



**Indonesian transnational female domestic workers: Between agency and
the commodification of love and care**

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ABSTRACT

The decision for being migrant domestic workers among Indonesian mothers often creates a dilemmatic situation for them. On the one hand, they really want to secure and save their family's economy and support their children's education. However, on the other hand, leaving their children in the home country for a long period of time produces a guilty feeling; in fact, they are stigmatized as irresponsible and bad mothers. This article discusses how the experiences of transnational migration among Indonesian mothers for being domestic workers abroad contribute to diversify the meanings and practices of motherhood, including mother-child relations. In this study, ten participants were interviewed and asked how the transnational migration enables them to reconstruct the traditional norms, structures, patterns, and arrangements of motherhood. The studies on new motherhood among migrant mothers reveal two distinctive conceptualizations of motherhood and parenthood that center in the role of sending money and gifts, which are the emotionalization of money and the commodification of love. This article elaborates dynamic and heterogenous reasons of being engaged in the commodification and commercialization of love and care among transnational mothers. I argue that through their consumption practices and behavior, Indonesian migrant domestic workers re(produce), negotiate and maintain their personal, familial, and social relationships with their children and their society to fit their motherhood role into accepted social expectations due to their physical absence.

Keywords: *Transnational migration; migrant domestic workers; new motherhood; money; gifts and consumption; women's agency.*

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ABSTRAK

Keputusan migrasi secara transnasional untuk menjadi pekerja rumah tangga di berbagai negara Asia menghadirkan situasi dilematis di kalangan perempuan yang menjadi ibu di Indonesia. Satu sisi, mereka ingin bekerja di luar negeri demi membuat ekonomi dan keuangan keluarga lebih terjamin, terutama demi kebutuhan pendidikan anak-anak mereka. Namun, keputusan meninggalkan anak-anak menghadirkan rasa bersalah karena mereka tidak bisa sepenuhnya terlibat pengasuhan. Dalam masyarakat kita, stigma bukan ibu yang baik dan sebagai ibu yang tidak bertanggungjawab tidak jarang dialamatkan pada ibu yang menjadi PRT migran. Studi tentang new motherhood, khususnya hubungan ibu-anak, sebagai efek migrasi internasional di kalangan perempuan yang berposisi sebagai ibu –yang berpusat pada kajian tentang pengiriman uang dan hadiah-- secara dominan memunculkan dua konseptualisasi dalam praktik menjadi ibu. Yang pertama adalah emosionalisasi materi, yaitu uang dan hadiah, dan, yang kedua, komodifikasi emosi (cinta). Dalam kajian ini, penulis mengeksplorasi kepentingan lebih dinamis dan beragam di balik komodifikasi dan komersialisasi kasih sayang melalui pengiriman uang dan hadiah di kalangan ibu pekerja rumah tangga migran. Berdasar penelitian tentang praktik pengiriman uang dan hadiah dengan mewancarai sepuluh pekerja rumah tangga migran Indonesia di Singapura yang berposisi sebagai ibu, studi ini mengobservasi kapasitas agensi (keberdayaan) para perempuan itu dalam mengadaptasi, menegosiasi, dan men-challenge norma dan praktek motherhood, parenthood, dan keluarga termasuk melawan stigma ibu tidak bertanggung jawab melalui komodifikasi dan komersialisasi “care” dalam relasi ibu-anak jarak jauh.

Kata Kunci: *Migrasi transnasional; pekerja rumah tangga migran; motherhood; uang; hadiah dan konsumsi; kapasitas agensi perempuan.*

1. INTRODUCTION

I am interested in the commodification of childrearing and the reconstruction of motherhood and childhood. I look at how Indonesian female migrant domestic workers (IFMDWs) re(construct) and re(produce) the discourse of mother-child relationships as a result of their experience as transnational mothers in transnational families. Cook (2004) stated that motherhood and childhood are socially constructed; childhood is not a given and natural category, but a social artifact with contradictory and inexact meanings. Therefore, motherhood and childhood are produced and reproduced in many ways for many different reasons and purposes.

There is a mainstream discourse and discursive practice on motherhood and childhood. Examples are how mothers must stay together with their children; mothers must play the main role in taking care of children; being together with children is the only way to express true love. Under such norms, a mother will view herself as not following the pattern and, to some extent, will consider herself an irresponsible mother. Female migrant workers are engaged in transnational families by constructing the meaning of motherhood while separated physically by distance, living without their children in proximity while they work in their employers' houses to earn income to feed their families, especially their children in Indonesia.

The social construction, ideology and institution of motherhood and the ideology of women's domesticity, of good mothers and wives are still persistent in Indonesia. In this paper, I argue that through their consumption practices and behavior, IFMDWs re(produce), negotiate and maintain their personal, familial, and social relationships with their children and their society to fit their motherhood role into accepted social expectations due to their physical and emotional absence from their families in Indonesia. I view this mother-child relationship as commodified and commercialized through monetary value and symbolic immaterial values of love and care for the sake of their children and to be good and responsible mothers.

I collected data by interviewing ten IFMDWs who work in Singapore and have left their children in Indonesia under their families' care. As they asserted, they must follow the strict rule of being restricted from bringing their children to their employers' houses. They felt uncomfortable, guilty, and uneasy. As a consequence, they decided to send everything they earn to their children and compensate their physical absence for a number of reasons. Here I discuss of how the experience of being migrant mothers shapes the mother-child relationship; how love in such relationships is materialized; how being transnational mothers in a transnational family contributes to changing family construction in Indonesia; and how the migrant women deal with the dilemma of being away from their children. Finally, how do they challenge the dominant norms in the social construction of motherhood? I conducted ten interviews to IFMDWs by using audio-recorded and did literature review based on some studies by scholars studying women's transnational migration. I use the ten narratives to analyze my data qualitatively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Transnational Families and Transnational Mothers

Parreñas (2005) argued that transnational families occur in the context of care resource extraction, creating structured global gender inequality and inequity. Gender contestation occurred among migrant women and mothers who leave their families, especially the children left behind, demanding that they perform care and be responsible for emotional and material well-being. A characteristic of the globalization of contemporary paid domestic work is inequalities. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) identified three forms of inequalities: first, the rise of paid domestic work performed by women who leave their countries, families, communities and any social support; second, women from poor and even high strata of socio-economic class go to the more richly developed countries as part of colonialism; and, third, the incline of international migration of women laborers called "global cinderellas" (Lan 2006), "servants of globalization" (Parreñas 2002), "workers of dirty work" (Zarembka 2003, Anderson 2000), "dreamseekers" (Anggraeni 2006), and "global women" (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002). Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) studied "transnational motherhood," referring to a variation in the organizational arrangements, meanings, and priorities of motherhood, and showed how migrant domestic workers reconstruct the meaning of motherhood and rearrange matters to accommodate the spatial and temporal separation as they try to find a strategy of transnational mothering. Being transnational mothers is more than being biological mothers who raise their own children. They change the practices, definitions, and meanings of motherhood.

Fransisco (2015) studied Filipina transnational mothers who worked as domestic workers in New York City with their families left behind in Manila. As they became transnational mothers, defined as “separated mothers from their young children for an extended amount of time,” (p. 233), they created their own meaning of motherhood. They produced it through imagined and material familial relations and used it as a resource for organizing solidarity and mobilization on common issues, such as abusive and exploitative working conditions among other issues. Transnational motherhood is not only as “physical circuits of migration but as the circuits of affection, caring, and financial support that transcend national borders, provides an opportunity to gender views of transnationalism and immigration” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997: 550). They argued that transnational mothering is the arrangement of motherhood to accommodate the temporal and spatial separation.

Parreñas (2015) called the transnational family a postmodern family as it shifts the notion and practice of traditional and modern family norms, family arrangements and the nuclear family. Parreñas (2005) studied the Philippine women migrant workers who have to deal with the paradoxical situation by which they gain financial security to support their families, while at the same time having to face the emotional insecurity of being separated with them, especially their children.

2.2. Good and Responsible Mothers: The Construction of Motherhood

Parreñas’ research (2015) on the Filipino diaspora in Los Angeles and Rome who work as domestic workers had a similar notion regarding the transnational family, seeing it as a family whose members are located in at least two countries. They keep maintaining their transnational families. Most of them are breadwinners and regularly send remittances home to their elderly parents, children, or other relatives. Lan (2006) conducted interviews in Taipei with the Philippine and Indonesian workers called “global cinderellas” who as transnational breadwinners tried to reinforce and conform to gender boundaries to be “good” mothers from afar who live in geographical separation with their children. To compensate for their physical absence from the family and inability to take care of, love and have intimate relationships with their children.

Parreñas (2005) argued that they need to act as “super moms” to be able to fill the emotional gaps and physical distance in their own families. Domestic workers, therefore, commodified their love and compensated for their absence with material goods to sustain a comfortable middle-class style for their families, particularly for their children (Parreñas 2015). Lan (2006) discussed how migrant mothers are involved in the practice of “transnational homemaking” to play their roles as domestic workers and long-distance nurturers/mothers. They maintain transnational family relations apart from their physical absence from the household reproduction and caring through the flow of goods, sending money, communicating from a distance.

In Indonesian context, as a political way to coerce women into conforming to the state narrative about being women, the Soeharto administration (1967-1998) appeared to produce and apply two different and contradictory forms of gender politics. On one hand, the government created the ideology of traditional motherhood that promoted traditional gender roles of women and based on this, made a distinction between good and bad mothers. Good

mothers were portrayed as domesticated women who stayed at home, did household chores, took care of the house and children, and obediently served their husbands. They were the pillars of the nation. Meanwhile, bad mothers were construed as women in the public sphere who engage in politics, abandon home and children, were critical of the government, and were disloyal to their husbands. They were a threat of the state (Irawaty 2017). The government imposed the ideology of *state ibuism* or maternalism that incorporates economic, political, and cultural elements coming from the concept and practice of *priyayi* (Javanese bourgeois) of “*Housewifisation*” (Suryakusuma 1996). On the other hand, the government applied the politics of economic developmentalism by pushing women to participate in the labor market to meet the national need of a cheap labor supply.

Gram and Pedersen (2016) pointed out the mythology of the good mother and the gap between ideal motherhood that becomes pervasive, and realities could trigger depression, so a lot of literature position mothers as passive victims. Though some women tried to bridge the gap between the ideals and the realities there are only limited options available to them. They still have choices in terms of the socially accepted alternatives. For some societies, there is still a strong gender norm that says women should have to stay at home to care for and nurture their children.

Motherhood is about women’s expectations and experiences (Miller 2005). Miller explored how women fell into essentialism in becoming mothers by “doing the right thing.” I argue, motherhood is about the family’s and society’s expectations of how women as mothers are supposed to play their roles and how mothers should behave, treat their children, and perform their role. In a patriarchal society, women are under the surveillance of family, society, and religious and other institutions, and even the state. By using Foucault (1995), I draw a concept of surveillance, especially of mothers, to discipline and control them to be correct and productive mothers according to the social norms and expectations. This ideology of motherhood comes into practice through socialization mechanisms and discipline bodies in society that make women themselves keep practicing and internalizing those ideologies in their lives.

2.3. Materializing and Commodification of Feelings (Love and Care) and Childrearing

In a consumer culture, motherhood cannot be separated from the construction process of it and the accumulation of things as well as the social construction, manipulation, and the commodification of emotion. Clarke (2007, 2016) raised a point that the materiality of things is inseparable from the politics of mothering and the construction of the mothers and children, and it becomes a social process coming from social relationships. Coe (2014) showed that migration facilitates the commodification of love because migrant parents, specifically women as mothers, try to compensate for their parental absence and replace emotional intimacy and presence with material goods and remittances. To prove themselves good mothers, some women put much effort into commodifying their love and emotions through buying and providing material goods and providing the best education for their children.

The gendered nature of parenting and nurturing rationalizes the process of commodification of mother-child love and emotional/romantic feelings. Women begin to imagine and conform to their role as mothers to fit in the society, to not be judged as “bad mothers” and to feel good about themselves because they can fulfill the role as “good

mothers.” If we see gender, including motherhood, as a social structure, by employing Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, we would see how women could enable or constrain themselves to perform such normative disposition according to societal norms and expectations. Women could maintain and perpetuate the norms by internalizing them or they could challenge and transform them to be more liberated and emancipated and use them to resist either individually or collectively.

In Parreñas’ study (2015), working mothers commodified their love and compensated for their absence with material goods to sustain a comfortable middle-class style for their families particularly for their children. Lots of mothers, including the female migrant Indonesian domestic workers do that because they feel it is not fair to leave their children without their caring and nurturing, while they work both as nanny and as housekeeper. Providing material goods through consumption practices will create distinctions in society and create differences in terms of accessing and using material goods (Ngai 2003; Bourdieu 1987). The mothers feel a dilemma between giving so much attention and nurturing to the children they are taking care of and not giving them to their own children, so their children must have a care deficit. Miller (1998) elaborated on how commodities become part of the technology of love in the family as one of the choices in family relationships. Women as mothers use it as a tool to show and prove their love to their children.

Boden and Williams (2002) discussed commodified emotions which become “things” that could be rationally managed, monitored, modified, or transformed and even dominated and manipulated that are potentially part of emotion management. Because they are about emotion and feeling, the gender dimensions play a significant role here. Consumer culture, they argued, goes along with the rise of the “emotion industry.” Gifts or goods through shopping become a mechanism to overcome any tension and problems occurring in parent-child relations as reflected in Miller’s ethnographic study (2001). Therefore, some parents use the time lost because they work and cannot be with their children. They compensate by buying “vicarious gifts” (Miller 2001). Since the working parents/mothers cannot express their love for their children in person, an abundance of gifts alleviates the guilty feeling. Lindsay and Maher (2013) showed how gifts become a tool to manage tensions in the families’ lives. Goods have commitment, love and care meaning for some families.

3. METHOD

I draw the data from the literature review and the interviews by using the WhatsApp application. I interviewed ten Indonesian mothers who work as domestic workers in Singapore whom I chose by applying snowball sampling by assigning one of my friends as the key informant to approach others. I contacted her who has been working as an IFMDW in Singapore for more than 10 years. My interlocutors agreed to use WhatsApp for telephone interviews, which took 45-60 minutes and focused on the topics of my project. For some participants, I did multiple interviews according to the needs, therefore I made another appointment with them. Though I had guiding questions, it was a semi-structured open interview.

I limited the interviews to ten informants, so I could follow their stories in detail. I called the interviewees one by one, following a prearranged schedule. I introduced myself,

explained the project and asked if they had questions. I asked their permission to record the interview and had them sign the consent form I prepared.

My research participants are domestic workers and mostly come from Java. Their tasks include household work, babysitting and taking care of the elderly. They live in their employers' houses. Their ages range from 35 to 50 years old. Some of them are married and their husbands remain in their hometowns in Indonesia; some are divorced. All participants have children whom they left in Indonesia with relatives or families. Six informants graduated from middle school and four interviewees graduated from high school. Singapore has a strict rule that restricts family members of domestic workers from living with them nor do employers allow visits by family or friends.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All participants have children under the supervision and care of the workers' mothers in Indonesia. Four participants decided to leave their husbands because the men did not want to find jobs and could not provide financial support for the family. The women argued that if the men would find jobs and earn cash, the women would not have to go abroad as domestic workers. Three participants left their husbands because they married another woman or had an affair with another woman and did not give any child support. This was the reason they worked abroad as domestic worker.

I am interested in elaborating the roles of transnational mothers. How does this experience enable them to reconstruct the traditional norms, structure, patterns, and arrangements of motherhood? Do they still maintain the primary role of mother in the family, or do they completely ignore their children? How do they challenge the traditional structure and arrangement of family? Do they challenge the patriarchal system of motherhood as well? Two of them, Fatimah and Ranti, lived in a good neighborhood where they get support from family, relatives, friends, and neighbors while three of them suffered from neighbors' judgment of ignoring children and being "bad mothers." "Bad fathers" did not come into the conversation and local narratives even when fathers neglected their children through unwillingness and/or inability to take care of them, share the household burdens and earn income for the family's survival.

Gamburd's study (2000) on Sri Lankan domestic workers revealed that some villagers reacted negatively and accused some female domestic workers of abandoning their children to work abroad. Some of the workers defended themselves pointing out that their work provides their children with money for their needs, such as food, clothing, school tuition and even a new and better house and better future. Some villagers blamed the women for letting their children "run wild" during their absence, putting money as the main priority rather than their own family and children. They become the so-called "material mother" who provides for the family's material wellbeing. Self-blaming and feeling guilty are part of the internalization processes re-(produced) and perpetuated according to traditional gender norms that put women as mothers who bear the full responsibility and are the main resources of child-rearing and childcaring.

In the case of IFMDWs, I argue that working mothers build and maintain multiple relationships with their children through personal, familial, social, and emotional relationships by giving them money and buying them material goods. Chin (2001) argued that there is an

intersection between consumption and family and romance. Children usually want and receive an abundance of goods and massive amounts of money. They do not need any kind of force in doing so because consumption is used as a medium to create and maintain everyday social and kin relationships.

All participants said that they wanted to prove to their relatives, ex-husbands, their families and the neighbors that they can support their children. Everything they earn from working abroad is for the sake of their children, to support their education, to buy toys and other needs. As compensation for their physical absence and emotional care and responsibility as mothers they “spoil” their children with money and goods. They are engaged in materializing love. They all argued that they work only for their children’s wellbeing and their future. They want to see their children go to school and have what they want and need so the children will not feel different and inferior to other children. The women believed what they do is for the future and the best interest of their children. Fatimah said,

“I did not buy many things in Singapore because I save my wages for my children and sacrifice myself not to buy anything, though my friends, usually younger domestic workers who have not married yet, ask me to go shopping and hang out. I just prefer to stay at home or if I go with them, I do not buy anything, just hang out with them because my children are my priority. I don’t want anything. I just work for my children. When my son asked for a new motor bike, I bought it and when he asked for anything, like the new model of cellphone, tablet, I bought them for him. I feel guilty that I cannot be with him, like other mothers. The only way to make him happy is to give him everything he wants and to send my wages to him, so he will not be old-fashioned.”

They internalize the guilty feeling and self-blaming for leaving their children behind and not being there physically and emotionally for them. They compensate for those feelings by materializing their love and care as well as emotional attachment by sending the children money, sending them material goods, giving them gifts, or fulfilling their needs and desires in terms of material goods. They are eager to see the better future of their children’s lives. Meanwhile, for their own, they just want to be good and responsible mothers as well as to prove to their family, relatives, neighbors, and community that they care and love their children, even they do it from afar. Materializing their care and love is a way among others to respond to judgement from people and society blaming them as irresponsible and not good mothers.

The act of buying things for their children as a means or technology of care and devotion, as Miller (2001) contends, involves obligation, ambivalence, resentment and both positive and negative portrayals and attributes attached in such practices. Miller raised the point of the dialectical process of shopping in producing, forming as well as maintaining, relationships in kinship and family and creating meaning through the process of objectification. All participants mentioned, buying and sending goods or gifts for their children is seen as a signal and index of love. The objectification of love is meant to maintain mother-child and familial relationships.

All participants used the strategy of materializing their love and care to reconcile the gaps between ideal motherhood and real motherhood and to maintain the mother-child relationships. They want to fulfill their obligation as mothers as the main provider of care at home to conform to social expectations and become responsible mothers.

Ningsih's experience reflects the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988) and the commercialization or commodification of love, care and childrearing but everything she has done is for the sake and interests of her children, not for her own. She told this story,

"I am happy that I can go to Singapore to work, even as a domestic worker. In my village I can't find any job. I left my husband because he could not earn any cash. How can we live and eat? I decided to work abroad because the wages are a lot more compared to any jobs that we can do in Indonesia. It is good, right, to feed my family. I know that a lot of people will judge and blame me for not taking care of my own children while I take care of my employer's children and leave my children behind in Indonesia. I know this is not the family I and society want where I have to leave my own children, but I have to find a way to fulfill my task as a mother and main provider in the family since I am a single mother now. Some people blamed me, and some supported me but then I have to prove that I am still a good mother after all, not neglecting my children. Therefore, I force myself to send money very often to my children and send them many things and fulfill their needs and desires for some goods they want. There is nothing I can do, just make them happy and fulfill my role as a mother. I can't give them love and care through my physical and emotional existence, but I can give them what I get from my work. I hope they understand that I love them so much, that's why I give everything for them even if I have to sacrifice myself and not buy many things for myself or save money for my future. I don't want my children suffering and I don't want to get any bad judgment as being a bad mother."

Expressing their love, maintaining mother-child relationships, diminishing guilty feelings, and avoiding judgment from people who would consider domestic workers "bad mothers" are the main reasons these women materialize their love and care. A participant, Yulia, expressed how she is always concerned about her children's education and their other needs. Her ambition was to invest in her children's education for their better future and to transform her children into modern children who do not lack many goods and have access to technology, such as gadgets, stylish clothes, motorbikes, etc. She wanted to win her children's hearts as compensation for leaving them. Yulia said that she likes to send gifts to her children to make them happy so they will not complain about her physical and emotional absence from the household. She used it as a tool to solve the problem, though tension arose between her and her children when they demanded that she be with them. She strategized it to negotiate and communicate with their children and at the same time to maintain their familial relationships.

She asserted that it is hard to erase and redeem the guilty feeling for being away from her children and compensate her physical absence. She could not find ways to be a good mother, other than to give them what they ask for and want and send money to them. She realized that money cannot buy love and care, but at least she proved to herself, her children, and other people that she is a good mother. However, sending money and gifts is also part of expressing of her love and care and part of distant parenting. She said,

"I send almost my entire wages for my children in my village and gave the money to my mother, who takes care of my children, to buy anything they want. If they can buy whatever they need and want, I feel relieved that at least I still can perform as a good mother and show them that I am a responsible mother, though I know money can't buy love and care and can't replace us and our love. I don't want to make them sad. I am sad if they ask me to come back and be with them. I don't know what to do. I just ask them

what kind of gifts they want me to send or buy. When they mentioned something, it eases my guilty-feeling and self-blaming because I still can be a good mother for my children. I want to see them being as modern as other kids and therefore, I send money for them to buy anything to catch up with the modern things. Besides, I really care about their education. I want them to have higher education for their future and mine because I know they are an investment. That's why, if they asked me to buy them new shoes, a backpack, even a laptop, I granted their wish. I don't want to be unfair for them by not being together."

I argue that IFMDWs have and show their potential agentive capacity and their resistance in many different forms. The commodification and commercialization of love and care, emotion, feelings with their own reasons are a form of articulating agency. We can see how mother-child relations are constructed and how those are reproduced, maintained, and internalized by society, family members, and women themselves including IFMDWs. As a social construction, mothers-children relations, especially in transnational settings, are not uniform. It is important to understand different reasons why they have commodified care and love for their children.

All interlocutors believe that there are some conditions that can change and be changed, such as an economic situation that can make them resist the traditional arrangement of mothering. They saw motherhood as not strict, though society expected them to perform traditional way of mothering. The five informants told me that their husbands either could not and did not want to find jobs and could not earn money to feed the family. Yulia said she and her children needed to survive and meet the family's needs. Therefore, she left her husband and decided to be a mother working abroad because she could find nothing to do in her village to earn money. Therefore, motherhood is a social, political, and cultural construction that opens any possibility and room for mothering and doing motherhood.

5. CONCLUSION

Being migrant domestic workers facilitates the IFMDWs for being engaged in transnational families. They are transnational mothers who left their children in the home country of Indonesia while they work in Singapore. With this experience, they challenge the traditional construction of motherhood that requires a mother to stay with and take intensive care of her children. Being separated from them creates a guilty feeling. As compensation, they produce a narrative that everything they make as migrant domestic workers is for the sake of their children. As a result, they shift the emotionally traditional relationship of mother-child into a more materialized form. This situation leads to the commoditization of childrearing and motherhood marked by dominant practice of consumption. Therefore, based on the narrative of "for the sake of their children," these migrant mothers working as domestic workers express a legitimate reason for being engaged in commodification and commercialization of love and care and articulate their interest in becoming a good and responsible mother from afar. There is always room for them to find creative ways to perform the motherhood role on their own terms and in their own ways. Since it is a social structure, it does not only constrain IFMDWs but also enables them to resist, express their freedom and show their agency.

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