which 80 percent came as 'tourist workers' without work permits from the Philippines (Gonzalez 1997). This arrangement is legal in Singapore but is not considered so by the Philippine government.

Similar 'mega dramas' have occurred in the Middle East (see [Chapter 14](#)) and in the United States and France (see [Chapter 7](#)). The status of migrant domestic workers, whether legal or illegal, is a human rights problem. In 1990, the United Nations adopted the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. As of December, 1997, only eight countries had ratified the Convention (Philippine Migrants Rights Watch/Asian Partnership in International Migration 1997). Twenty ratifications are needed to make the Convention legally enforceable.<sup>9</sup>

### **Immigration policies**

It has been argued that immigrant women are the 'absent centre', ignored in policy, research and action on women's rights and immigration (Hoskyns and Orsini-Jones 1995:53). Specific immigrant quotas for workers to fill areas of perceived shortage, have the effect of not only gendering domestic work, but creating an overlap of gender, age and ethnic segregation in different national labour markets (see Anderson in [Chapter 7](#) of this book). For example, until 1996, special visas allowed Filipinas to enter the United States more easily as nurses than as domestics,<sup>10</sup> although they could not work as nurses in Italy, as this profession was restricted

to Italians until recently (Campani 1993). In the 1960s and 1970s, West Indians were especially favoured in the Canadian market for childcare workers (Henry 1968). In the United Kingdom, at this time, West Indians, as Commonwealth citizens, could enter as nurses (Beishon *et al.* 1995), and women from the French Caribbean played a similar role in France, whereas southern Europeans, especially Portuguese women, found it easier to get work permits as domestics in Britain (see [Chapter 8](#)). Canada now demands higher standards of education and experience, so that West Indians have been largely displaced by Filipinas, as described by Pratt in [Chapter 2](#), and Stiell and England in [Chapter 3](#). Young Europeans can now enter the United States on special visas, as au pairs, to work as household helpers. These visas dictate the number of hours to be worked per week and the minimum wages to be paid but there is much non-compliance.<sup>11</sup> Japan does not allow employment of domestic servants in Japanese homes, limiting foreign female migrants to work in the entertainment industry, or for diplomats based in Japan. In Pakistan, because of the problems faced by their migrant maids in the Middle East, only older women were allowed to take jobs there. In India, changes in the demographic structure of migration streams have resulted in domestic service changing from a male occupation to one for older women, and, more recently for younger women, according to Raghuram ([Chapter 13](#) of this book).

Such labour market segregation is a function of official immigration and employment policies, both national/federal and state/provincial, as described by Mattingly in [Chapter 4](#), by Anderson in [Chapter 7](#) and by Cox in [Chapter 8](#), and of stereotyping by gatekeeping agencies and employers (Bakan and Stasiulis 1995), as illustrated by Pratt in [Chapter 2](#), by England and Stiell in [Chapter 3](#), by Cox in [Chapter 8](#) and by Narula in [Chapter 9](#). It is also influenced by national immigrant networks, which tend to reinforce the concentration of certain groups of people in domestic service in particular countries (Campani 1993). This phenomenon is also described by Raghuram (see [Chapter 13](#)), Miklavčič-Brezigar and Barbič (see [Chapter 10](#)) and Miles (see [Chapter 12](#)).

### Remittances

Foreign-exchange remittances from these workers have become vital to many of the governments of the labour-exporting countries, as well as to the families of individual workers, as detailed by Miklavčič-Brezigar and Barbič (see [Chapter 10](#)). Although it is difficult to separate money sent by women domestic workers from that remitted by other migrants, and an unknown proportion goes through informal, and therefore unrecorded channels, it is estimated that in the whole of Asia, overseas workers in 1995 sent home some US\$75 billion, about one-third more than was received in foreign aid. Since the proportion of women among these migrants has been growing, and, generally, women are more consistent and reliable transmitters of remittances to their families back home, a high proportion of such remittances must come from women domestic workers.

Chin (1997:365) suggests that Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers remitted between one-third and one-half of their monthly earnings to their families. In 1994, remittances from foreign domestic workers were the third largest source of foreign exchange for Sri Lanka. Samarasinghe (1998) states that in 1994, 84 percent of Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East were women, with even more being recruited to work in Singapore, Italy, Greece and Cyprus. These women saved well over 90 percent of their earnings, according to Samarasinghe, and remitted almost all of these savings home. Most of this money goes into paying off debt (Ismail and Momsen 1997) and improving their homes. Such economic targets are usually met (Ismail and Momsen 1997; Miklavčič-Brezigar and Barbič [Chapter 10](#) of this book). Unfortunately, a large number of husbands quit their jobs as soon as their wife starts sending money back, and with family needs and expectations continuing to grow, she is forced to accept a further contract in order to support the family when she returns home after completion of her initial contract (Ismail and Momsen 1997). The figures also fail to take into account remittances in kind, such as clothes, toys and electronic items, that are sent or brought back by these workers.

Clearly, the trade in female domestic workers is so important financially to the sending countries, and to the families of the migrant workers, that it is impossible for it to be stopped. For governments, such as that of the Philippines, which is faced with structural adjustment of its economy and a growing population, the export of young workers reduces the number of unemployed, and thus the danger of social disaffection. It also provides a cheap flexible labour force, willing to undertake low-paid work in the recipient countries: this allows employment of these countries' skilled female workers outside the home, without the need for government social services to replace their reproductive work. This commodification of the transnational 'maid trade' between the global south and the rich industrialised nations of the north, is beneficial to both exporting and receiving countries, and has become highly politicised, with profits being taken by official and unofficial agencies at all stages of the migration process.

### **Education**

Many people ascribe this migration predominantly to the push factors of poverty at home (Enloe 1989), but we should not ignore the importance of individual decision-making. Both structure and agency are involved in migration, and the more educated the worker is, the more likely it is that she has made a personal decision to move. People taking jobs as domestic workers are not necessarily the poorest and least skilled. Migrants are increasingly well-educated and from families with sufficient income to fund the costs of migration. Ismail ([Chapter 14](#) of this book) shows that it is the better educated Muslim women who migrate to the Middle East from Sri Lanka, and Campani's research in Tuscany indicated that most Filipina domestics were from lower-middle-class families, with 70 to 80 percent having completed high school (Campani 1993:197). Domestic workers



going to Canada under the Live-In Caregiver Programme now must have finished high school and have some experience of childcare work. Pratt (1997:173) reports that Canadian nanny agents trivialised Filipinas' educational attainments, in order to provide a 'comfortable rationale to Canadian households for what might otherwise be conceived of as a highly contradictory situation: low-priced, well-educated labour'. It is perhaps not surprising that several of the Filipina maids interviewed by Pratt, complained of becoming de-skilled during the two years they had to spend in domestic service (see [Chapter 2](#)), as did West Indian domestics in New York (Colen 1990), and former weavers from Tamil Nadu in Delhi (see Raghuram in [Chapter 13](#)). In 1995, 17 percent of Filipinas in Singapore had a university degree, and 45 percent had some tertiary education (Gonzalez 1997: 15). Mattingly ([Chapter 4](#) of this book) also notes that the current economic crisis in Mexico is leading to the migration of trained teachers and nurses to the United States, where they can earn more as maids than they can working in their professions in Mexico.

On the other hand, Pappas-DeLuca ([Chapter 6](#) of this book) argues that rural migrants in Chile take jobs as domestics in Santiago, in the hope that they will also be able to advance their education in the city. Such an aspiration is often frustrated in the case of maids in South Africa, according to le Roux ([Chapter 11](#) of this book) and for Filipinas in Vancouver ([Chapter 2](#) of this book). Many workers are mothers, and seek the relatively high-paying jobs as surrogate mothers in other people's homes in large cities or overseas, in order to allow their children to be better educated and to lead more comfortable lives (see [Chapters 6](#) and [17](#)).

Although the presence of the domestic worker may maintain the patriarchal family ideal of gendered divisions of labour,<sup>12</sup> the worker herself may be utilizing these traditional ideas to free herself from restrictive family control and to seek for new opportunities, according to Pappas-DeLuca (see [Chapter 6](#)) and Ismail (see [Chapter 14](#)). Much work on migrant domestic workers sees them only as victims, forced to take up this work by poverty. However, it is only the more enterprising who dare to undertake such migration and although economic issues may be foremost in their decision-making (Ismail and Momsen 1997), many are seeking adventure, freedom, independence, education, training and social upward mobility. A few succeed spectacularly, as shown by Ismail in [Chapter 14](#). Despite the incredible restrictions and controls imposed by employers and immigration laws, many maids develop systems of resistance.

### **The space of domestic work**

Domestic service, by its location within the private domestic space of the employer, transgresses the boundaries of the public/private, production/reproduction dichotomies. Such dualisms are based on power, and are socially constructed in order to maintain an opposition between sameness and difference (Pile 1994). Furthermore, as Radcliffe (1993:103) has argued, 'the reality of women's lives goes beyond simple dichotomies, and is embedded in active

engagement with subjecthood, identity and social transformation'. Domestic space can be seen as a contact zone, within which, negotiations over 'otherness' and identity, based on race, class, religion, age, education, sophistication and citizenship are constantly underway (see [Chapter 17](#)). These negotiations are not always based on a unidirectional power relationship, but change as the household becomes ever more dependent on the alien, the 'other' who is in the midst of the most private confines of the family. Buang (1997) looks at the tension between the benefits and constraints for employers of migrant housemaids in Malaysia, and calls them 'elusive rescuers'. Pratt ([Chapter 2](#) of this book) shows how Canadian employers struggle to cope with a nanny's illness, or her days off. Dominance and deference, exploitation and engagement, are continuously restructuring the relative positions of employer and employee within the space of reproduction.

Pappas-DeLuca argues that this inter-dependency allows the maid to develop a space of resistance. She sees this as a complex situation, in which physical and social mobility are literally and figuratively in conflict. The prospect of work in the apparently protected space of a private home may have persuaded the maid's parents/husbands to allow them to leave the haven of their own home, and to move to the city or to a different country (Jelin 1977). Indeed, some employers see the offer of free accommodation within their home, especially to refugee women, as a form of charity, which should be sufficient reward for the work expected of these migrant women (see [Chapter 7](#) of this book). The spatial and physical restrictions experienced by domestic workers within their employers' households, parallel the constraints they experience in the wider society as a result of their sex and class. In [Chapter 6](#), there is an exploration of how migrant maids negotiate with their physical spaces, as well as their gender roles, in apparent attempts to maximise their mobility within employers' households and, thus, in society at large.

This space of resistance may be seen as a Third Space', created by the very act of labour migration. McDowell (1995) suggests that the largely metaphorical locational terminology of postmodernism, is now paralleled by the dislocations caused by the reshaping of the real world, as migrant flows move over ever-greater distances, and women, in particular, move from the margins to the centre. Such large-scale movement of women, personalises and feminises a tension between the global and the local, which Bhabha (1994) sees as creating new and transitional, or hybrid, identities through the intermixing of peoples. Living within the private space of a strange family, caring for children and performing menial tasks for them, accelerates such hybridisation of identity for domestic workers. Bhabha (1994:218) further suggests that this migration opens up 'a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences. He defines the residents of this third space as continuously remaking the boundaries and challenging the bases of difference. Such is the hybrid identity of maid and mistress, with similarities of femininity and motherhood sometimes overcoming differences of race and class. Similarly, sex tourism in the Philippines can be viewed from the perspective of

negotiated spaces of identity, with the bar as a third space, within which differences between Western men and Filipinas are negotiated (Laws 1997:110). The private space of the maid within the employer's household private space has to be negotiated, and there is strong resistance to sharing this space with a child (see Yeoh and Huang in [Chapter 17](#) of this book) or with another employee (see Miles in [Chapter 12](#)).

Outside the workplace, a parallel negotiation takes place within the host country, and a third-space meeting place for maids is often created as a place of sustenance and resistance. This may be a community centre, as in Vancouver ([Chapter 2](#)), a refuge provided by the Church ([Chapter 10](#)), or even a public park where nannies can gather on their days off, as in Hong Kong ([Chapter 16](#)). Where the dominant presence of an immigrant group is resented by local residents, a private third space consisting of a supportive network offering job openings, legal advice and cheap overseas telephone calls (Sørensen 1998); or emergency accommodation and cultural activities (as in Vancouver); contact with compatriots and religious support, as described by Miklavčič-Brezigar and Barbič ([Chapter 10](#) of this book) for Slovenians in Egypt and Italy; or the short-term emergency job replacements mentioned by Raghuram in [Chapter 13](#), provides an opportunity for the reinforcement of local identities.

### **Organisation of the Book**

The chapters have been organised by continent, because these reflect quite different circuits of migration, with distinctive legal restrictions and nationalities involved. Filipinas are global workers to be found on all continents; Sri Lankans, although still going mainly to the Middle East, are beginning to move more widely, and Europeans are taking up élite positions in North America. However, on the whole, migration is short distance. Most domestic workers in the United States are from Mexico and the Caribbean; in Europe, they come from southern and eastern Europe and North Africa, and in Asia from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, to Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. The coverage is well balanced, with three chapters on North America, two on South America, four on Europe, two on Africa south of the Sahara, two on South Asia, and three on South East and East Asia.

All the authors base their findings on interviews, usually of employees, sometimes of employers, as in the case of Hong Kong and Singapore ([Chapters 16 and 17](#)) and London ([Chapter 8](#)), sometimes of gatekeepers ([Chapters 3, 8 and 14](#)), and often of all three. In preparing their chapters, contributors were asked to consider the varying perceptions revealed by the interviews, the impact of official gatekeepers on migration for domestic work, and the major characteristics associated with this work in their own particular research site. The sixteen chapters include six on internal, rural-to-urban migration ([Chapters 5, 6, 11, 12, 13 and 15](#)), two involving daily commuting in part ([Chapters 4 and 10](#)), and eight on

international labour migration, of which five ([Chapters 2, 3, 14, 16 and 17](#)) involve short-term contract migration.

Several themes emerge, cross-cutting all regions. First, is the stereotyping and representation of maids by employers and agencies, and in migration rules. This stereotyping is based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, education, religion and linguistic ability, and results in a degree of 'otherness' for all domestic servants. However, such a formalisation of difference does not always put the servant in the subordinate position, and can vary from place to place. Professionally-trained British nannies occupy an élite niche in Britain and North America, and may indeed be seen as looking down on their employers (Stiell and England in [Chapter 3](#) of this book). In Malaysia, Indonesians are considered better workers than Filipinas, although they are paid less (Chin 1997). In Canada, Filipinas are preferred to West Indians, because they are seen as less aggressive ([Chapter 3](#)). Filipinas also benefit from their ability to speak English and Spanish, and their Roman Catholicism, in Europe. Sri Lankan Muslims are preferred in the Middle East as being most suitable for childcare in Muslim families, and the ability of most Sri Lankans to speak some English makes them welcome in Singapore.

Second, is the distinction between working as a live-in domestic and living out. In countries where living in is a condition of entry, as in Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Middle East, it is especially resented as a control over the worker, leaving her vulnerable to exploitation and ill-treatment. On the other hand, the provision of accommodation may be a very important benefit for a newly-arrived migrant, as discussed by Raghuram in [Chapter 13](#), allowing them to save money and minimise travel-to-work time, as African research shows (see [Chapters 11 and 12](#)). Most will move out as soon as possible in order to have privacy, set up their own family (Pappas-DeLuca in [Chapter 6](#)) or have their own piece of land on which to be buried. Having your own home and working on a daily basis is seen by many immigrant women as a first step in upward social and professional mobility (Campani 1993). Often, working for several households can bring in more income than living-in and working for one family, (see Mattingly in [Chapter 4](#) and le Roux in [Chapter 11](#)).

A third theme is the importance of networks. Networks of kinfolk may be important in obtaining the job (see [Chapters 2, 6, 13 and 15](#)). Organisations established by the church, labour unions or non-governmental organisations<sup>13</sup> for domestic workers, might provide support, training and advice (see [Chapters 6 and 10](#)). Organisations set up by domestic workers themselves, may also be of vital importance for newly arrived migrants (see [Chapter 2](#) of this book and Sørensen 1998), in providing services and a place to which they can go in their time off.

Migration for work in domestic service, although having deep historical roots, has been reinvented in the last two decades, in response to the global spread of neo-liberal economic policies and the increased paid employment of women. It has now become a transnational activity, in which women leave their native land to work for a short period in a foreign country, in order to support the families left behind. The impact of this new activity on the women themselves and their

families,<sup>13</sup> and its future trajectory in the face of what may be a global recession, will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

### Notes

- 1 In this chapter the terms 'maid', 'housemaid', 'domestic' and 'domestic worker' are used interchangeably to denote an individual worker undertaking a range of reproductive tasks for a private household.
- 2 In 1993, in a village in Yunnan, southern China, I was told by the village leader that the local government had just that year passed a law forbidding parents to sell their daughters as 'housekeepers'. Two years earlier, in an even more remote minority village in the mountains of Yunnan, I met a man who had been captured as a child some forty years earlier in battles between rival warlords, and enslaved by his captors. Such slavery did not end officially until 1956. He was ethnically different from other villagers, but had eventually been allowed to marry and was integrated into the community of his former enemy: both he and the village leaders were willing to talk openly about this episode in local history. Hooper (1998) reported that there were 25,000 foreign prostitutes in Italy including Nigerians, Albanians and Poles, many of whom had been abducted from their own countries or lured to Italy with promises of formal sector jobs. Most had had their identification papers taken away and were kept under tight control by their captors and/or pimps so that very few have been able to appeal to local authorities for assistance.
- 3 My mother-in-law, who lived in Rio de Janeiro from the 1920s until the 1970s, employed six full-time household staff. Her daughter, who lived in São Paulo, had one full-time live-in maid, while today, her grandchildren living in Brazil have only once-weekly cleaning ladies. When my mother-in-law retired to the United States, she managed with three full-time immigrant household staff. Her children in North America turned to immigrant (Mexican, Jamaican-English) mother's helps for childcare, and one of her grandchildren offered childcare for others in her own home. Her nephew in Paris employs a male Sri Lanka Tamil refugee. Today, the Swiss nanny who worked for the family in Rio, lives a comfortable life in Los Angeles, at the age of 94, being cared for by the youngest of her charges, a woman, and by the son of another of her former (male) charges.
- 4 Economic crisis and falling prices for petroleum combined with improvements in women's education, are overcoming social restrictions on working women in Muslim countries. *The Economist* (1998b: 48) reported that there were now over 250,000 working women in Saudi Arabia, many of whom were utilizing electronic media (telephone, fax and the soon-to-be, on-line e-mail) to run businesses, while still avoiding meeting men face to face.
- 5 See for example the Louise Woodward case, where an English au pair, described as a nanny, was convicted of murdering her young charge. The mother, an ophthalmologist, was severely criticised by the media for leaving her child in an employee's care.
- 6 When I employed a Jamaican mother's help in Calgary, Canada, she had never before been out of Jamaica. She was puzzled by the 'hole in the wall' (the fireplace), the use of blankets on the beds and the loss of all greenery in the garden as temperatures fell in the autumn. Both the Jamaican, and the English woman whom I employed

when I had my second child, could not believe the Albertan winter weather of brilliant sunshine with below-zero temperatures. Despite repeated warnings, the Jamaican went out without gloves and got incipient frostbite in her fingers, and the English woman, a trained nurse, on a weekend backpacking trip to the Rockies, had to be airlifted out with hypothermia. Fortunately, I had insisted that she be accompanied on this excursion by Albertan students trained in mountain survival techniques. She later married one of these companions and now lives in British Columbia.

- 7 Only in cases of high-profile employers, is the legality of such workers checked in the United States. When Jane Harman ran as a candidate for governor of California in 1998, she was criticised for employing a British nanny, from 1989 to 1992 who did not have the legal right to work in the United States. This issue was first raised when Harman won her congressional seat in 1992. In 1993, both Kimba Wood and Zoe Baird had their nominations by President Clinton for attorney general rejected, after revelations that they had hired undocumented immigrant women as nannies. In 1998, the 'nanny tax', which, in the United States, is owed on wages paid to child-care providers, housecleaners and other in-home workers, was reportedly one of the taxes least likely to be paid, because it was rarely enforced. The number of households paying this tax fell from 500,000 in 1994, immediately following the Wood and Baird cases, to 314,000 in 1996 (Johnston 1998).
- 8 In 1984, legal, non-EU foreign female domestic workers made up only 6 percent of the total, but by 1987 they constituted 52.2 percent of the total number of registered domestic workers (Campani 1993:206). The main source nations were the Philippines, the Cape Verde Islands, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, El Salvador and Peru (Campani 1993). Hoskyns and Orsini-Jones (1995:63) explain the importance of domestic workers in Italy as follows: 'Italian women are very house-proud and like to have a helper in the house. Since very few indigenous Italian women are willing to work as [domestic servants], the immigrant [domestic servant] is usually the easiest choice, as she is relatively easy to find, works long hours and, if undocumented, cannot complain of the way she is treated by her employers.' They also blame the inefficiencies of the Italian welfare system, which forces Italian women to look after old and sick relatives, thus increasing the need for help in the house (Campani 1993). Despite recent attempts to regularise undocumented immigrants and tighten border controls, Italy is still seen as a relatively easy route for illegal entry into the European Union (Campani 1993).
- 9 The Philippines is the only Asian country to have ratified this Convention by December, 1997.
- 10 The H1-A program that admitted foreign nurses, expired in 1996. About 35,000 H-1A visas were issued to foreign nurses between 1989 and 1996. The United States House of Representatives immigration subcommittee held a hearing on November 5th, 1997, on a bill that would permit up to 500 foreign nurses to enter the United States each year to work at hospitals in poor neighbourhoods.

The demand for nurses is still there, especially for geriatric care. In January, 1998, the United States government broke up a ring that brought nurses into the United States fraudulently, under a temporary foreign-nurses program intended to alleviate nursing shortages. Five Americans, led by Billy Denver Jewell, a Texan owner of 22 nursing homes, pleaded guilty to submitting more than 1,100 fraudulent petitions to bring in registered nurses. The Filipina and Korean nurses brought in by Jewell, paid recruiters in their countries between \$1,500 and \$7,500 for visas, and Jewell

collected another \$1,000 to \$1,500 from each nurse employed in his nursing homes. Jewell paid them between \$5 and \$9 an hour, instead of the prevailing wage of \$14 per hour. The State Department's Diplomatic Security Service said that this was the largest visa fraud investigation ever conducted in the United States (Martin 1998).

- 11 The United States exchange visitor program, issues J-1 visas to foreigners coming to the United States as part of a cultural exchange program. One part of the J-1 program is the au pair program, which was made permanent by 1997 legislation. The United States Information Agency, rather than the Department of Labor, administers the au pair program, which has brought about 50,000 European domestic helpers to the United States since it started in 1986. About 8,000 were expected in 1997. The au pair program is meant to provide an educational and cultural exchange 'with a childcare component,' in which the employee is treated as an equal by the employer. Under regulations adopted in February, 1995, to curb past abuses, United States households must pay au pairs at least \$155 a week, for a maximum of 10 hours a day and 45 hours of responsibility a week. Au pairs caring for children under 2 years of age must be at least 21 years old and have 200 documented hours of childcare experience.

Eight agencies are certified to bring au pairs to the United States. They charge families in the United States between \$3,000 and \$4,000 to find an au pair for them, and then counsel the family and the visiting foreigner while they are together. One agency advertises that 'au pairs are cheaper than daycare.' Most au pairs must post a bond with the agency that arranges for them to enter the United States.

In November, 1997, a 19-year-old British au pair, Louise Woodward, was convicted of second-degree murder when the baby in her care died. However, the judge reduced her crime to manslaughter and sentenced her to time-served, resulting in her immediate release. Clearly, the regulations for au pairs were not followed in this case.

- 12 The patriarchal household is further maintained by the common belief that the salary of the domestic worker is related only to the earning power of the wife and mother. In Canada, the tax system reinforces this by allowing the costs of childcare to be deducted from the income of the lowest-paid member of the employing household, usually, and formerly, specifically, the mother.
- 13 I have received a great deal of help from Fe Caridad M. Sarmiento, an NGO worker from the Philippines, and Sih Handayani, who founded an NGO in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 1992, to empower domestic workers. Both Fe and Sih were awarded Fellowships in 1998 under the program funded by the Ford Foundation run by the Gender and Global Issues Group at the University of California, Davis, in the Spring Quarter of 1998. They are both working to train domestic workers and to make them aware of their rights.

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