

# Intersectionality: making a difference



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Intersectionality is defined as the relationships among multiple dimensions of identities and modalities of social relations and experiences of exclusion and subordination, including gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality (Collins 2000; McCall 2005; Davis 2008). It starts on the premise that everyone live multiple, layered identities. The theory attempts to expose the different types of discrimination and disadvantages that occur as a consequence of the combination of biological, social and cultural identities (AWID 2004).

Intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw (1989) attempts to address the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse (AWID 2004; Davis 2008). Subsequently, this concept had extended to the understanding of women holding different disadvantaged social identities. Such intersections indicate that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions intersect together in producing injustice and inequality, instead of multiplying around the different social identities (Collins 2000; Conanhan 2009; Yuval-Davis 2007). An understanding of intersectionality suggested the attainment of political and social equality of disadvantaged women and improving the global democratic system (Harjunen 2008).

This paper attempts to understand the intersection of social identities of Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) in Singapore. The number of women coming into Singapore to work as a FDW had increased over the years, and the increment of these ‘outsiders’ had created many negative stigmas towards them, discursively created by the State and the society. By understanding the intersectionality these women face, it will establish an

understanding of what shapes their experiences and opportunities as an FDW in a foreign land.

## **Domain of study: Foreign Domestic Worker (FDW) in Singapore**

As the temporary home to 196, 000 Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) and an estimate of employment of one live-in domestic worker in every five households (Daipi 2010), Singapore was and is an immigrant society. The FDW performs various household and maintenance chores for the families, including cooking, cleaning and care-giving to the young and elderly.

Evidently, many FDWs now are the caregiver for babies and toddlers while their mothers were obliged to put in long working hours in the ‘old male model’ and subordinate their family time for work demands. This may constitute more than mere care-giving, where many FDWs devote their love and emotional attachment to their ‘young employers’ as a response to what the FDWs cannot provide for her own child (Hochschild 2004). With the introduction of the Foreign Maid Scheme in 1978[1], labour mobilization of women was promoted by the government which prioritises economic development that brought about the significance of the Singapore female labour. FDWs have since been a visible feature of households in Singapore. This gradually led to the outlook of an ‘ideal’ family in the Singapore context that comprises not only the kin but also the fictive kin.

The ‘ideal’ family in Singapore is one that consists of two working parents, a foreign maid who looks after their child(ren) and an older relative – usually a grandmother – to supervise the domestic worker (Teo 2011).

According to Ochiai (2010), the model of Care Diamonds as proposed depicts patterns of care provision in each society in four different sectors, namely the State, the Market, the Family (and Relatives) and the Community.

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Figure . Care Diamonds in Singapore

In the Singapore context, we see that there is a good proportion of care responsibility of familialism falling onto the Market, which reflects “ the bulk of welfare responsibility towards its members, in terms of both income distribution and care provision” (Ochiai 2010) falling from the Family into the hands of the foreign domestic and care workers from the Market. This signifies the importance and prevalence of FDW in Singapore families, in both child care and elder care. It also shows the trend where families are now more prone in outsourcing their filial piety, which is also known as ‘ liberal familialism’ as the cost of purchasing care services is still borne by the family (Ochiai 2010). This is constituted as discussed from the increase participation of female labour into the workforce that displaces the natural caregiver role from the woman in the family to the woman from the market.

Outsourcing the domestic chores in the house to the FDWs living in, they may become not merely an employee but close to a ‘ fictive kin’ through the constant interactions. This propels the assignment of kin relationships to non-family who embody the “ special characteristics of family, and are those who provide caregiving and emotional attachment like family and are given the labour of kin with its attendant affection, rights, and obligations” (Gubruim and Buckholdt 1982; Tronto 1993; Karner 1998).

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## **FDW and Singaporeans[2]**

FDWs in Singapore are live-in domestic helpers (Ministry of Manpower 2013), and this establishes a close fictive kinship living under one roof. As a Singaporean who was raised by a kin (instead of a fictive kin) all my life, I decided to interview some employers of FDWs and learn about how they perceive these supposedly ‘fictive kin’.

In my understanding, the acknowledgement of the status of a fictive kin has to be conscious between the FDW and the employer like a two-way traffic. This contradicted with the literature definition (Tronto 1993) which only addresses fictive kin as a person who provides kin-like care. Though most of these employers deem the help of FDWs to ease their load in housework, some of them do not recognise the FDWs as a fictive kin, but as a mere ‘employee who I hire with money’. For the employers who do not deem the FDWs as helpful, they made frequent complaints about the FDWs’ work including criticism such as ‘stupid’ and ‘clumsy’ towards the FDWs’ productivity in front of others in the presence of the FDW, lack of appreciation by saying ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ or blamed for mistakes that were not committed by the FDWs. This can adversely affect the psychological well-being of the FDW who are labelled as ‘quiet indignities’. Moreover, research shows that though there is a decrease in ‘maid abuse’ cases in Singapore for the past 10 years, there still possesses a great number of cases where FDWs were stripped of basic human rights, including not being allowed to go out of the house, not having enough time to rest and having a heavy workload (Transient Workers Count Too 2011). This affects the physical well-being of the FDWs. The psychologically and physical well-

being of the FDWs tend to be jeopardised in Singapore because of the inferior-superior mentality held by the employers towards their FDWs.

A minute fraction of the employers acknowledged the FDWs as a great help in the house and a fictive kin, where these employers will buy new clothes for the FDWs, invites her to join in for dinners, and bring her along during family vacations.

## **FDW and Intersectionality**

Figure . Intersectionality in FDWs in Singapore

As a FDW, some of the axes of social identities that she holds include the intersection of her gender, nationality and social class. Each of these axes contributes to inequality on its own facet, and a complete picture will be portrayed when these facets intersect. As a social construct, gender emphasises the biological and psychological differences between man and women, which had constituted to the inherent power relationships. Nationality is also a social construct that emphasises on the basis of the arbitrary division and belongingness towards geographical spaces. Social class as a social identity determines the access to resources, which then shapes the power and position of the individual and the family in the society.

Notably, these FDWs braved through obstacles to come to a foreign land alone to work in. The inherent power relations from different social identities differentiated the FDW and the employer, in an in-group-out-group context. This empowers employers to discriminate and oppress these FDWs which affect their opportunities and experiences as a FDW in Singapore, and it is tougher when she is helpless without the support of her community.

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## **Gender and Social Class**

In Singapore, FDWs had been portrayed as the lowest strata in the society. The society, constituted by the local policies[3], associated an FDW to only the female gender. The legalization of the legislation that FDWs are strictly females also contribute to the internalization and naturalization of women occupying jobs in this sector. Comparatively, their female counterparts in Singapore were able to enjoy an overall increase in access to education, higher education, healthcare from the industrialization of the nation in the late 1960s, allowing Singapore to attain one of the highest standards of living amongst its neighbours in Southeast Asia. This improvement of status was not universal and not extended to the FDWs, who were mainly from Indonesia and Philippines (Humans Right Watch 2005; Arifin 2012). Despite both females being conformed in a patriarchal society in Singapore, the FDWs and the Singapore females were clearly distinct in their class status which is evident from the developments of the two groups of countries. This is despite that many FDWs were college graduates (International Labour Organisation 2007) but still segregated into the low-wage, low-prestige domestic work in Singapore. This instils a superior-inferior relationship between Singaporeans and FDWs. This hence led to negative stigmas from the Singapore women who were the employers, who acknowledged the FDWs as their assistance and also their inferior (Arifin 2012).

## **Gender and Nationality**

As the policies[4]in Singapore discourage Singaporean women to participate in the domestic service sector, there is a synonym of women from the sending countries (predominantly Indonesia and Philippines) as ‘ maids’ in

Singapore (Human Rights Watch 2005; Law and Nadeau 2009). As the provision of domestic service is seen as ‘difficult, dirty and demeaning’, these FDWs are portrayed as unskilled labour. In the patriarchal society, these women are not duly respected for their contributions, yet perceived as inferior as of their gender as a female and their nationality recognised as sending countries for FDWs – both identities equating to the identity of maid. This created a discursive idea of FDWs as ‘Other’ in the society. They are held with sharp contrast with other foreigners who come to Singapore with better skills, commonly addressed as ‘foreign talent’ or expatriates. The call for ‘talent’ capital from places such as United Kingdom, Australia and North America had allowed Singapore to be ranked as the top expat destination in the world (HSBC 2012). Evidently, the economic and social development between the two groups of origin countries differs greatly. Though there are more FDWs than foreign expatriates in the country (National Population and Talent Division 2013), there is a huge disparity between, in their income, respect received, and inherent stigma since these foreign expatriates are the people with the ability to hire these FDWs despite both being foreigners in the country. Discourses by the State portray FDWs as a sexual and social threat that breaks up Singaporean families and portrays expatriates as ‘saviours’ of National Survival (Koh 2003; Human Rights Watch 2005). The demonization by the State further deepens the existing stereotypes towards FDWs.

### **Intersection of social identities**

The intersection of gender, social class and nationality constructed the negative stigma of these FDWs in Singapore. It created a social hierarchy



where FDWs were strained to the lowest strata without any mobility. Mobility is prohibited by the government through their policies that forbid FDWs to be covered under the Employment Act, or to be able to obtain citizenship from her length of stay and contribution to the economy (Human Rights Watch 2012; Ministry of Manpower 2013). In contrast, mobility is made available in countries like Canada where their live-in caregivers are permitted for permanent residence in Canada after two years of authorized live-in employment in Canadian households (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013).

Reduced as a commodity in the global labour market, the FDWs brought about seemingly traces of slavery in the modern world. Without adequate social and legal recognition for paid domestic service, the commercialised employment relationship with these fictive-kin FDWs can only be confined in an oppressive, 'family'-like hierarchy. FDWs often engage in a power struggle (and often lose out) as they are not in any position, financially or psychologically, to negotiate their working conditions even if they deem it over exhaustive (Ueno 2008).

With the improvement in social aspects in life including educational profile and healthcare for women, we see an increase of 10.3% in the women participating in the labour force in Singapore for the past 10 years (Ministry of Manpower 2011). With more women expected to participate in the economy in the future, there will be an increase in the care gap in families – which signifies the greater need for FDWs. However, this may also mean there will be more opportunities for oppressions to take place that will further undermine the physical and psychological well-being of FDWs.

## **The next step: Recognition**

The struggle of FDWs in Singapore exceeds more than what the intersectionality of social identities as discussed – they also have to struggle with their employers' lack of appreciation of FDWs as a fictive kin. This can be problematic because a fictive kin relationship “ improves the quality of care and retrieves personal meanings for both the provider and the recipient” (Lan 2003) and the oppression will be a hinder to the delivery of a kin-like care service. However, their social identities which are ascribed rather than achieved, confines them into a superior-inferior relationship with their female counterparts in Singapore.

It reciprocates if an employer is more understanding to the FDW – and evidently the appreciation will be mutual. Institutions such as the employer and the State can step in to improve the situation – where both the sending and receiving countries can include FDWs into Employment Acts to protect them from physical and psychological harm, and to provide them with basic rights extended to every employee. As employers, one has to be reflexive and mindful that the FDW is also another human being – with her own thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and hence behaving as a ‘ proper’ employer who treats her FDW well, even to the extent of a fictive kin, will be a good capital for the family members. By being aware of how they understanding their own experience and how their social identities intersect, it is empathetic to relate to how these women struggle through oppressions, all by herself.

## **Appendix**

### **Foreign Maid Scheme in Singapore**

In 1978, Singapore introduced the Foreign Maid Scheme which permits the employment of women from selected Asian countries as live-in domestic workers (UNIFEM Singapore 2011). The scheme is introduced to encourage the participation of local women in the formal economy by introducing an extra helper to maintain the family. The high and steady rate of economic growth demanded massive number of labour in all sectors. The low population and low fertility rate of Singaporeans thus was not able to fulfil the demands of the labour market. Moreover, Singaporeans were not keen to work in the unskilled sectors including domestic work, as influenced by the rising socioeconomic conditions and educational level of Singaporeans.

According to the Ministry of Manpower, FDWs will be employed under strict regulations, including their source country, age and educational attainment, and subsequent regulations inbound which assures their transience. These regulations were set forth as the political leaders assume that the presence of unskilled migrant workers and domestic workers will disrupt the Singapore society if left unregulated (Yeoh and Annadhurai 2008).

### **Requirements for a Foreign Domestic Worker**

The following summarises the FDWs requirements in Singapore (Ministry of Manpower 2013). The list of requirements can be found in: <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-fdw/before-you-apply/Pages/basic-requirements-of-a-foreign-domestic-worker.aspx>: C: UsersshiminDesktopPicture2. png

## **Intersectionality as a critique to Multiple Discrimination**

Mentioned in the EU Report on the ' Multiple Discrimination in EU Law', EU initially had a sole definition of ' multiple discrimination' as an overarching notion, neutral notion for all instances of discrimination between multiple domains including ' race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion or disability or because they are indigenous people' (UN 1995).

The definition of ' intersectionality' debated the EU legal discourse and reinforces the importance of encompassing the notion of gender as an important domain when it discusses the discrimination suffered primarily by the intersection of domains in many instances of discrimination suffered especially by women. It criticises that the mathematical notion that may be conjured by multiplying around the separate strands of discrimination which in reality intersect (Conanhan 2009; Yuval-Davis 2007).