
CREATING BOUNDARIES IN THE POLITICS OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR: SRI LANKAN MAIDS IN THE KUWAITI HOME¹⁾

INTRODUCTION — Over the past few decades, in a global context of economic neoliberalism and labor market flexibilization, care work²⁾ worldwide has been increasingly commoditized, defamilized, and foreignized. As a consequence, women, primarily from less-developed countries, are increasingly on the move, filling growing care deficits in private households in developed and/or more affluent countries in a globally interconnected world. At the receiving end, under the auspices of global capitalism, these migrant women substitute for upper- and middle-class women who are no longer able to perform ‘unpaid’ social reproductive labor due to their entry into the labor market as salaried workers or are no longer interested in the drudgery of ‘unpaid’ household work, the constantly made-over status symbol of women. Social reproductive labor is therefore the basis of an employment relationship between two women, maid and mistress, who occupy very different class stations. These class stations are neither fixed nor given but continually (re)produced and challenged in the politics of (paid) household labor. Indeed, the maid’s ‘otherization’ and the mistress’s affirmation of the status quo takes place on a daily basis in the not-so-private world of the home and family life. The category of women is thus at once challenged and stabilized, as too are the binary and familial concepts of care and the women’s lives that apparently coalesce around it. It is within this context that in this paper I scrutinize the (re)making of ‘self’ and ‘other’ distinctions between maid and mistress through the daily politics of household labor. Defined as everyday practices, rules, rituals, and symbolism of constructing family and work, the daily politics of household labor produces feelings of intimacy and distance as well as the images of mistress and maid in the domestic space. My research examines a dynamic maid–mistress relationship in the Global South, characterizing Sri Lankan migrant maids and their mistresses in oil-rich Kuwait. The two women forge a curiously intimate labor relationality that casts new light on ‘sameness’ as much as on ‘difference’—making and breaking boundaries—in the complex organization of reproductive labor.

— Based on my fieldwork in Kuwait in 2022, I offer a qualitative, post-structuralist analysis of the phenomena, the micropolitics of domestic labor, boundary work, and ‘self’/‘other’ identities. The field interviews were carried out on the premises of the Sri Lankan

1)

This paper is based on research within the FWF Lise-Meitner Programme project: “‘Ideal’ Migrant Subjects: Domestic Service in Globalization” (M 2724-G) led by Wasana Handapangoda (applicant/chair) and Brigitte Aulenbacher (co-applicant/mentor), Johannes Kepler University Linz, Austria (duration: 11/2019–04/2023).

2)

This is all the work related to the provision of everyday caring needs, including household chores and care for the elderly, children and frail performed in and for a private household or households.

Mission in Kuwait and focused on two different groups of participants: live-in Sri Lankan migrant maids and Kuwaiti employers of Sri Lankan maids. Notably, in a society where the spatial options and behaviors of women are largely restricted and controlled as defined conventionally, meeting with female Kuwaiti employers as potential interviewees was challenging and limited. In these circumstances, my field interviews with the male employers were used as an informative window into the employment relationship between their wives (mistresses) and Sri Lankan maids in the private Kuwaiti home (Handapangoda forthcoming). Together with my field observations, the interviews yielded important insights into the employment relationship between Sri Lankan maids and their Kuwaiti mistresses. It is an intimate relationship, yet bounded by different social locations, which are sustained, contested, and reproduced through the daily politics of household labor concerning space, food, clothing, and religious faith in the private home.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE — Linked to the legacies of slavery and colonialism, domestic work has long represented class and race hierarchies in the most intimate sphere (Lan 2003: 535), making the domestic labor relationship between maid and mistress a politically charged terrain of class-based and racialized troubles and struggles. Today against the backdrop of rising neoliberal globalization and labor migration, the historically fraught image of the maid has been increasingly replaced by that of ‘migrant maids’ from developing countries worldwide, who have repositioned the maid–mistress relationship within an ever-widening matrix of power (Nakano Glenn 1992: 1–43). Migrant domestic work constitutes an employment relationship between two women characterized by unequal dependencies and thus imbalances in power and inequalities; women are structurally connected by gender while simultaneously divided along various other intersecting social axes, such as class, race, nationality, religion, and immigration status (Yeates 2012: 135–154). Migrant domestic work thus represents an ideal space within which the female subject is at once located and dislocated, rendering the essentialist construction of women as common victims of capitalist patriarchy effectively non-pertinent.

— Hiring migrant maids involves an interactive process of establishing, reproducing, and contesting social and spatial boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The boundaries are drawn along structural lines of (in)equality, forming ‘socio-categorical boundaries,’ and through the divides that establish the public/

private zones, constituting 'socio-spatial boundaries' (Lan 2003: 525–526). Migrant maids are subjected to everyday regulation and disciplining of the body, emotions, and sexuality, as Casanova points out (Masi de Casanova 2013: 562.), through which the employers set the boundaries and manage any boundary-threatening situations that may arise in the domestic workplace. This involves domestic politics concerning the choices and conditions of employment, such as food and space, appearance/clothing, movements and privacy, via which the employer constructs 'self' and 'other' identities and social ranks (Lan 2003; Casanova 2013). That said, these everyday interactions simultaneously represent the territories within which maids negotiate their bodies, actions, space, and affects, making the boundaries that exist permeable and/or constructing alternative boundaries (Lan 2003: 525). Identity in the domestic workplace is therefore co-authored by maids and mistresses, for which process the narrative of the Sri Lankan migrant maid and Kuwaiti mistress provides an informative case of analysis.

CREATING BOUNDARIES OF 'SELF' AND 'OTHER' IN THE DAILY POLITICS OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR _____

The Kuwaiti mistress's home provided both the working and the living space for the Sri Lankan maid. Home was therefore shaped by the ideologies of family as well as (paid) work, thus embodying different meanings for the two women, maid and mistress. In the home they were tied by a mutually dependent relationship: the maid relied on the mistress for her job that she could not afford to lose while the mistress relied on the maid for everyday household work and family care that freed her, to a greater degree, from the burden of unpaid household work, allowing her to pursue her own passions and interests, including paid work as a 'career woman'. In the home they were thus connected by the traditional gender division of labor that determines spatial divisions, where everything that is related to the sense of home constitutes the women's world in both Kuwait and Sri Lanka (Fathi 2021: 979–993). Through everyday rules, rituals and practices, they negotiated, affirmed, and contested their social positions in the home, which were very different yet at times comparable in significant ways. The conceptions of 'self' and 'other' were thus (re)constructed in an everyday struggle between the mistress, the head of the Kuwaiti domestic space, and her maid through the politics of bodily actions, space, signs, and symbols in the home that embodied a locus of material, spatial, and symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

— In accordance with this view, what follows are narratives from the field, casting light on the ways Sri Lankan migrant maids and Kuwaiti mistresses engage with the conceptions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ through everyday exchanges, rules, and rituals of household labor.

— **SRI LANKAN MIGRANT MAIDS:**

Account 1:

“All the families I have worked for have been nice to me. Thank the Lord, Allah protect me. I work hard. We come here to work; I have no problem with it. Some say it’s hard and difficult. What our people [Sri Lankan maids] do is, they are always on the [mobile] phone. These people don’t like that. They pay us and just expect us only to work for them. ... Your religious faith is part of you; it is about what you believe in, a state of mind, isn’t it? I observe my daily Buddhist rituals like that, all in my mind. But in this country, half the time you believe in the Lord, Allah. I have been given everything; a phone, a separate room, clothes, even gold jewelry.”

Account 2:

“Most of the time, they [employers] would bring takeaway food except for me. I had nothing to eat; nothing in the fridge kept for me. *Mama* [mistress] kept everything in their fridge. I told her that I want to cook for myself. So, she told me to cook some vegetables, like eggplant or something like that. I had to do everything around the house. I cooked, cleaned, did the laundry for them, looked after their children, and did everything. I had to wear a uniform and cover my head. ... I was not allowed to talk with men. I could speak with *baba* [male employer] only when I was spoken to. I was not allowed to wear clothes that revealed my body. We think they are our family, but they aren’t: they will hit you with anything they can find and say anything to you that comes to their minds.”

Account 3:

“They [the employers] said they’d give me 4,000 dinars as a reward if I converted to Islam. No, I wouldn’t do that. You must work hard, listen to your employers and work as they please. You must look after their children with care, without scolding or hitting them. Only then will they pay your salary and be kindly to you.”

— **KUWAITI MISTRESSES:**

Account 1:

“... they [Sri Lankan maids] are not cheeky. They are polite; they accept anything, flexible. When I go to the kitchen, I can find dust and dirt under the fridge, behind the cupboards and all. I know they have not been cleaned up thoroughly. But she [her maid] has an excuse this time because she is working alone. So, I will not scold her, but tell her to clean up. But when there are two [maids], there is no excuse, no. I must be serious about not cleaning. If she deserves a mobile, that is only after she has proven to me that she's no trouble, yes. There are no days-off. If she is a liar, I don't like her. She should do her work, what I tell her to do, and be polite. If she is tired, she can tell me; 'sorry, madam, I cannot do it'; tell me openly without being afraid or lying to me.”

Account 2:

“I love Sri Lankans [maids]. She [her Sri Lankan migrant maid] has been with me for 26 or 28 years. Yes, she came to work for me when I had my first daughter. I love her. She is part of my family. She is like a second mom to all of us. She works very little now. She is old. What she does is only cooking and washing. I cannot press her to do more because she has worked more than enough. She speaks Arabic better than me [here, the interviewee was laughing]. Everyone in my family asks me how many more years I am going to keep her. I tell them until she wants to leave. I will never tell her to leave [said firmly].”

— Migrant domestic work has an inescapable ‘otherness’ ascribed to it. In the process of ‘otherization,’ space – physical, social, bodily and symbolic – proved critical. In the visible presence of an outsider, a foreigner and underling in the home 24/7, the mistresses deployed space as a strategic arrangement to construct family boundaries and to safeguard privacy (Lan 2003). The mistresses’ superior social position enabled them to stake claims to such arrangements and mark boundaries in their private homes. Therefore, separate spatial arrangements like servants’ rooms, bathrooms, and toilets prevented unwanted contact and intrusion on privacy for both parties in the usually extensive living spaces in Kuwaiti homes. The maids’ separate and demeaning spatial arrangements symbolized their inferior social status, amplifying their servitude, against which the mistresses’ superior social

status was highlighted. The spatial arrangements and controls also manifested the symbolic and bodily boundaries constructed around the maids that were connected to their subjectivity and sexuality: measures taken to save the ‘promiscuous migrant subject’ from her own body and any threat that her promiscuity might inflict upon the integrity of the morally righteous Kuwaiti family home (Handapangoda 2024). Such acts of restraint demonstrated the Kuwaiti mistresses’ unrestrained power in (re)constructing and (re)affirming the subjected position of their maids, which was entangled in tensions over categorical distinctions such as class, race, nationality, religion, and immigration status.

— The maids’ dual status as immigrants and domestic workers afforded them little juridical status in terms of workers’ rights, legal status, and freedoms, with absolutely no right to organize on Kuwaiti soil or in any of the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Organizing migrant maids in GCC countries is extremely challenging within the restrictive legal provisions dealing with them—especially *kafala*, an endemic law that exclusively ties migrant workers’ work and residence status to individual employers, denying them rights to unionization or entry into a labor dispute process. The isolated working conditions and limited mobility and privacy also placed migrant maids among the workers most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. However, this is not to say that the migrant maids were passive victims of circumstances. In their own ways they resisted against oppressive forces that intruded upon their spatial boundaries: from running away from the workplace to simply living with abuse, they used both defiance and compliance as household strategies to negotiate, defend, or simply surrender the right to space in disparate embodiments of ‘other.’

— Food has the capacity to mobilize strong emotions (Appadurai 1981: 494)—love, affection, and inclusion as much as disgust, shame, and exclusion. Daily food culture in the Kuwaiti home embodied critical practices through which everyday domestic labor relations were regulated and disciplined via the workers’ bodies (Ceradoy 2022: 922–937). The migrant maids were subjected to control of their food by the mistresses in many ways. These ranged from giving them insufficient food or the employers’ food waste, restricted food choices, the imposition of irregular and controlled mealtimes, to the maintenance of separate refrigerators for the employer’s family and the maid. Home thus became a place in which the maids were denied the right to food and food security. In addition, in receiving employers’ food waste that they had rejected and discarded (Ibid.), home was portrayed as a place in which

the proximity of dirt and filth was used to protect and maintain boundaries; and on this basis, class and racial distinctions were drawn in both bodily and symbolic form. Food control signified perhaps the most tangible and immediate form of boundary-making and power over the maids' bodies exercised in the Kuwaiti home through deprivation, abuse, humiliation, and surveillance. Food nevertheless acted as a locus for the maids to negotiate their place within the home. Through acts such as cooking separate food for themselves, refusing to eat undesirable food, buying separate food for themselves, or stealing food, they strove for the right to bodily integrity and for their place in the home.

— Appearance and clothing were the site of another critical, overtly established code of conduct within the private Kuwaiti home. The maids were enforced a strict dress code at work by their mistresses. They dressed in a maid's uniform, made of loose trousers and a shirt of a single color with a white frill collar and sleeves, as well as a head cap; through it their bodies were scrutinized and controlled. The uniform clearly distinguished the maids from the mistresses and the rest of the family. It was an outward manifestation of inferior social status and a symbol of 'otherness' imprinted on them under protest. The uniform signified a form of symbolic violence against the maids, where the mistresses monopolized the cultural codes and symbols, taking control of the maids' body and bodily space, over which they had exercised greater control and autonomy at home in Sri Lanka (Handapangoda forthcoming). Furthermore, the maids succumbing to wearing uniforms and the mistresses clothes – again dictated by the social conventions on 'appropriate' clothing for women in Kuwait – violated both maid's and mistress's right to bodily expression and bodily space in the most intimate sphere.

— In terms of religious faith, for the mistresses and their families as Muslims, living out Islam was a major part of everyday life in the private Kuwaiti home. This often positioned maids, who were mostly Buddhists, in a conflicting and confounding moral cosmos, where they found in religion a sense of emotional reassurance from the fears and anxieties of life in a foreign land. The mistresses often forced their religious beliefs, values, and attitudes upon the maids, obligating them to follow everyday Islamic rituals and practices, sometimes culminating in the extreme of religious conversion; the maids' spiritual space was thus intruded upon (Handapangoda 2024). In return, the maids practiced a range of everyday coping strategies in a simultaneous manifestation of resistance and obedience. These included keeping religious identity

a secret, borrowing a relatively 'favored' religious affiliation while secretly practicing their own religious rituals, refusing to give in to the mistresses' demands of faith, and religious conversion. Religious faith created a form of morally-based social division and associated outcomes of reward and retribution in the private Kuwaiti home.

CONCLUSION — In the dynamics of global inequality that push more and more women into the labor market, social reproductive labor represents an important realm for the production of identities and social inequalities. It simultaneously differentiates and consolidates the 'category of women' along structural lines: while gender forms a common denominator of 'oneness,' such social categories as class, race, nationality, religion, citizenship/immigration status, and language constitute structures of 'otherness,' creating overlapping, interdependent, and mutually constitutive systems of discrimination and privilege. Therefore, in a curiously intimate employment relationship bounded by intersecting structures, the maids and mistresses can become caught in a dynamic of dominance and submission, in which they practice mutual surveillance (Bohata 2017: 341–359). The rules, rituals, and practices of (paid) household labor, i.e., domestic politics concerning space, food, clothing, and religious faith, proved useful in this. The question of who can draw boundaries and to what extent may alternate between the two women, maid and mistress, with the maid often becoming the subject of boundary-making exercised through punishment and violence as well as reward and recognition. The boundaries are physical, social, bodily, and symbolic; they are policed and safeguarded, yet fluid, movable, and crossable.

— Sri Lankan women's emplacement as migrant maids in the Kuwaiti private home exposes social reproductive labor as a desirable commodity, thus setting off conflicting discourses of economic opportunity against hyper-precarity. It provides an opportunity to question the propriety of the intrusion of instrumental means into the reproductive realm and the de-centering of 'family' in the concept of care; yet it simultaneously unfolds the possibility of a more or less successful union between the reproductive and the productive that has become essential for a succession of transnational regimes of accumulation. 'Women's work' has been repositioned within a framework of capitalist production that treats various factors that determine social location, including but not limited to gender, class, race, nationality, religion, and immigration status, as fundamental to capitalist accumulation (Bohrer 2018: 46–74). In this way,

migrant domestic work provides a glaring example of the ways in which global inequalities have been anchored into the most intimate sphere, differentiating the ‘category of women’ and power dynamics not only between mistress and maid but also between maids.

// References

- Appadurai, Arjun (1981): Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia. In: *American Ethnologist* Vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 494–511.
- Bohata, Kirsti (2017): Mistress and Maid: Homoeroticism, Cross-class Desire and Disguises in Nineteenth-Century Fiction. In: *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 341–359.
- Bohrer, Ashley (2018): Intersectionality and Marxism: A Critical Historiography. In: *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 46–74.
- Casanova, Erynn, Masi (2013): Embodied Inequality: The Experience of Domestic Work in Urban Ecuador. In: *Gender & Society*, Vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 561–585.
- Fathi, Mastoureh (2021): Home-in-migration: Some critical reflections on temporal, spatial and sensorial perspectives. In: *Ethnicities*, Vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 979–993.
- Ham, Julie and Aaron Ceradoy (2021): God bless me with employers who don’t starve their helpers. Food insecurity and dehumanisation in domestic work. *Gender work and organization*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12643> (November 20, 2023).
- Handapangoda, Wasana (2024): Reproducing ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the micropolitics of paid domestic labour: Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. In: Carstensen, Birke, Riedner, Huke, (eds.), *Anthology of Migration and Work*, Weinheim, Beltz Juventa (forthcoming).
- Handapangoda, Wasana (forthcoming): (Re)Making Home(s) on the Move: Sri Lankan Live-in Migrant Domestic Workers in Kuwait. In: Pisco Costa, Sampson Lee Blair (eds.), *More than Just a ‘Home’: Understanding the Living Spaces of Families*, Emerald Insight.
- Hubert, R. R. (1969): The Maids as Children: A Commentary on Genet’s “Les Bonnes”. In: *Romance Notes* Vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 204–209.
- Lan, Pei-Chia (2003): Negotiating Social Boundaries and Private Zone: The Micropolitics of Employing Migrant Domestic Workers. In: *Social Problems* Vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 525–549.
- Nakano Glenn, Evelyn (1992): From Servitude to Service Work: The Historical Continuities of Women’s Paid and Unpaid Reproductive Labour. In: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 1–43.
- Yeates, Nicola (2012): Global Care Chains: A State-of-the-Art Review and Future Directions in Care Transnationalisation Research. In: *Global Networks* Vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 135–154.

// About the Author

Wasana Handapangoda has earned her doctoral degree in Global Society Studies from Doshisha University, Japan, in 2011. She is currently working as a visiting staff member in the Department of Development Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna, Austria. She was the principal investigator of the project, “Ideal” migrant subjects: Domestic service in globalisation, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Lise-Meitner Grant, M 2724-G (11/2019–04/2023) in the Department for the Theory of Society and Social Analyses, Institute of Sociology, Johannes Kepler University, Austria. Her current research interests lie in migration and social reproductive labour, intersectionality and identity politics, minority studies and embodied methods.

// FWK is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK

Sigrid Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Marietta Kesting /
Julia Noah Munier / Mona Schieren / Rosanna Umbach / Kea Wienand / Anja Zimmermann
// www.fkw-journal.de

// License

This work is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>

