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Book Review

Follow the Maid: Domestic Worker Migration in and from Indonesia

Christina Gerken [1]*

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Olivia Killias's book *Follow the Maid: Domestic worker migration in and from Indonesia* unmasks the complex process whereby women from a village in Upland North Central Java are transformed into domestic workers, migrate to Malaysia and eventually return home. Drawing on extended ethnographic research, Killias weaves together narratives of women who are eager to improve their families' economic status in socially acceptable ways while also seeking adventure and an opportunity to explore an urban, middle-class lifestyle. Yet what really sets Killias's study apart from other works on global care chains and female migration is the fact that her book moves beyond an exclusive focus on the migrants. Instead, she offers a nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the *process* of migration and brings in the voices of a range of middlemen who make these care chains work (and ultimately profit from them). This book is thus a welcome addition to a growing number of critical texts that examine global care chains and it expands our understanding of the infrastructure of care migration.

Throughout her analysis, Killias presents important questions for the reader to consider. Specifically, she invites us to contemplate how the global labour market and the increased demand for care workers has affected gendered migration patterns and how local and global discourses have constructed Indonesian women as particularly well suited for care work. At the same time, her rich narratives of individual migrants encourage the reader to question simplistic accounts of Indonesian women as submissive and powerless victims of an exploitative system. Instead, we hear stories of women who strategically use migration as a socially acceptable way to escape abusive marriages, women who are painfully aware of the fact that labour contracts do not automatically lead to better working conditions and who, in some cases, have found that violating the terms of their contract and becoming 'illegal' has given them the flexibility to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions.

One additional aspect that makes Killias's study stand out is the fact that she managed to interview not just the female migrants and their families, but she also included the voices of the male brokers and recruiters, alongside the mostly female workers in maid agencies that match potential employers with a maid. As one would expect, these intermediaries are motivated by the potential for financial gain and they do profit from each woman they recruit and place in a home. However, I was surprised to learn that – despite the dehumanising nature of the training and placement process – many of these workers cared about the way their work was perceived and sometimes went to great lengths to morally justify their efforts. This is exactly the kind of detail that is absent from many other studies. Yet Killias's rigorous methodology, her vast collection of over one hundred qualitative interviews and her ability to rely on 14 months of multi-sited fieldwork allowed her to discover these kinds of important details that complicate our understanding of global care chains.

[1] *Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Indiana University South Bend*, USA
***Corresponding Author:** cgerken@iusb.edu

Follow the Maid is divided into six chapters that, after some historical information about Indonesian state efforts to regulate migration, quite literally follow the migrants from their original homes in rural villages, to the training facilities in urban areas of Indonesia, to the employers' homes in Malaysia and eventually back home to Indonesia. Yet even though Killias's ethnographic research ends in Upland North Central Java, she also emphasises that this 'return home' is oftentimes temporary and that the migration patterns are circular with many women embarking on a second journey to Malaysia or to a different (and often more prestigious and better paid) position in Saudi Arabia or Taiwan. While this is clearly beyond the scope of Killias's already extensive project, it would be interesting to learn more about these different destinations and how they compare to the migrants' experiences in Malaysia.

One of the strengths of the book is the fact that the ethnographic data is supplemented with two chapters about the historical and political context of the Indonesian migration regime. In Chapter 1 Killias carefully traces the current migration system back to colonial indentured labour and discovers some uncanny similarities. Interestingly, these similarities are particularly striking for female migrants. While male migrants are generally considered as skilled labour and are expected to pay for their own journeys (or borrow money from family or local moneylenders to finance their travels abroad), female care workers operate within a very different system. Their journeys are paid for by their future employers – employers that they know very little about and that they cannot actively choose (or reject). Once they migrate, they are bound to these employers for a fixed period of time and the original travel costs are deducted from their wages. While this arrangement gives women with limited financial resources the opportunity to migrate, it also seriously limits their ability to escape abusive workplaces and negotiate wages that reflect their value.

As a Gender Studies scholar, I particularly appreciate the way that Killias explores the feminisation of labour migration and discusses her findings about Indonesian care workers in the context of other studies of female migrants. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who coined the expression 'global care chains', and other scholars of domestic labour have often been criticised for essentialising women's 'natural' aptitude for care work and their seemingly smooth transition from caring for their own children to caring for others. Similar to Deirdre McKay's work on Filipina migrants, Killias pays close attention to how Indonesian maids frame their own work. What emerges is a multifaceted narrative of women who are acutely aware of gender norms and the social limitations they face. Killias shows how the women 'render their journeys socially acceptable' (68). Rather than publicly acknowledging their desire for adventure, independence, or financial autonomy, they emphasise the fact that their journeys are socially acceptable precisely because they involve a highly gendered activity – care work – and because they are confined to their employers' homes and supposedly protected from 'immoral' behaviour.

Her interviews reveal an even more complex story. For example, Yusriah, a young return migrant from Malaysia, gave Killias the following explanation for her decision to migrate:

> I had problems at home, it's as simple as that. Personal problems (*masalah rumah tangga*). Like most migrants. My husband was cheating on me; he was having affairs with other women. I was staying at home and so angry (*panas*). So I decided to leave rather than to stay at home like that. […] But I did not contact my husband, and I did not want to hear a single thing about him ... I did not send any money back home. I saved all my money and now I am building a house. He can't call me his wife anymore; it's over. (82)

While Yusriah's decision to work as a maid in Malaysia might neatly align with gendered ideas of care work as a suitable position for a young woman, her story also illustrates how empowering and truly transformative this migration was for her.

The juxtaposition of simplistic official narratives with Killias's rich ethnographic data can also be found in Chapter 4, which examines the 'training' camps for maids. According to the recruitment agents, the confinement in camps is necessary to protect the naïve, rural women from the dangers of the big city. While the migrants resent the fact that they are basically imprisoned without pay and often forced to engage in rather demeaning activities, they also see this as the first step in their transformation to becoming a global woman. Ultimately, these camps fail to turn the women into the submissive and passive objects they try to produce. Killias provides a striking illustration of this failure when she describes a scene where the women cut each other's hair (a requirement which is intended to make the women look more uniform and ultimately less attractive). Rather than mourning the loss of this important marker of traditional femininity, the women are in a celebratory mood, signing Celine Dion songs, and admiring their 'stylish' new pixie cuts.

This misconception of migrants as 'poor, backward, and uncivilised' (145) is further complicated in Chapter 5, which focuses on the workers' arrival in Malaysia. Even though research clearly shows that it is not the poorest and least educated women that migrate, the maid agencies and employers are clearly invested in this image. Killias describes pictures of destitute wooden houses without running water on the walls of the agencies that are captioned with "This is what my house in Indonesia looks like" (145). She also explains how the agencies have carefully constructed the perception of a large cultural gap between the maid and madams. Employers are encouraged to

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think of their ability to hire an Indonesian maid as a visible reminder of how modern and middle-class they supposedly are. They also like to think of themselves as benevolent and see the virtual imprisonment of their maids as a sign that they are committed to protecting them from running away and turning to prostitution or other evils.

The maids, on the other hand, carefully negotiate the downsides of these highly restrictive arrangements and balance them against the benefits of earning money abroad. A particularly interesting insight into the way that gender norms can be both limiting as well as empowering for women is Killias's discussion on how the money is spent. Since men are expected to serve as the primary breadwinner for their family, the remittances of male migrants are used to cover basic needs. At the same time, traditional gender norms and Islamic ideals not only construct women as natural caregivers, they also suggest that a woman could not possibly be the main provider for her family; that is the man's role. As a result, women's remittances are usually earmarked for special projects – like the construction of a house – rather than being spent on daily needs. Their migration thus has the potential to have a more permanent effect on a family's social status.

Ultimately, *Following the Maid* provides a nuanced discussion of the contradictions and complexities of the migration of Indonesian domestic workers. While many migrants, their families, as well as the various intermediaries that are involved in this care chain profit monetarily, there are also a number of undeniable risks and plenty of evidence that these workers are stripped of many rights in the process. Yet perhaps even more importantly, Killias's study repeatedly reminds us that these women are not simply passive victims of an oppressive system and we would be amiss to regard them as nothing more than members of a growing global serving class. Quite to the contrary, Killias's richly detailed descriptions of the migrants' interaction with each other, with the people that they encounter on their journey and with the migration system more generally, give us a glimpse into lives that are filled with moments of reflection, resistance and agency.

One of the questions that remain unanswered though is the impact that this journey has on their communities of origin. Killias alludes to a sense of disenchantment and dreams of modern houses that remain unfulfilled, but I was also curious about what (if any) effect these new migration patterns have had on gender norms and family structures. Other studies, such as Sheba George's analysis of the migration of female nurses from their homes in Kerala, India, to the United States, tend to show that women's economic mobility does not automatically lead to more equality within the home. Instead, husbands sometimes respond to their wives' professional success with resentment and refuse to assume any of the duties that they perceive as traditionally female, such as taking care of children.

Yet despite this minor critique – which is really more of a wish to learn more – *Follow the Maid* represents an important and welcome addition to the existing research on global care chains and the migration of domestic workers. The book will appeal to a wide range of readers who are interested in gender and migration, global care chains, and state efforts to exert tighter control of migrant labour. It would be a useful monograph for graduate courses in Anthropology and Gender Studies and its richly detailed examples from her extensive ethnographic research make it accessible even to advanced undergraduate students and a more general audience.

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