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Migrant Domestic Workers

Becoming Visible in the Public Sphere?

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The geographic mobility of domestic workers is certainly not new. However, contemporary globalization has dramatically stimulated and facilitated the international migration of domestic workers. In many areas of the world, paid domestic labour is a growth sector in which new groups of women are becoming involved. Increasing economic inequalities on a global scale, shifts in family relations and household composition, as well as the changing patterns and evaluations of women's employment and domestic work, are increasingly drawing migrant women into this field of employment.

Although at first glance domestic workers (especially if female) may be seen as relegated to the private, domestic sphere, there are good reasons to address their presence 'in the public'. For if the house is the private sphere of the employer, it is simultaneously the work setting of the domestic worker. This in itself invites revisiting the private-public dichotomy and is precisely the kind of issue that the project is concerned with. The project addresses the publicness of migrant domestic labour through three sets of questions.

Historical trajectories

The first and most general field of research addresses how the historical trajectories of migrant domestic work relate to the development of specific notions of the public-private nexus in the Middle East. Using the empirical question, 'who is the domestic worker replacing?' as its point of departure, the project investigates how the labour and family relations of earlier categories of domestics (such as domestic slaves and 'adopted daughters') differ from those employed under conditions of contemporary globalization (such as migrant contract labour and systems of sponsorship). These transformations are investigated within the context of the development of the nation-state as well as the growing importance of transnational relations that tie in with changes in family relations and household composition, and, more generally, with the development of new notions of publicness. This raises such questions as, how different is the private-public nexus in the case of earlier forms of domestic work from that of present-day employment? What has been the impact of particular forms of nation-state formation and concepts of citizenship? And what sorts of legal regimes and concepts (varying from Islamic law to international human rights) are at stake?

Public Space

Second, this project deals with the transformations of public space and the ways in which (migrant) domestic workers are included or excluded in this process. Access to public space is an obvious area of contestation between employers and domestic workers, with the former often supported through state regulations. In such discussions, the im-

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This research project is linked to the ISIM research programme, Migrant Domestic Work: Transnational Spaces, Families, and Identities (see www.isim.nl).

pact of systems of gender-segregation is also a critical factor to consider. In what ways are migrant domestic workers visible in public spaces and how is their visibility in public spaces assessed? Are migrant domestic workers able to participate in hetero-social public spaces or do they have access to gender-segregated public spaces? And what sorts of positions are they able to take up within such gendered public spaces? Are migrant domestic workers able to (or perhaps forced to) produce 'their own' public spaces, and on what identity markers (such as nationality, language, or religion) are these areas of interaction based? This historical

perspective raises the issue of how such visibility in public spaces compares with that of earlier forms of domestic labour.

Public debates

The third field of investigation addresses public debates on (migrant) domestic workers (such as the impact of Asian domestics on the socialization of children in terms of language and religion) and the ways in which these are mass mediated. In contrast to the notion of 'the public' in the sense of a bounded space of face-to-face interaction and dialogue, the development of the mass media has engendered a qualitative change in the conditions for participating in 'public debate'. In investigating public debates about migrant domestic work, the central questions are not simply, who are the participants (state institutions, politico-religious movements, associations of/migrant domestic workers, human rights organizations, women's groups and so on), which issues are at stake, and what styles of argumentation have been employed, but especially, who has the authority and the defining power to frame these debates. The fact that such debates are mass mediated further raises questions about how different genres have represented migrant domestic workers, and what media and forms of representation migrant domestic workers themselves have employed.

These questions will be discussed in the course of five seminars in Istanbul, Dubai, Beirut and Amman, where participants in this project have been involved in empirical research on migrant domestic labour, with a concluding session to be held in one of the participating countries.

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