This paper is a compilation of micro and macro consequences of women migrating into Singapore to work as domestic workers. Singapore's governmental push for Singaporean women to have babies and a career simultaneously has required modern families to seek alternative forms of child care as a means of fulfilling household duties. Female domestic workers come to Singapore to fill this role, but many face multiple levels of discrimination and hardship during their stay in Singapore; their low social status makes exploitation possible. In this thesis, I lay out the current dichotomies between career and family facing modern career women in Singapore and how this affects the immigration of domestic workers from Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Migrant women working as maids face discrimination and hardships on many levels. Using open-ended, unstructured interviews my fieldwork reveals individual perspectives of domestic work in Singapore. I present recommendations geared toward non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Singapore to combat inequality between employers and women working as domestic workers. I recommend short and long term changes that may enable
domestic workers to live a more autonomous life during their stay in Singapore and afterwards.
Silenced Voices: Maids in Singapore

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.
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INTRODUCTION

If anything I do in the way of writing...isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some prevail, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influences in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted—Toni Morrison (James 1993: 43).

In January 2000, I accepted an internship in Singapore working with a women's organization called AWARE (The Association of Women for Action and Research). I lived in Singapore for four months from January to May 2000. While I was working at AWARE I did my fieldwork for my thesis. My thesis centers around the lives of foreign maids living and working in Singapore.

Incorporating vulnerability and emotion into ethnography has done much to influence my research (Behar 1996). To the maids I interviewed, I am the different one, the other. I am not a foreign maid, nor will I ever be. But, when I talk to these women I cannot help but measure their experiences against my own. My experience as an American woman makes it impossible to relate to their experiences first hand. Despite this lens, I have attempted to contrive methods to aid my perception in seeing the maids experiences through their eyes. Ani Difranco, one of my favorite musicians, sings, “There are some things
you can’t know unless you’ve been there, but oh, how far we could go if we
started to share” (Difranco 1993). The women I interviewed opened their
thoughts to me. They made themselves vulnerable, and in sharing their
experience helped me to glimpse the realities of their lives.

I will never be a Filipina, Indonesian or Sri Lankan woman leaving my
family to be a maid in Singapore. I will never know these hardships, yet I
construct their hardships based on my cultural understanding of them. Henrietta
Moore (1993) writes that anthropologists speak for others in instances of
ethnographic encounters; translating another’s experience in terms of my own
experiences is necessary in this type of ethnography. I am speaking for these
women, my informants. It is my tacit perception of their experiences that are
written in these pages. In this voice, we are one step closer to a clearer
understanding of the struggles and hardships women migrants face in
Singapore.

Following this introduction is a literature review looking at the similarities
and differences between the plight of domestic workers in Singapore and those
of migrant workers in other countries. I then write about my use of
anthropological theories and methods.

The results section focuses on the sociopolitical context that supports the
migration of maids to Singapore. Singaporean women in the workforce and a
governmental push to increase family size creates a huge influx of foreign
women working in the domestic realm. Because of this wage labor institution,
culturally and politically speaking, there appears to be a lack of concern in
Singapore for the quality of life of maids. I also write about the problems maids face on a daily basis in their work as maids in Singapore.

In the Conclusion, I look forward with my recommendations to future studies that might piggyback on this one, along with what current implementations could positively affect the lives of maids in Singapore. It is my goal to offer recommendations for change so female migrants in Singapore might have more access to their rights and their voice. Recommendations stemming from this final work will be presented to NGOs such as AWARE and maid agencies, embassies (like the Philippine Embassy) and other organizations that have the power to change policy regarding maids in Singapore. Policy changes specific to female migrants should be the focal point to continuing research. Follow-up research would be ideal to get maids themselves involved in the changes they feel would be necessary to allow them more access to their rights and their voices.
Domestic Work as Women’s Work

In the mid-1800s, Harriet Taylor argued that no woman could be “…both an excellent wife and mother and an excellent worker…” (c.f. Tong 1998: 17). She said that in order for women to be liberated, we should be able to hold down a career as well as men. In order to do this, women would need “a panoply of domestic servants” (c.f. Tong 1998: 17) to ease the conflicting roles of wife, mother and career woman. Today, we see that there are women in the world who have never had the choice not to work. In early feminism and still today, we see a race and class bias when it comes to women’s work. As Harriet Taylor suggests (c.f. Tong 1998), middle class women have the luxury to pursue careers; the leftover domestic work is handed off to domestic servants.

Importation of domestic labor is supported economically and socially in Singapore. In *The 3 Paradoxes: Working Women in Singapore*, the authors stress the need for maids to help Singaporean women stay working. They write, “To lighten women’s traditional domestic and childrearing responsibilities, and to enable them to contribute to the economy, there must be a system that provides competent and reliable child care and domestic help” (Lee et al. 1999: 60). The authors discuss the women’s movement and how the last thirty years have seen remarkable changes in Singapore; traditional gender roles are slowly being broken down. The authors summarize the challenges faced by women living in Singapore as three paradoxes:
The first paradox is at the national level where there are policies that encourage women to work due to the labour shortage as well as those that encourage them to have more children because of the declining birthrate. The second is at the societal level where, on the one hand, there are increasing expectations for the women to contribute to the family income and the economy. On the other hand, there is a desire for them to be traditional wives and mothers who provide comfort to their family and stability to society. The last paradox is apparent at the organizational level. Here, women managers and executives are grossly underrepresented although their educational level is rapidly rising (Lee et al. 1999: v).

Singaporeans are aware of how women have been suppressed in society, but there is little mention of the rights of migrant women workers. There is a class bias taken by Singaporean women; local women are encouraged to hire a maid to ease the burden of “The 3 Paradoxes.” A parallel work, The Ties That Bind (1996), states that hiring a foreign maid is seen as a luxury for only the elite middle class family. The maid is expected to live with the family and take instructions while keeping her opinions to herself (Huang and Yeoh 1996: 79); the maid maintains the “quality of life” of a family (Yeoh and Huang 1999: 285). The quality of life of the maid is not factored in to this system.

By focusing on women and their strengths, values, goals and ideals, researchers have been able to teach people to be more sensitive to women and women’s work (Rosaldo 1993). Feminist researchers reevaluate what roles women have played in human existence and what roles they are playing now. Rosaldo also claims that to understand women’s lives we need to relate them to that of the lives of men. Being blind to sexual differences between men and
women is harmful to feminist research because it keeps us from seeing the factual information that we must use to understand and change women’s lives.

Women employers are the unpaid household workers before they hire a maid. When they do, they are not relinquishing domestic tasks, but modifying their own familial and reproductive responsibilities to alleviate their burden of dual work and family. It is the woman of the household who is the primary supervisor of the maid’s work, and it is the employee-employer relationship that challenges gender roles. For example, the maids are taking on mothering roles, as well as household chores; women employers are faced with anxiety of their children knowing another woman better than their own mother while they provide for the family outside the home (Yeoh and Huang 1999).

Though domestic tasks are modified, the maids do the majority of domestic work in a household with little compensation. Irene Tinker (1990) claims that people advocating for women argue that for low-income women laws will not impact women’s lives as much as greater economic status. Not only do women become empowered with economic status, but also with the work they do. If the type of work a woman does is valued, and she is compensated justly for this work, the woman will more likely feel valued (Tinker 1990).

Domestic workers in Singapore are part of a system that exploits people for capitalistic expansion. Foreign maids believe they will work themselves into a higher economic class. Almost every woman I interviewed had a goal to move to Canada or Hong Kong to make more money and live an easier life. In reality, few women succeed in using their experience as domestic workers to gain
economic ground; they remain stuck in positions as domestic workers for much longer than they originally anticipated (Yeoh and Huang 1999).

Overseas employment is successful and almost impossible to stop. Transcending out of a poor class is not a reality for the majority of laborers. Immanuel Wallerstein and Terence K. Hopkins’ (1982) World Systems Analysis is effective in illustrating why this is. In a growing world economy, there is ever increasing capitalism and competition between countries for goods and services. Human labor is seen as merely a trade exchange: service for money. Low wages are a reflection of “inserting people into the world-economy” (Wallerstein 1982: 96). Wallerstein (1982) argues that if we viewed household income over a period of a lifetime, we would see a downfall because of the increasing world-economy. Those who do succeed are used as examples, making the poor believe that they are just not working hard enough and it is their fault that they are not successful. When capitalism is globalized, rather than an exchange between people, there is an exchange between countries. Human rights of workers is not at the forefront of any issue. The contribution to the global economy is so abundant, it shadows human rights issues.

Foreign income is such an important factor in the economy of the maids’ home countries that overseas migration is a necessary contribution. In Women of a Lesser Cost, the authors claim that “[i]nternational migration is absolutely critical to the Philippine economy, with overseas contract workers (OCWs) being required by law to remit between 30 and 70 per cent of their earnings (depending
on job location) through the state and commercial banks” (Chant and Mcllwaine 1995: 33).

Socialist theorists believe that this pattern of unequal access to the fruits of a country’s economy will continue until the proletariat class unites for better working conditions. In Singapore, however, foreign workers are prohibited by law from forming unions. Pooling together to demand rights is impossible because workers are alienated from each other, plus they are in constant competition for jobs. In Singapore, the plight of women domestic workers as a human rights issue needs to be brought to the forefront.

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Domestic Workers

Scholars claim that female domestic workers share common hardships, sufferings and traumas through time and space (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997: 10). Maids have several counts against them in the economic system in which they now work. As women of a lesser class, their ideals, values, strengths and goals are undermined and discounted. Domestic work is not seen as real work because it is done by women in the home. Women’s work is devalued because women are doing it; society does not hold reproductive labor as valuable. The low status of employed women domestics is an extension of the oppression and low status of unpaid household work women do worldwide (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997: 10).

Sri Lankan women work as maids in the Middle East in great numbers. Women are picked from photos and descriptions by agents before being flown to
their destination (Abu-Habib 1998). Because employment is so necessary, Sri Lankan women will fabricate untruths to become more acceptable to employers. (For example, they will change their religion). Once they are working, they can be returned to Sri Lanka and replaced if employers do not like them. The workers have no means to change employers. They make little money (US$100 a month) and are not protected by local labor laws (Abu-Habib 1998).

The employers retain the workers' passports and travel documents (Abu-Habib 1998). So often a woman's only choice is to run away from an abusive or undesirable situation, rather than seek recourse. If she doesn't work, it is easy for her to become a prostitute; sex work is easy money and easy to come by. For this reason, women repatriating to Sri Lanka have lowered status because women who work overseas are seen as promiscuous.

The majority of Sri Lankan women working in the Middle East have families of their own; children are left with relatives and in-laws. These families depend on the income of family members who seek work overseas as migrant workers. Sri Lankan women working overseas generally give up more of their income than Sri Lankan men (Abu-Habib 1998). Income earned by Sri Lankan maids in the Middle East is remitted into the Sri Lankan economy. This money pays for “…import of food, fuel, [and] military equipment…”, and is considered a matter of national security (Ismail 1999: 234). Yet, they have little or no legal or social support in their countries of origin nor in the host country.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the Middle East give little attention to migrant workers' issues (Abu-Habib 1998: 52). Generally, womens'
organizations that organize local women do not admit the oppression of migrant women. They may deny, reject and/or not be interested in the issues that migrant women face.

Non-white women who feel affirmed in their current cultural system form groups for women, but still believe that their definitions of what issues are important prevail (hooks 1984:9). They don't encourage oppressed migrant women to use their voice against the tyranny of exploitation. They do not attempt to understand the hardships and traumas faced by migrant women. They seek to silence the domestic workers and judge the legitimacy of their strife. Silencing domestic workers is another parallel that abounds beyond geographical boundaries.

In Zambia, Karen Hansen (1989) worked and lived with domestic workers. Her research on power and autonomy in relationships between domestic workers and their employers is helpful in understanding gender differences in migration. Only one-third of the domestic workers in Zambia are women; because men and women have similar jobs, the differences in their treatment reflects the lowered status of women.

Men and women do domestic work, but their job descriptions are very different. Zambian men are hired to do household work while women are hired to care for children. Both are working for upper-middle class Blacks, Asians, Indians and some Whites. The men have families with a wife at home who does not work outside the home, while women workers are usually single heads of households. In Zambia, these women are of the lowest status because they
don't have a man to legitimate their economic and social roles in society. They are considered to have loose morals because they are seeking a male partner all the time. The men are more valued for this work because they are considered more stable; women are considered unstable because, again, they are actively seeking a male to head their household. Employers think their female domestic worker will leave her job as soon as her economic position is increased or she finds a man. Women have a higher turnover, are paid less, and degraded more.

Hansen argues that one main difference between employers and employees in Zambia is that the employers have choices that the domestic workers do not. The domestic workers are poor and must provide for their family and have few choices. Hansen suggests that dealing with the unbalanced relationships between power and dependence will bring race, class and gender differences to the forefront. She claims that employers are working to sustain their security, while the domestic workers are struggling to survive. They each want to increase their "...access to economic resources and power" (Hansen 1989: 5). Because relationships between domestic workers and employers reflect increasing developments in the world economy, they also offer valuable insights into class, race and gender struggles. The biggest contention is that a lack of choice is a lack of freedom; gender, race and class differences are starkly apparent in the case of migrant women from third world countries working in first world countries.

In Canada, the guidelines for employment of migrants are tricky, and employers find ways to manipulate contracts in ways that exploit workers on a
large scale (Grandea and Kerr 1998). By law, migrant women are expected to work 8 hours a day and have weekends off, freedom during that off-time and paid overtime. After two years they can apply for a landed migrant status, which means they can seek jobs and living situations outside domestic work. In reality, they work 12 or more hours a day, days off and do not get paid properly because overtime is by the hour; employers manipulate the hours by not paying domestic workers when children are sleeping (even though the workers are responsible for the children), or for house sitting. If a maid asks for her share of money or a day off, her employers label her materialistic. Additionally, Canadians can subtract $300 (Canadian dollars) from a maid’s pay to compensate themselves for room and board. Some maids said their employers tell them they could rent their room for $600 (Canadian dollars), and manipulate the maids to work longer hours without pay (Grandea and Kerr 1998). The maids don’t understand why, if the employers could rent the room for more money, they were hired in the first place. Finally, some agencies place maids on a “three month trial basis;” the maids are expected to work for free, and many do because they want and need the job. But, this cuts into their two year contract and prolongs their landed migrant status.

Research done with domestic workers in Canada is more specific to the exploitation and unfair treatment of migrant women in their job (Pratt 1999). Grandea and Kerr (1998) facilitated a participatory action research (PAR) study

1 Domestic workers, due to the conditions of their job, are criticized when they are assertive about time off and proper pay. They are expected to deliver a “labor of love” rather than a service (Pratt 1999: 25).
in Canada in 1996, with maids as the primary researchers. Sixteen domestic workers in two Canadian cities came together and formed focus groups with other domestic workers. Together they made extensive lists of what they called "agents for change." These action-oriented strategies are thought to be able to improve situations in which domestic workers currently find themselves in Canada. Their policy recommendations were in three main categories: policy changes for the Canadian government, the Philippine government and for domestic workers themselves.

Maids interviewed in this workshop explained why and how they were being taken advantage of. Some migrant women working in Hong Kong and Singapore come to Canada as a jumping board for a better life because they desire fair treatment and increased pay. Once in Canada, they are shocked to find that they are treated no better than they were in their previous job. In fact, foreign maids feel their situations to be much worse than Canadian or European nannies and attribute this to their foreign status and the Live-In-Caregiver Program required for foreign maids their first two years in Canada. Not only are they nannies, they are housekeepers, gardeners and house sitters.

Foreign maids in Canada challenge the belief that life in Canada has a better working environment. One result of the research project is that the maids want this myth to be eliminated and recommend workshops for domestic workers in Canada to raise their level of awareness of their rights (Grandea and Kerr 1998: 12). Workers in Canada argue that when they arrive in Canada, their new employers inquire about what their duties were in Singapore so they can ask
them to repeat these duties. However, domestic workers had left Singapore for Canada because they wanted a more realistic workload with realistic pay.

The previous examples are invigorating to me because the migrant workers are being encouraged to “…build their own support structures and networks” (Lim and Oishi 1996: 111). Increased participation of migrant women with their government, through embassies and the host country, could further increase the quality of life of the maids.

Theory

Feminists have taken traditional theories and adapted them to suit theoretical feminist needs and have been successful (Harding 1992: 338). When traditional theories are adapted to feminist theory a whole new set of concepts arise. Theory evolving from the depths of the patriarchal paradigm should not be ignored, dissected or rebuked; rather their useful pieces should shift into a paradigm that honors the autonomous nature of much of feminist theory (Harding 1992: 347). I have decided to use feminist theories to outline the difficulties women domestic workers face in Singapore because as women their experiences are different than those of men, and as poor women of color, their experiences are different than that of many women, especially western women. The everyday tasks and occurrences that shape their lives are drawn from their gender, ethnicity and class; it is impossible to separate these characteristics. The fact that these women are poor and women of color is essential to understand why they are working as migrant workers for little pay
and enduring great hardships. Feminist theory is helpful in identifying the exploitative conditions and difficult realities lived by women domestic workers.

A Socialist feminist view of workers in Singapore would argue that a capitalist society exploits workers in order to increase capital (Harding 1992). In capitalist countries the need for cheap labor is essential, but the relationship between capitalist countries and poor counties is symbiotic. Poor countries send workers to capitalist countries because of unemployment and hard earned wages are sent into the worker's home economy; at the same time, low-waged work supports the capitalist country. Wallerstein (1982) calls this *unequal exchange*.

Is a worker free to choose work as an overseas worker or are conditions in the home country such that overseas labor (which supports capitalism) is the only rational choice? Coercion is a tactic used to convince workers that they have a choice and that overseas work will lift them out of their grim situation at home. In Singapore, migrants are not permitted to form unions and do not pool together when working conditions are poor. In order to form what Socialists call class-consciousness, workers need to pool together and support each other to make working conditions better. Would female domestic workers constitute a class of people with a consciousness of class? If they did pool together, would working conditions be better? Could they communicate and organize?

Domestic work the maids do in Singapore alienates them from the wholeness of human existence. The women are alienated from the product their work produces because they lack creativity in the monotonous tasks performed
daily, and from themselves because the work they do is forced and required and unpleasant. The women workers are dehumanized through abuse, trauma and degrading treatment by their employers and society. They are alienated from each other because working patterns force workers simultaneously into competition and isolation, and from their own bodies, which are the tools of their labor. Women are worked so rigorously and have little to no time off that they do not have time to come together and examine each others' working conditions. Socialist feminists are hopeful that over a period of time the capitalist relationship will so divide the proletariats from the bourgeois that socialistic conditions will eventually overthrow capitalistic ones (Tong 1998: 99). If foreign women workers in Singapore are seen as a class of workers, that is, a group that is alienated from a wholeness of human existence, then socialist feminists would argue that the only way for things to change would be for the maids to pool together and demand it. With the use of feminist praxis, researchers can contribute to this change.

One characteristic of praxis that I feel comfortable with working into my research is the notion that research projects have the best outcomes with active involvement from those the research is for, in this case the maids themselves (Ward 1995). Maids have the knowledge to reject or accept models, norms or standards according to their self-definition. In this research, I attempted to maximize the involvement of maids in the project using participatory approaches. The participatory approach, together with feminist theory, should be more than a reaction or critique to patriarchy, otherwise it “…affirms the very paradigms is
seeks to contest" (Gross 1992: 360). Feminist theory should be emotionally driven, hold a point of view, and be open to diverse ways. Rather than a space between the researcher and her or his work, feminist theory should honor a closeness between them (Gross 1992: 368). Feminist thought, coupled with a participatory approach, may best allow for multi-layered ideas and experiences to emerge and be valued in problem solving. Women’s personal experiences are a valid form of knowledge dedicated to feminist praxis. “Theorizing as a life or death endeavor rather than leisured, idle speculation, embodies revolutionary praxis” (James 1993: 41).

The women I interviewed have limited knowledge of academia and theory, but their knowledge of migrant women’s experiences as non-academic and non-theoretical is valuable and contributes to feminist thought and to the resolution of women’s issues. bell hooks (1984) writes that feminist ideas must be shared and understood by multiple races, classes and genders of people; without this understanding, feminism will not have a stronghold. Feminism is not about being educated and privileged, but about working to end sexist (and thus classist and racist) oppression (hooks 1984). Migrant women in Singapore face challenges in their experiences that differ from those of men and non-migrant women. The authors of Women of a Lesser Cost write that inequality based on gender, and I add ethnicity and class, cross over every aspect of migrant women’s lives (Chant and McIlwaine 1995).

Women migrants are discriminated against on the basis of being female and foreigners and poor, often called the “threelfold oppression.” The ‘threelfold
oppression’…views femaleness, compounded by class (migrant worker) and nationality (foreigner), as being a particularly unfortunate situation ripe for exploitation” (Brettell and Simon 1986: 5). In this paper, I attempt to show how migrating women face different challenges than migrating men and that these differences should be considered during policy building. The women I interviewed have experiences of being maids, and their experiences should be incorporated into changing policy specific to women’s human rights. In my recommendations, I will present ways that I feel would increase the access to resources for women working as low-wage migrants in Singapore.
METHODOLOGY

During my stay in Singapore, I conducted interviews with foreign maids, embassy officials, and others to try and decipher the current working conditions of maids (see interview questions in the appendix). I interviewed 18 maids about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings throughout the process of becoming a maid and what it is like to be a maid in Singapore; 10 maids were from the Philippines, 6 from Sri Lanka and 2 from Indonesia (this number is consistent with the ratio of foreign women working as maids in Singapore). I also interviewed 2 embassy officials, 1 agent, 2 local employers of maids and 2 women working with skills training for maids. The interviews were unstructured, open-ended and in English. All interviews took place in a comfortable setting; the interviews were always on the maids' "turf."

There were challenges I faced from the beginning. I was familiar with domestic worker issues before arriving in Singapore, but soon after starting my internship at AWARE I realized that talking about these issue caused locals and non-Singaporean permanent residents (PRs) to become defensive. I started by asking women at AWARE about maid abuse, but realized "abuse" was a strong word that caused people to become more defensive, and so I changed the term to "issues." This is a better description of the situation of maids in Singapore; while many of the maids are not abused in a way, many are treated indecently.

2 With the exception of two interviews with Sri Lankan women that were interpreted by another English speaking Sri Lankan domestic worker.
As I will illustrate throughout this thesis, when in Singapore the class position of the maids is low. When I located my first informant, a woman who had been a domestic worker in Singapore for fourteen years and who guided me throughout my stay, I was warned that my research was touchy and I should be careful. Several people advocating for maids would not talk with me in person because they said it is a sensitive issue that they didn’t want to draw attention to.

Because of the lack of interest concerning maids in Singapore, there is little information about the thoughts and feelings maids have about working as overseas low-wage laborers; their position as migrant laborers is regarded as a resource for middle class families. The apparent needs of the modern family far outweigh the needs or feelings of the maid; maids are not treated in humane ways, but as servants expected to do a job without expressing feelings.

Reflecting these current issues, I feel qualitative research, striving for a participatory approach, is best to capture the thoughts and feelings of the women I interviewed. As I aforementioned, the interviews are unstructured and open ended with the informants contributing to the direction and flow of conversation. I was told I should not tape my interviews because it might jeopardize the women’s safety, so I took detailed notes. These notes were later entered into my computer. Then I analyzed them for common themes. Much of what constitutes case studies in this thesis is my raw perception of these women’s stories.

I attempted to balance the power relations by using participatory research to help guide my fieldwork; Colleen Ward calls this “power-sharing” (Ward 1995).
The shift to a more egalitarian relationship between researcher and informant creates a mutual giving relationship. I became involved with my informants, answering questions about myself, sharing my opinion when asked for it, and so on. Despite these attempts, social norms about class and race, and the positive racial influence of being an American, prohibited the power relationships from becoming completely balanced.

Being American worked in my favor; intuitively I know that people talked with me about this touchy subject because I am an American. In fact, during the first few weeks in Singapore I tried to disengage myself from my own culture because I thought the immersion into Singaporean culture would benefit my experience and my research. I found that lack of contact with other Americans and my denial of my ethnicity is not realistic or ideal. Attempting to avoid ethnicity, I found, does not benefit experience or research, but sensitive awareness of ethnicity can contribute to a broader understanding of the research and those the research is for. I now recognize that I am not equal with the maids, despite my sharing.

My current research led me to questions such as: Could it be possible that women in such oppressive situations would openly choose to become a maid in a foreign country? Why would a woman choose this condition? Is the labor of migrant women so necessary that human rights are irrelevant? In the next section I will show how the push for local women to join the labor force has created an influx of migrant women to take over in the domestic realm.
RESULTS

Singaporean Women in the Modern World

Singapore Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, gave a speech on 15 Aug 1983, stating that "...fewer graduate women got married compared with non-graduate women" (Anuar 1998: 23). This was a marked day for the women's movement in Singapore because the leader of their nation was candidly discouraging the pursuit of equality for women. Lee Kuan Yew noted that the better educated the women the fewer children she has. His assumption was that education would reduce the number of children being born and effect the quality of the population; this is a serious matter since people are Singapore's only resource (Anuar 1998). The Prime Minister felt single graduate women should be encouraged to get married and have children. A local woman reflects:

I was one of the first to speak out against this publicly. After Lee Kuan Yew's speech, the Government set up a matchmaking agency for graduates called the Social Development Unit for women graduates to meet male graduates. Later the Government modified its stand and wanted every single woman, not only graduates, to marry and have children. Another unit was set up called the SDS (Social Development Services) for non-graduates; I understand this has been more successful than the SDU. Recently the population issue's been revived and the population target has been increased again to 5.5 million (informant 2000: personal communication).

Singapore is a small, independent country/state that occupies an island at the lower tip of West Malaysia. It became independent in the mid 1960s and since has been successful in becoming accomplished economically and
politically; it has a one-party political system. The same system that makes Singapore economically and politically successful in Asia also hinders progress of the women's movement. This government push for women to work and have more children sets up an institution just right for foreign domestic workers to be exploited.

Family and Career

Women in Singapore live by a double-edged sword in a culture that wholeheartedly supports women's careers while adamantly promoting child bearing. In Singapore the birth rate is low, health care is high (i.e., a growing elderly population) and the population is somewhat small. All these factors contribute to what locals call “The Great Marriage Debate.” “The Great Marriage Debate refers to the speech made by Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister, on 15 Aug 1983 on patterns of procreation” (Informant 2000: personal communication). There exists a paradox in gender labor; women are expected to have a career and fulfill familial needs at the same time. This tandem set of ideals supports in-migration of women from other countries to take over in the domestic realm so Singaporean women can simultaneously fulfill family and career.

Because Singaporean women are becoming more educated, marrying less often and emigrating more, fewer babies are being born. There are incentives to inspire women to join the workforce while continuing to bear children: “...the government has undertaken a number of measures to
encourage a higher female labor force participation rate (FLFPR). It is aiming for a 50 per cent FLFPR. This includes getting more married women to enter, remain, or rejoin the labor force" (Liang 1994: 93). Meanwhile the government also encourages women to have more babies. The popular population slogan is, "Have Three, or More If You Can Afford It" (Liang 1994: 97).

To persuade women with a family to work and still bear children, a new population policy provides tax incentives (Liang 1994: 94). One tax incentive is called the Qualifying Child Relief (QCR). For example, women who have their first, second and third child will receive S$1,500 for each. For successive children born after January 1, 1988, the family will receive the same amount per child. Another tax incentive is a tax relief on the foreign maid levy available only to married, divorced or widowed women (Lee, et al. 1999: 62; Liang 1994: 95).

Despite this, the government feels Singaporean women are still not having enough babies. In a more recent article the Finance Minister introduced another tax rebate. "He had announced that S$20,000 rebates would be offered to encourage parents to have a third and fourth child" (PuruShotam 1995: 146).

**Why a Maid?**

Having children in Singapore is desired, but the number of childcare slots available is not nearly enough to offer services to all Singaporean families. The government is trying to fix the problem, but new policies regarding childcare are

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3 The levy is a sum of money paid to the government per migrant worker. It is currently S$345 a month (~US$230). The tax relief on the levy is not available to single women, including single mothers.
arising slowly and providing quality childcare for all children may take time (Lee et al. 1999: 64). Women who want to pursue a career have few choices and one choice is to hire a foreign domestic worker. This choice is often the best because it also helps alleviate the burden of career/family dichotomies that many modern Singaporean women face. Even if a woman’s mother or mother-in-law is available for childcare, some families still hire a maid for other domestic chores. The figure below shows that the biggest group hiring a domestic worker are people in the 30-39 age bracket with a university education and who work in professional positions. This is the time when most people really expand their career path and have young children. Bringing another woman into the household can create a much-needed break for many women, though it can be expensive. Despite expenses, many families make the sacrifice because they feel hiring a domestic worker is the best choice when children are involved.
### Sociodemographic characteristics of employers surveyed

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<th></th>
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Figure 1. From Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlea Huang (Yeoh and Huang 1999: 282).

Maids also increase the status of a family; status and prosperity is important to most middle class Singaporean families (Heyzer and Lycklama 1989: 1). Women hired to work the undesirable jobs make way for spare time to be spent in more luxurious ways.
Upward social mobility still holds out real promise for the transfer of the tedious, mundane and boring tasks that are part of the less rewarding aspects of being in a middle-class family...to other women. These other women include full-time foreign domestic maids... One may not have such a maid, but to be of the middle class means that one can aspire to have such help in the future (PuruShotam 1995: 140).

Though modern families are becoming fast paced and the career/family dichotomy plays heavily on women, hiring a maid takes a large economic toll on the family. Families who hire a maid through an accredited agent will have to pay an expensive deposit of S$5000.00 to the government. The monthly wage paid to domestic workers, if proper guidelines are followed, is S$200 to S$350 a month. On top of that the employers are required to pay a government levy of S$345 a month. This levy is in place to reduce the number of foreign workers coming into Singapore (Liang 1994: 95). Some locals feel the levy is not appropriate. A local migrant worker rights activists I talked with feels the levy is a double standard; if the government doesn’t want to let people into the country, it doesn’t need to be enforced by a levy. If there was no levy, the workers may receive more income.\(^4\)

**Dependence on Female Migrants for Domestic Labor**

Poor female migrant workers leave their less economically developed homeland to work in countries with more money available. This has been seen

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\(^4\) A local employer of an Indonesian maid complained about the CPF (Central Province Fund) and said it is "morally wrong" to take money from employers and put it into government funds. There was no mention of the maid herself receiving the levy money that is currently paid to the government.
as a large-scale regional phenomenon starting in the early 1990s (Weerakoon 1997: 68). There are many reasons why women come to Singapore to work as domestic workers, but the main reason is lack of employment in home countries coincided with the need for employment in others. "People often migrate to improve their socio-economic positions, to gain greater security and to escape poor positions in the socio-economic stratification system which limit their full participation in the social opportunity system" (Heyzer and Lycklama 1989: 1). The chart bellow shows the diversity of occupations and education women have before migrating to Singapore. Many held professional positions, such as nurse or teacher.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<th>Indonesian n=45</th>
<th>Sri Lankan n=20</th>
<th>Others n=11</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. From Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang (Yeoh and Huang 1999: 281).
The majority of the women working as maids in Singapore are from the Philippines.\(^5\) Women from the Philippines are usually educated with two or four year degrees, because going to college or university is encouraged. After these women graduate they cannot find jobs because of mass unemployment, although women have an easier time getting hired than the men. However, women who do find employment, as teachers for instance, do not make enough money to live on. In seeking for better opportunities, foreign employment is a seemingly easy way to make better money.

The emigration of women and men decreases unemployment in their home countries. Specific to the Philippines, many of the women are new graduates and jobs are hard to find with lack of experience. If they can get a job that pays only a few thousand pesos a month in the Philippines, working in Singapore will pay them more money. Plus they spend less; as foreign workers they don’t pay for rent, car, food and medical. In Indonesia women only make about \(1/20\) of the earnings that they make in Singapore, if they can get a job at all. There are more opportunities in foreign countries and in Singapore there is a demand for work. In the 1970s there were few women who went abroad. Now, because of the demand, many more women want to go abroad. There is a demand before there is a supply.

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\(^{5}\) 77 percent of the people emigrating from the Philippines are women and are leaving to become domestic workers (Weerakoon 1997). 80 percent of the foreign domestic workers in Singapore are Filipina.
Case Study No. 1: Julia

Julia has been working as a domestic worker for over seven years. She has a Bachelor of Science in education from a university in the Philippines. Her cousin asked her to come to Singapore because her employer wanted another worker. Her employers have four children. Working in Singapore pays better so she decided to come to Singapore to work as a domestic worker.

She came as a tourist and then used an agent here in Singapore. When Julia got to Singapore she had S$250.00 deducted from her salary for three months to pay the agent fees. Despite this monetary set back she makes a lot of money here and she saves most of it because she only spends money on her off day. In the Philippines she needed to spend money everyday to travel and for food and rent. In Singapore she can save a lot more of her money because she does not have to spend as much.

Despite unemployment, women come to Singapore for a variety of reasons. Some women come by choice and their families may or may not be supportive. Other women are asked or forced to come by their parents and their whole paycheck is sent home to help the family farm or business or to send younger siblings to school. Sometimes maids come against their parents' will because they want to help the family, and overseas work is the fastest way to get
money. Some do it for a life change or just to travel and are not aware of the hardships many domestic workers face.

Other factors that motivate migration to Singapore include a desire to move to Canada or Hong Kong. “Singapore is a jumping board” for the workers to get to more desirable countries (Informant 2000: personal communication). Many maids want to work in Canada because they heard conditions are better for foreign domestic workers. But to get to Canada, one of the requirements is they need to finish a contract in Hong Kong or Singapore. Working as a domestic worker in Singapore is a way for women to achieve upward social mobility (Heyzer and Lycklama 1989).

The amount of money a maid earns in Singapore depends on several factors. If she is a Filipina and she comes through her embassy, she will make S$350 a month.\(^6\) If a woman is from Sri Lanka or Indonesia she will usually earn less money, about S$200 a month because she does not speak fluent English (Wong 1996). Most Chinese-Singaporeans, which make up more than seventy percent of the population in Singapore, want to employ Filipina women because of the strong push by the government that children speak English. There are now so many Filipinas working in Singapore it isn’t uncommon to hear people joking about their children having a Filipina accent.

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\(^6\) She must use the Overseas Worker’s Contract provided through her embassy. It is the law in the Philippines, not in Singapore.
Becoming a Maid in Singapore

The situation in third world countries is becoming harder on local people and the push to emigrate is greater than it used to be. As capitalism and free trade become more globalized, families are losing their farms and family business and looking for outside work. Sri Lankans give up their land for strawberry crops and non-edible flowers that are exported. The lack of outside work makes living situations harsh. Grace Chang writes:

Filipina rural women have reported going without power for four to eight hours of every day and coping with little or no water. Urban women from the Philippines reported working an average 18-hour day doing domestic work, laundry work outside their homes, and begging, while men face increasing unemployment. Their children are most often on the street rather than in school, and many families are becoming homeless due to the high price of housing and the demolition of houses under development. Families often eat only once or twice a day because they can't afford to eat more often. Most go without any health care, as the public hospitals demand payment up front and prescription medicines are prohibitively expensive (Chang 2000: 127).

Overseas employment would seem inviting after living in situations of vast poverty. In Singapore, the women are told they will have housing, food, payment and access to health care. Singapore's policy is to allow overseas workers these "comforts" and few go without. But this is not without repercussion; migrants often pay for these comforts in other ways. They may not be given proper food or culturally sensitive food, nor given sick days, are overworked, or expected to play and entertain children or company even on their off time. It is difficult to set
privacy boundaries when co-living is a factor (Grandea and Kerr 1998). I will touch more on this in a later section.

Women coming from either Sri Lanka or Indonesia have less support from their government than Filipinas to make sure their rights are protected. Many of the women I interviewed from these two countries are not paid well and do not have a day off. Many women have no idea of working conditions before coming to Singapore and often do not have contact with one another and so do not know that a day off or a certain salary, for example, is recommended. More specifically, recommendations from Indonesian and Sri Lankan embassies are not prominent, whereas the Philippine embassy is adamant about certain employment conditions for domestic workers. Proper recommendations are followed for Filipina workers more often than with Sri Lankan and Indonesian women.

When a woman decides to become a maid in Singapore she has many choices to make. Often the choices can affect a woman's experience for better or worse in extreme cases. First she decides if she wants to use an agent in her home country and then transfer to one in Singapore after she arrives. If she decides to use an agent in her own country she will end up paying more money out of her pocket because she will have two agents to pay instead of just one. Many women come to Singapore as tourists and then set themselves up with an agent after arriving in Singapore.

In 1993, 106,290 people left the Philippines as tourists and 11,568 left as workers. It is apparent that many of the women leaving as tourists become
domestic workers in Singapore (Wong 1996: 127). A Filipina maid who has been working in Singapore for many years tells me her perception of how women get to Singapore:

Oh yea, very hard you know? They borrow money, they pawn their jewelries, they pawn their land, they sell cows and everything like this. Of course they borrow the money from the person and if the person is not kind enough to let them build the land and them pay slowly slowly, they take the land, no? In Singapore there are about 800 agencies. That's why it's not easy for the girl.

Agents

There are two types of agents to choose from and an inexperienced worker may not know the difference. Accredited and non-accredited agents place maids with employers in Singapore. The accredited agent must comply with Singapore guidelines and with guidelines from the migrant worker’s home country. For example, I interviewed an accredited agent and learned that women who go through his agency are informed of guidelines regarding salary, days off, and benefits. This particular agent worked only with Filipina women and followed guidelines set by both Singapore and the Philippines. If a woman unknowingly goes through a non-accredited agent she is at the mercy of the contract set before her. Often she will sign a contract that says she must pay an allotted sum of money to her agent for a certain number of months and it is usually a lot of money. She may sign a contract agreeing to a seven-day workweek or a salary much less than the recommended amount given by the Singaporean government.
or the government of her home country. If she does, she must comply with the agreed terms until her contract is expired or terminated.

**Case Study No. 2: Mr. Lee**

Mr. Lee is an accredited agent for foreign domestic workers from the Philippines. I interviewed him in his office. There were pink file folders all over the office; I assume they are files for domestic workers. It is a small office with pictures of women migrants on the outside window for passers by to view. The agency is on the third level of Lucky Plaza, a mall in Singapore for shopping and eating and is the local hang-out for Filipina maids on Sundays.

There was little Mr. Lee knew of the demographic impact made by maids working in Singapore and he said he had no statistical reports that showed economic or population demography influenced by the maids. He did say there were ~110,000 women working as domestic workers in Singapore and 80 percent of these women are Filipina. The other 20 percent are Indonesian, Sri Lankan and a small percent of women from India, Thailand, etc.... MOM (Ministry of Manpower in Singapore) has classified certain countries they will and will not accept workers from. Hong Kong and Macan are two examples of countries that are not permitted by their home country or by Singapore to migrate into Singapore to work wage labor jobs (in appendix).
Mr. Lee said agencies in Singapore that recruit maids have associates in other countries. Sometimes the women come directly from their country as tourists and look for an agency in Singapore because family and friends suggested it (to save money) and do not go through The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA). Others come through the Philippine Embassy into Singapore and they go through POEA. One problem Mr. Lee sees is when the women do not go through the Philippine government and POEA as overseas workers. "Due to certain reasons, like control at Philippine airport, there are workers that went out to work abroad that did not go through POEA." When this happens the women have less rights because they don't have their government and POEA to back them up if there is a problem. MOM encourages all employers and employees to use a contract approved by the sending country and Singapore.

A Filipina interested in finding an agent to help place her in a home has to come up with 5,900 pesos (22 pesos per S$1 = US$163.00) for a processing fee. Policy to protect workers through agreement contracts is different in non-accredited agencies. It is better to go through accredited agencies to avoid unfair arrangements made on the maid.

Mr. Lee feels that the Philippine government needs better control of situations regarding workers leaving the country as tourists. The
government should know better if they want to protect their people from being exploited.

I asked Mr. Lee how women are viewed in the Philippines. He said, "In the eyes of the Philippine government the workers are heroines." They bring overseas money into their country; they definitely contribute to the country's economy and it reduces unemployment. The demand for workers in a country like Singapore that has a shortage of workers depends on unemployment of workers in other countries.

Because of the foreign dollars workers bring into their country, they are considered heroines of the Philippine economy (Chang 2000). In her book, Grace Chang claims women send more money home than men even though women make less; this foreign money totals $6-7 billion annually through informal channels (Chang 2000: 130; Momsen 1999:9). Foreign domestic workers are heroines for this reason, and because they create employment vacancies in their home country. Their exploited labor is useful to host countries because of the amount of work they perform for so little money. Foreign workers don't cost the Singaporean government much because they are not allowed to use social services like local workers, plus their presence in Singapore opens doors to entrepreneurs like agents. Also, each employer of a maid is required to
pay a government levy. The levy is currently S$345 a month. The domestic workers are paid ~$350 a month and the employer pays the levy to the government. The reason for Central Province Fund (CPF) levy is the government's control of the influx of foreign workers; Singapore doesn't want to depend on too many foreign domestic workers. On top of the levy, the employer must show that they have at least S$5000 in the bank before they can hire a domestic worker. This is because it is their obligation that the domestic worker is “well maintained,” meaning the employer is responsible for the employee’s health as well as making sure she does not get pregnant. If something like pregnancy or sickness happens, the employers need to be able to afford to re-patriate her (send her home), and that includes buying her return air ticket.

Agents may be untruthful when placing a maid with a family. A woman anxious to be placed may have put anything in her application that she thinks will get her employed faster. Women who apply for domestic work and are placed in families, either by their own wish to be placed quickly or the agents desire to pass off women to families that are not a good match, have ideal applications. “...able to cook, wash, take care of children, hygienic in habits, willing to work hard, etc.” (Arotcarena 1986: 9). In fact, sometimes the agents even go so far as to tell prospective employers that particular women will give up their day off, church participation, won’t return home if she is needed and will not feel homesick (Arotcarena 1986). This can cause conflict between employer and

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7 One reason maids want to emigrate to Canada is because the pay is so much higher, ~$900 Canadian dollars a month. The levy money paid to the government in Singapore is thought to take money away from the maids.
domestic worker if the employer is not expecting someone to be a churchgoer or if a domestic worker expected a day off. Accredited agents should follow more rigid guidelines when placing maids with families. In the appendix is a copy of worker rights given to maids by their agents (if they go through an accredited and honest agent).

Adjustments

I asked many women I interviewed why they chose to come to Singapore to work and how they felt after they came. Every woman I talked with had a different experience with her family, agent and her adjustment to life in Singapore. Because many women come from rural villages, life in Singapore can be a shock. Some have never used a rice cooker or a vacuum cleaner before. The local paper in Singapore, The Straits Times, validates this claim by stating that, “The shift from a rural setting to an urban setting is very real and the related problems it throws up together with the culture shock can affect the maids deeply” (Shivdas 1992: 36).

Adjustment can be quite hard and several variables are attributed to a woman’s adjustment. For instance, approximately eight women a year die by falling out of windows while they are cleaning them because they are not used to safety issues about high-rise buildings. There is a large controversy in Singapore about training maids to work safely. Many employers want their maids to be trained to care specifically for children or the aged and to use modern appliances while others feel the responsibility for training maids should
fall on the employer. Another article in *The Straits Times*, reports the Ministry of Manpower urging employers to “...take pains to instruct their domestic workers and to explain to them how their work could be done well and safely...” (The Straits Times 1999: 43).

A local informant working with Indonesian maids told me that the Indonesian maids tend to have a hard time with the transition because, unlike the Filipina women, Indonesian women go through two agents, and the agent in each country is very different. She felt it was mainly these agents in Indonesia that are responsible for recruiting women to become maids in Singapore. She also felt the cultural differences between Indonesia and Singapore is so different that the women experience shock and feel scared and ostracized. There is a problem with language and often the Christian and Catholic women are placed in Buddhist households and that alone is a significant difference.\(^8\)

**Economic Contribution**

Domestic work is becoming more and more gendered. The experiences of maids within their employer's household reflects the constraints experienced in society because of gender, class and ethnicity issues (Momsen 1999). In other words, the political and economic conditions are just right for allowing low wage overseas workers to be so employable; it is women who are employed in

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\(^8\) Most of the women I interviewed belonged to a religious faith; usually the women are Catholic or Muslim. The Chinese-Singaporeans are usually Buddhist and do not practice strictly. Women who are dedicated to their religious faith find working for Singaporeans challenging. Not only do they not share a common religion, but a different opinion on the role of religion in one's life. For many of the maids, honoring of their religious beliefs continue to be suppressed throughout their stay in Singapore.
the domestic realm because that is what is expected of them. Domestic work is seen as valueless and this work reflects the reality that domestic workers are women and are poor. When jobs are not available in a woman's home country and jobs are easy to get in richer countries, a woman's only rational choice to support herself and her family is to seek overseas work.

Female migration is dependent on labor fluctuation in a woman's home country; unemployment is a driving factor (Heyzer 1986). Migration has been a male dominated phenomenon until recently. With changes in agricultural economy, women are the more desired family members to migrate because the men and sons are expected to stay and work the land. Women don't have land rights and thus female migration is easier. Noeleen Heyzer claims that women migrate out of rural areas in search of jobs when they can no longer contribute to the agricultural economy (Heyzer 1986). Because women cannot contribute to the agricultural economy, they migrate to generate income for their families as overseas workers.

Maids contribute to the local and foreign economy in several ways, yet still have no economic power. Government policies regulate women's work and affects their personal lives. The global economic market is ever changing the lives of women. They contribute to their own country by sending money home; this money is put directly into their home economy. "The Philippine government receives huge sums of remittances from its overseas workers each year." (Chang 2000:129).
But, the maids are isolated and do not know the conditions of other maids, so exploitation is successful. Through a highly developed underlying institution supported by society and the government, the workers are alienated from each other. If the maids do have contact with each other it is likely they also have greater access to resources. The call of whether or not to let a maid have a day off is up to the employer. The maids who do have a day off are luckier than those who don't. For the most part it is the Filipina women who get the days off, especially if they go through their embassy and use the required contracts. Women from other countries do not have such contracts and, thus, they have fewer rights, and much less a protection of rights.

**Foreign Employers**

In my observations, interviews and in talking casually with domestic workers I have realized that many domestic workers want to work for expats (expatriots). European and Japanese employers are more requested than Singaporean-Chinese employers. When I asked why this is I was told that foreign (non-Chinese) employers are more liberal, give more days off and often more pay. Another advantage of foreign employers is if the expats travel the domestic helpers go along and this is desirable for many women.

**Case Study No. 3: Lois**

I interviewed a Sri Lankan woman in her early 40s who is single with no children. Lois has worked as a domestic worker for a British
family for six years. Her English is clear and she interpreted a couple of interviews for me with women who did not speak clear English. She is the nanny for four children and has been since their birth. The family lived in Hong Kong and has since moved to Singapore. My informant has come with them every time they've moved. The family has hired another woman to do the cleaning so that my informant is only responsible for the children. The family takes sole care of the children on the weekends, leaving her free to relax and do a little bit of cleaning. She gets every Sunday and public holidays off. The employers encourage her to rest. She has two rooms and a kitchen and her own bathroom. Her employers pay for her medical expenses. She says she feels very lucky and told me the other domestic workers tell her how lucky she is.

Because Lois has no family she saves her salary. She has spent the money building a house in Sri Lanka and plans to live there when she goes home. Owning a house in Sri Lanka is a big deal because one home stays in a family for generations.

Lois said she has no problems and never felt homesick. She is very confident and seems genuinely happy and proud that she is saving all her money for herself. She is content with her life and does not want children in the future. She mentioned that she is quite aware that her situation is unusual and realizes others know that too.
Maids desire foreign employers because it is believed foreigners treat their workers better; situations like the one above validate the opinion. Several of the women I interviewed were surprised I did not have a maid and told me I was independent. More than once they insinuated that they would be willing to work for me if I was looking for a maid. They also felt that they made a connection through me and I could find them foreign employers or even hook them up with someone overseas in the US and Canada, who might be interested in hiring a maid. Some maids want foreign employers because they've heard stories from friends that suggest foreign employers are easier and fairer to work for than locals. Others, like one woman I interviewed at the Philippine embassy, have personal reasons for wanting to fulfill the stories they've heard about foreign employers.

**Case Study No. 4: Martha**

Martha started the conversation by telling me she wanted US employers. She asked if I knew anyone interested in hiring a maid. In 1996 her Chinese employer molested her. She pressed charges and there was a hearing in 1997. She won the case and was rewarded with money. The embassy officials told her she was daring because the man she prosecuted was very angry when she went to the police. She was the fifth maid that had been molested by this man, but she was the first to press charges. The embassy said they were proud of her for pressing charges. Martha went back to the embassy for two weeks while she was waiting for the hearing. The employer was so
angry and went looking for her. She felt nervous during the hearing, but was glad she did it. She is still working in Singapore in a safe home, but still wants foreign employers.

Abuse and Trauma of Maids

I am aware that migrant women in Singapore have positive working experiences, but this section focuses on those who don’t. The lack of concern and treatment of migrant workers in Singapore reflects the treatment of maids in some households. Maids deal with the stress of migrating and the trauma of abuse or harassment. It is hard to estimate the number of women abused through rapes in relation to the number of molestation and battery cases because of the nature of language used in media. The words “sex” or “rape” do not appear in the laws and guidelines regarding sexual abuse in Singapore. Words such as “offending of modesty” or “outraging of modesty” are used in relation to sexual violence. This makes it hard to tell how many maids are raped or touched or talked to in an abusive way.

Though migrant women are working women, they are moving from one domestic realm to another; they move from their own familial duties to another’s familial duties. Because the maid lives in the same household with her host family, domestic workers are vulnerable to abuse and trauma in ways they wouldn’t be if they had a separate dwelling. Their lives are dictated by the host family; they have little to no privacy or personal time (Yeoh and Huang 1999).
Women living in the home of their employers are placed in more vulnerable situations than those living outside their working environment (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Ismail 1999). In Not One of the Family, Abigail Bakan and Daiva Stasiulis claim that compulsory co-habitation is a vital key in understanding the tactics of subordination of domestic workers. In Canada where the book was written, co-habitation is seen as a key factor in the abuse and trauma of domestic workers (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997).

Many women I interviewed experience abuse ranging from molestation and rape to mental and physical trauma. Maids may not report abuse to agencies for fear of deportation. 9 "...the most important thing for them is to stay employed. This renders them more likely to take up any abuse that might be imposed on them just to ensure the continuity of employment. They may not want to get out of the abusive situation unless the working conditions are extremely unbearable" (Cheng 1996: 144). In Singapore, hundreds of domestic workers a year are suppressed or abused and not valued by men and women, and thus influence the next generation of employees, their children.

Most of the women I interviewed have friends or family that were abused, had been abused or are in a situation where they are being abused. Women live in households where their work, thoughts and personality are discounted, rebuked or degraded on a daily basis. Many Indonesian and Sri Lankan women,

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9 There are approximately seven false reports of rape by maids of employers a year. Singapore's government is debating whether or not to make the penalty harsher for migrants who false report. Women's rights activist fear this would deter migrant women from reporting true cases of rape because it is their word against their employer. For women who have sacrificed a great deal to get to Singapore, chancing deportation is already too risky to report rape and molestation cases.
especially, endure great hardships of physical and/or mental abuse without speaking a word to their embassy because they don’t realize they can or they are afraid.\textsuperscript{10} It is called a cycle of oppression when target groups of people are mistreated, which in turn generates misinformation and ignorance about these people and is used to justify further mistreatment. The fear and silence they endure makes them more vulnerable to abuse and violence.

On the flip side, Filipinas are known for running away, talking back and working with the Philippine embassy to solve matters. The difference is in the support of the embassies, culture, and proficiency in English. The Indonesian Embassy offers a half-way house for women who are abused or mistreated in any way by their employer, but two days and two nights is all the time allotted these women before they are handed back over to the police. This is insufficient time to receive help or to gain insights to particular situations before the women are returned to the stressful or abusive situation. They don’t have much protection. What follows are two case studies. The first is a woman from Sri Lanka that is currently living in an abusive situation and is choosing to keep her experience from the Sri Lankan embassy. The later is a Filipina that was a victim of abuse and sought help from her embassy.

\textbf{Case Study No. 5: Hettie}

Hettie is from Sri Lanka and has been in Singapore for 10 years and has switched families a lot. It seems her employers are always

\textsuperscript{10} Filipinas are more likely to report abuse to their embassy.
moving, which leaves her with new employers often. She is a small, soft-spoken woman in her mid 30s. I have met her before at a Philippine gathering on Orchard Road. I talked with her briefly there and when I interviewed her this time she reminded me of our previous meeting. She seemed excited to talk with me, but soon after she sat down she started crying and saying she was not happy.

Currently, Hettie works for a British family with four children whom live in a three-story home. She told me the children are very naughty and don’t listen to her at all. Her employers give her lists each day, especially if they are going out. They are never happy with her work and criticize her all the time. She kept saying, “I’m not happy,” or “I am hurting, my heart is hurting.” She is responsible for the four children, all the cooking and cleaning and also for the gardening and mowing. She is expected to wake at 6:00am and goes to sleep around 12:00am.

Hettie told me a story: Sister Ana is planning a pilgrimage to Rome for domestic workers. Hettie asked her employers if she could go and they agreed, but keep changing their minds. They say she can go and then say she can only go for four days when the trip is scheduled to take eight days. They also use it as a threat; if they are not happy with her work they will criticize her and tell her she cannot go on the trip if she does not work harder. She says she never argues with the
employers, never gives them a hard time, yet they are always scolding her.

Previously this family had three other workers, all Filipina. This time around they wanted a Sri Lankan woman because they figured she would be less belligerent. At least one of the Filipina women ran away from this family. Another Filipina was trying to get one of the children to take a bath and during a struggle the child's arm broke. Hettie insinuated that the Filipina was blamed for the broken arm, but it was not clear. It seemed she felt empathy with the previous maids this family hired.

Hettie kept stressing to me how her employers make long lists for her when they go out each day. If she doesn't finish everything on her list she gets criticized and yelled at. She looked through her purse to prove to me the lists were long, but had left the list at home. When she cleans, her employers thoroughly inspect her work and tell her it is not good enough. They say, "You are old, blind, deaf, what am I paying for? How did you ever work before?" (This she repeated several times). On her days off, which she seldom receives, she is kept until late morning because she is given work and often misses the mass service she wants to attend. One time the mass service got out late on Good Friday and when she returned she was yelled at and criticized. She was supposed to cut the grass that day (her day off and a religious holiday), but by the time she got home it was too dark.
She then is given more work. She says, “So many things I do and I am so tired.” She told me she is sometimes so busy she forgets to eat. She says her employers never forget when she makes a mistake. She says, “My heart is very sad.” They had three Filipina maids that were a problem and “I never make a problem.” I asked her if her employers have ever seen her cry and she said, “never.”

Most interestingly, she told me she cannot sleep at night. She goes to sleep around 11:00pm-12:00am and stays awake for several hours. She says, “I can’t sleep, I’m thinking, thinking, thinking all the time.” If she wakes even five minutes past 6:00am her employers are there saying she is sleeping all the time and lazy. She says she never rests and is tired. She wants new employers, but is scared that her current employers will prevent her from this because they will give her a bad reference.

The children scream at Hettie. When she tries to get them to bathe they shout that they will not. The employer comes in and criticized her, “What? You can’t even get them to take a bath?” The children scream when she touches them. She says she talks kindly to them and calls them sweet names, like darling, but they are not warm with her. She says this is how they treated the past domestic workers too. She told me, “Sometimes the children just run away and I just want to run...no peaceful mind.” She says that when “…the husband forgets, never mind, when the madam forgets, never mind, and when the
children forget never mind, when I forget I get scolding.” She repeated that the woman employer is wicked. She also repeated that they wanted her because she does not talk back.

She was telling me of her previous employer, a Chinese family that has moved to Australia and so she had to change families. She pulled out a homemade Easter card from Sydney and encouraged me to read it. Hettie’s past employer wrote to her about their new life and said she had looked for her but was unable to find her. The woman was very friendly and seemed to care for Hettie. Hettie told me that on her days off she would come home and her previous employer would set her a place to eat and warm her dinner. She really felt respected and cared for. The relationship reflects that Hettie is a hard working woman and was well liked in the past. Her previous employers gave her two days off a month and did a lot of work themselves.

This case study reflects how cultural beliefs and expectations can prevent a person from openly pursuing resources that protect her rights. Meena Shivdas discusses the difference between principle and practice, stating that principally women can go to their embassy to seek help, but practically, they choose not to, nor realize they can. Hettie’s embassy has done little to speak out for the rights of their people; in addition, she has been conditioned not to expect protection. She can not stand up for herself and each day she lives in an environment that
strips her of dignity and respect she is farther from the realization that she has rights, no matter how basic. She starts to believe what her employers tell her. This is the employer’s way of controlling her to get what they want from her, a form of internalized oppression. Unequal relationships between maids and their employers keeps maids susceptible to trauma and abuse (Cheng 1996). If embassies get involved and offer protection to the women of their country, the power relationships between women and their employers would start to become more balanced.

The recommendations of the Philippine embassy state women should have a day off, should retain possession of their passport, and so on. But what is recommended and what society dictates is entirely different. Even if there is a contract, a woman may not be confident enough or knowledgeable enough to request support from her embassy. It could be as minor as the employer taking her passport away to prohibit her from running away. But there is automatically an acquisition of non-trust. A person who does not feel trusted will not trust and this paves the way for a lot of other hardships.

In order for maids in situations where they have little contact with others from their country to understand their rights, there must be access to resources informing them of these rights. This is a double-edged sword because access to resources is in itself a resource. Women who have resources and are aware of these resources will use them, as is the case with this next case study:
Case Study No. 6: Ella

Ella has been a domestic worker for nine years in December. For five years she worked for a French family and they left last July. She has a new family, also French. Her first employers were a Chinese family with an older son and an infant and she worked for them until 1993, when they started hurting her by beating her. She pressed charges and won the case. The woman who beat her got jailed for one day and fined. Ella was compensated S$1300+.

Ella came to Singapore when she was 21 years old, after she graduated with a BS in education. She came to Singapore because she could make more money. Her family doesn’t have a lot of money, but her mom lent her the money to fly to Singapore. She came as a tourist and found her first employer through a friend. She said her friend never told her the employer was mean and would beat her. She was also “very, very” homesick. She said the feeling of being away from home is “ridiculous.” She didn’t want to talk to anyone and didn’t tell her mom because she didn’t want her mom to worry. She paid a lot of attention to the little boy to be able to cope with her feelings of sadness. She really wanted to work hard, but her employer still beat her. Ella said she told her employer she was new and was willing to learn, but she was still beaten. She said she would
look into the mirror and ask, “My mother never beat me, so why should my employer do this to me?”

Ella said she was so sad about the amount of work she had to do when she first arrived. She would wake up early and have orders to wash the car, watch the baby, and do the household chores. She got a lot of scolding. Her first employer told her she didn’t do her job properly and this is when she said she was willing to learn. She said it was so difficult because she did not have a day off with these first employers.

Her woman employer beat her; the employer poked her fingers in Ella’s eyes with chopsticks, pinched her all the time and hit her with things. Her employer is the mother of two children (both taken care of by Ella), one infant and a three year old. The employer yelled at her, not at the children or her husband, and called her names like stupid and son of a bitch. Ella said it was rubbish.

Ella said she loved the older boy very much. The beatings started 8 months after she was employed, but she stayed on for a long time because of the boy. The boy would see her and comfort her and say his mom was stupid and that his dad would buy her some chocolate.

She told me this story: one day the husband asked Ella to go start the car. She did as she was asked. When the wife found out she

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11 She is not the only informant to say these exact words. It seems many of the women think of their employer as a family member and when abused it is shocking because they were never abused by their family at home.
yelled, "Who taught you to start the car? I know you wouldn't have touched a car in the Philippines because you are too poor!" The woman employer also accused her of sleeping with her husband. She was so jealous that she told Ella she should go have sex with her husband and she will now be called Mrs. ___(employer's name). I think Ella took this literally, but I imagine the woman was jealous and was being sarcastic.

Another time Ella sent a letter home and asked the woman employer to mail it for her (since most domestic workers are not allowed out of the house). She said the woman opened her letter and had another Filipina read it. It was written in her dialect, so she knew the woman could not read it. The woman started accusing her of writing bad things about her in her letters home and that is how she knew the woman was opening her mail.

Ella shared all her problems with one of her friends and the friend, out of concern for her, called the embassy. Ella was not permitted to use the phone. The embassy said she would need to stay at the embassy for a month before the hearing started and she was scared because she needed to feed herself. She was scared because she would not be making an income. She decided to run to the embassy anyway and asked for help. For ten months she was waiting for her

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12 I speculate this may be due to suppression of local women in Singapore and taking out frustrations on someone lower down the social ladder than themselves.
hearing and stayed in a half-way-house for women who run away.

Ella will be returning to the Philippines after the trial ends.

In this case there is a much different reaction to a similar situation. Her experience differs from the Sri Lankan woman because she has her contract through POEA (the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency) and was informed of her rights when she arrived in Singapore. The Philippine embassy is the only one to provide such a thorough contract with the workers and take efforts to inform them of their rights. She got support from other Filipina maids in Singapore that encouraged her to seek help from the embassy. Ella is aware of her embassy’s protection and though she was scared, she eventually received the encouragement she needed to get herself out of an abusive situation. She was aware that her situation was not right and that she could find a way out.

During the Beijing Conference in 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action states that eliminating violence against women, “…particularly those in vulnerable situations…” is essential for improved status of women. Women migrant workers are seen as particularly vulnerable to abuse and violence. The Platform for Action state that women who are abused or subjected to violent acts should be provided with access to their rights. It goes a step beyond that by stating that not only should they have access to their rights, but they should be provided with a means to find ways to heal from the sufferings they have endured (Battistella and Pagononi 1996: 179).
Women as Commodities

In the local papers every day there are ads for maids worded in such a way that the women seem like a commodity (see ads in the appendix); "Get yours while supplies last...", "Two for the price of one: 50 per cent discount on agency/commission fee", "Obedient Filipino", "free replacement", "unlimited replacements" or "$1 Indonesian / $388 Filipina" (Yeo 1999: 28). There are people who feel the wording is degrading and want to try to clean up the language used in maids ads. Still, the papers are filled with 1-2 pages of ads and sales pitch. Agencies write the ads depending on what their clients demand (Yeo 1999).

Many refer to the exchange in labor as the "maid trade." Geertje Lycklama delves into questions about the maid trade and how the commodization of women as domestic workers came to be; she also asks who is profiting from this big business. The employers have a lot of say in what kind of woman they hire, often times time sifting through video clips and maids' files before they choose a maid. The maid has no say in the family she will be living with. If a maid is not up to standards of the employing family, she is sent back to the agency and a new maid is sent to replace her. It is quite easy to get a replacement maid, but if a maid voluntarily chooses to leave a family she needs to provide her own way out of the country and often looses salary (Yeoh and Huang 1999).

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13 This ethnic difference reflects the racism in Singapore between Filipina workers and women from other countries. The biggest differences between these women are English proficiency and education.
Migrant Women's Sexuality

Further aspects of control over domestic workers and the lack of human rights include the control of a woman’s sexuality. Women who come to Singapore to work as maids are "banned by law from getting pregnant or marrying a local…" (Asiaweek 1999: 19). To keep maids from getting pregnant, they are often locked in flats. One employer was fined (only because there was proof) because he locked his maid in his flat while he went overseas. The employers lose S$5000 if their employee is sent home because she is pregnant. It is for this reason maids are locked into flats when employers are gone. A local author writes of cases where maids are locked in the house whenever the family is out. "Although the employer may be safeguarding his security deposit, the result is the deprivation of the foreign domestic worker’s liberty without due process of the law" (Arotcarena 1986: 29). Note in the Conditions for Work Permit form in the appendix, 7 out of 11 guidelines shape a migrant woman’s sexuality.
Figure 3. "Either they are scared of burglars or they're employing a maid..." (Arotcarena 1986: 28).

In my research and with the women I interviewed, I have been made aware that women are subjected to oppression by the work they do in the homes and business of their employers; often sexual "favors" are expected of them (Geok 1989). Women who come as domestic workers are away from home and in a vulnerable state. Women are often lonely and male employers will take advantage of them. Maids seek kindness and often men use maids sexually by showing them false kindness. They also are scared they will be deported and may go along with sexual favors asked of them. In some instances a male employer will have a long-term affair with his employee.
Pregnancy Testing and Physical Examinations

A woman coming to Singapore as a maid is required to have a medical check up before and after she comes. Before a woman can come into the country she must get a blood test and x-rays so diseases can be detected. After the woman comes to Singapore she is required to have another full physical examination and a pregnancy test every six months. Employers are expected to pay for all these tests as well as any medical bills that arise out of sickness. Depending on the agent, some women are told they are expected to pay for the physical examination and tests.

These are the words of a maid of her experience with the medical examination:

Oh, the medical exam... The medical exam usually takes every six months. It is the responsibility every six months. When I came from the Philippines I had to undergo complete physical examination. Complete-meaning Cholesterol and everything—all the blood tests. I have to undergo x-rays, I have to undergo the scanning, I have to undergo ECG, I have to check my eyes—I pay for all this. Pregnancy test also. But yet, even if you have that in the Philippines, the next day when you arrive Singapore, the next day the first thing the agent will do to you is to bring you to another clinic and have the complete examination again (personal communication: February 2000).

Her experience is individual, yet reflects similar experiences of many women.

Most pay for these exams; sometimes the employers or agents do, but that is not as common. In the appendix there is a copy of a medical form used during these examinations.
**Local Empowerment**

I came into contact with a handful of people dedicated to improving the lives of maids through different means. Sometimes classes are held to educate maids in specific fields so when they return to their home country they will be able to find a job easier. I spent some time with a Catholic nun who worked in Singapore with Sri Lanka maids. She taught classes for women, teaching them skills they could take back to their home country and use to make money. Unfortunately, in order to attend these classes a maid must have a day off. Often a maid will contact Sister Ana and relate her situation, including lack of a day off. Sister Ana will often contact the employers, upon the maid’s request, and speak on her behalf. She is successful more times that not in getting the maids a day or two off a month.

**Case Study No. 7: Sister Ana**

We met in a small room that was open on three sides. The grounds of the convent are beautiful and have a safe feeling. Sister Ana came from Sri Lanka some years ago to aid in the transition of migratory workers from Sri Lanka. The first two years she observed the goings on of migrant workers and felt the pain of the workers from her own country as well as those from other countries. She offered counseling and a listening ear to women who were having a hard time transitioning. She said the first year is the hardest because the women are often away from home for the first time, experiencing a
new culture and don't see any of their hard earned money. Because the loans taken to pay agent fees are quite hefty, most of the wages are used to pay them back. The rest of the money goes to the family for the sibling children’s education or food or rent or for a down payment on a house. Many of the women are quite sad this first year because they miss home or children and because they don’t understand a lot of this culture. Singapore is quite different than the rural villages most of these women come from.

Sister Ana started teaching skills training at the end of two years. Class time has evolved into a set 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month for Sri Lankan workers and 1st and 3rd Sunday for Filipina workers. The classes are not exclusively segregated by ethnicity and usually incorporate a diverse group of women. Sister Ana has a classroom that is shared with the other organizers of the skills training classes. Topics taught to the women include money management, sexuality, positive communication with employers, hair styling and cutting, sewing, basic office skills, English proficiency and basic nursing aid skills. Sister Ana gets volunteers to teach specific classes with an occasional paid position.

In Sri Lanka young women may be educated, but usually not. After marriage and children, women are not expected to work outside the home. Office work is not considered a female profession. Women's work is private and men’s work is public. When women come to
Singapore to work, it is considered temporary and usually women try and save money to buy a house. Sister Ana told me that owning a house is a big deal in Sri Lanka because the house will exist in the family for several generations.

Women come here very ignorant of public life and do not know their rights. For example, if they are presented with a contract of employment that states they are to have only one day a month off, they will sign it. Later, when they realize that they have no freedom and want more off time, the employers pull out their contract and remind them of what the agreement stated. Women may not be aware of resources or rights they have and employers use this to their advantage.

Sister Ana hopes to teach the women basic skills they can bring back to their country of origin and make money. She also hopes to teach self esteem in the process, offering importance of task and worth of person. Because women in Sri Lanka are not encouraged to enter the public sphere, learning these skills comes to them in a way that could not come had the women remained in their country of origin. It was my observation that she feels strongly that the women use their time in Singapore to their advantage and go home able to offer themselves, their family and community a new awareness of skills and opportunities.
Another local woman I talked with is involved in the rights and well being of Indonesian women, herself being Indonesian.

Case Study No. 8: Gloria

Gloria works mainly with Catholic and Christian Indonesian women, which is a small percent of Indonesian people (~10 percent). She sends a monthly booklet to about 80 women who have contacted her and visits them when she has the opportunity. Women contact her by phone when their employers are not home, or by letter. She responds by letter or calls them if the women say it is ok. She told me only about five women out of the eighty said she could call them at home. She believes the women who contact her may be the one's experiencing a hard time with the difference between their culture and Singapore's culture. Of the 80 women who she sends the mailing, only 12 come to mass on Sunday. Gloria believes the other women do not have a day off. During Christmas, she explained, "I write a letter begging the employers to let their workers come to mass." The numbers then increase from 12 to about 24 women attending mass. When I asked her why the employers would not let the women come to mass on Christmas, she told me they explain to her that during the holidays the family needs the maids to cater to their friends and family for entertaining. "It's like the maids aren't human," she says.
Maid-to-Maid Contact

Through my interviews I observe the differences in attitude between the maids that had regular contact with each other and those who don't. Maids that had consistent days off seemed more relaxed and happier. They talked more freely and expressed their opinion more candidly. The Philippine embassy puts functions together on Sunday so the maids can come in contact with each other. All the functions I attended had a happy and intimate atmosphere. I interviewed a maid that is president of an organization that works to empower maids through these functions, classes and personal contact. This woman has unusual employers that allow her to participate heavily in the needs of the domestic worker community.  

Case Study No. 9: Hope

Hope is president of a domestic worker run organization that is interested in improving the lives of domestic workers in Singapore. She is also a domestic worker and has worked in Singapore for fourteen years with the same family. The title of this organization is the Filipino Overseas Workers of Singapore (FOWS). It conducts classes once a month for domestic workers coming to Singapore. It is held on every third Sunday of the month at a local Catholic church. Three of the women who have gone through these courses have

14 During one interview, Hope and her family were present and one of her employers kept stressing to me that their situation was very unusual and I should not use it as a standard.
moved to the US and Canada to become nurses aids or related work in other fields that pay better than being a maid. Hope is very proud of these women who have worked hard to make their lives better. Of course, all the maids are interested in making their lives better, but many do not have knowledge or access to these classes. They may not know about the opportunities, or if they do, their employers may not be interested in letting them go. Many employers insist their maids not go out alone or have time off because they fear free time will make them “unmanageable.”

Hope devotes every Sunday to causes related to domestic workers. She has been involved in a lot of situations where domestic workers are abused and call her for help. She says she has saved lives. Women call her when they want to jump off high buildings or when they want to run away or when they are having affairs with married men. She often encourages the maids to run away to the Philippine embassy, with full support from her employers. Her employers are very supportive of her involvement with the well being of these women. They share a strong compassion for the rights of these maids. Sir (is what she calls her oldest employer) gave one maid S$500 when she went back to the Philippines after having lost everything in Singapore.

Hope and her employers have agreed to let a handful of women stay with them. If a maid has been abused she is given a new family
to work with. Hope and the youngest son in the family told me a story of one woman who was beaten often with a bamboo stick and finally when her eye was poked with a chopstick, she sought help from Hope. She told her to run away to the Embassy and seek help. The family told this young woman she could stay with them until her new family was found. They have been open to women staying with them quite often.

Hope has participated in two court cases, both murder trials; she was the translator in these cases. Her family didn’t like the idea of her translating for these cases because they feared for her safety. They felt that if she made a mistake in the translation she could be seriously punished. Everything went well and she was paid for her services. The Philippine embassy calls her often to ask for her input or for a service from her.

Hope is currently in contact with a government officer in the Philippines trying to submit a proposal for an overseas worker hospital/clinic specifically for migrant workers in the Philippines. The proposal is being discussed with a committee within the Philippines and may actually go through. Her goal is to have a clinic or hospital built for the people going overseas to work. They are most likely poor and the expensive medical exams cost a lot of money. She wants services that are realistic for poor women and men planning to work overseas.
The organization that Hope is president of is called The Filipino Overseas Workers of Singapore (FOWS). "The Filipino Overseas Workers of Singapore (FOWS) is the largest Filipino group in Singapore organized by domestic helper themselves…" (Gonzalez III 1998: 113). This organization can get things done that better the lives of migrant workers currently in Singapore. The primary purpose of the FOWS is as follows (From *Philippine Labour Migration*, Gonzalez III 1998: 114):

- To adopt the concept of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995.
- To Promote and strengthen the spirit of unity and camaraderie among its members.
- To foster among the people of Singapore and other ASEAN neighbours a better understanding of the Philippines and its people through the media of sports, cultural and other activities.
- To organize and reach out to various individuals and organizations and enjoin them to be FOWS members.

This next case study is of a small group of domestic workers that are dedicated to educating Filipina/o children within the Philippines. Because Singapore does not want non-local groups to organize a union, they are not permitted to register as an organization in Singapore. Despite hardships and obstacles, women come together each week on Sunday and make their stay easier by contributing to their countries child-literacy.
**Case Study No. 10: Small Group**

Vivian has been in Singapore for 11 years working as a domestic worker. She is involved with the Philippine embassy, especially in a volunteer group called PINOKYO (after the Disney character), which was formed by domestic workers. The members, who are mostly domestic workers, pay S$5 a month. They also take donations and hold fundraisers. I asked if there were any restrictions for membership and they told me “all races can join.” With this membership/fund raiser money they send poor Filipina/o children to school. They have sent two poor children off to school with the raised money.

PINOKYO also buys books, crayons and other learning materials and ships it all to the Philippines. The shipments are sent free of charge through Philippine Airlines. They also collect clothing and women’s books to send to the Philippines. Their employers donate books and cloths. The members meet on Sunday or whenever there is a collection of books.

PINOKYO has an election to pick a president in May/June. Vivian is one of the founders and is knowledgeable of the organization. She is lively and energetic and dedicated to PINOKYO.

Negative aspects for domestic workers include lack of language skills and an inability to communicate with their employers. Local programs organized by maids themselves aid in empowering them. Organizations like FOWS and
PINOKYO help prevent and attempt to protect women that face hardships and abuse. Foreign maids are often not allowed to go to church or to see their friends and family. Many women face fear of molestation or verbal and physical abuse, depravation of food, lack of privacy or lack of sleep or personal contact with each other. A local woman I talked with works with Indonesian maids and told me that the women do find ways to contact each other, signifying the importance of women like Hope. Usually, maids use the phone when the employers are gone.

**Embassy Connections**

Women with a lot of contact with their embassy fair better than those with little. I only had contact with the Philippine embassy. Contact with the embassies is vital to a successful working experience for the maids. The embassy has set guidelines that, if followed, serve the maids well. These guidelines "...[put] pressure on employers to comply with minimum norms for working hours, wages and so on" (Chant and McIlwaine 1995: 312).

Filipina workers are encouraged to become members of the OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration). A Filipina maid I talked with works closely with newly arrived maids and believes all overseas workers should become members of the OWWA.

There are some who sign a contract with the agent and there are some who sign a contract from the embassy. But if you are legally recorded from the Philippines you should at least have complete papers with the embassy. If you are a tourist (meaning if you come
found your way to Singapore as a tourist and become a domestic worker later), you still have to get a contract from the embassy so that you will be legalized because the embassy is built to help you be legalized here in this country. They will give you and assist you to help with the contract with the embassy and the medical care—the one membership. The membership is a two-year insurance. I give you an example: There are some who come in as tourists. If something happens, like the one who get bumped on Orchard Road, these girls won’t have any membership. So when they die their family don’t have not even one cent from the embassy because they are not legal members of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (personal communication, 2000).

This insurance is one of several protections offered to Filipina maids that are legally working in Singapore, but in recent years approximately 80% of the workers were without work permits from the Philippine embassy (Momsen 1999: 7; González III 1998). The contract is a legal document that is required by the Philippine government, but not Singapore; if a maid comes as a tourist she doesn’t get this work permit. The work permit includes training to women leaving the Philippines to work as domestic workers. So, if she comes to as a tourist, she has no access to these benefits.

Through the Philippine embassy the government offers a reintegration program to the workers upon coming back to the Philippines. They provide information of how to save or invest money in order to put up a business and are taught how to start their own business. Training for nursing aids is also very popular for women returning from Singapore after being a domestic worker. Nursing aids make more money, have more time off and have more benefits. It is also easier for nurse’s aids to emigrate to Canada if they choose. Labor attachés report that women have elevated status when they return to the
Philippines after working in Singapore because they can put up a house, buy furniture, send their kids to school; “the women have an improved life” (personal communication 2000).

Services provided by the embassy include: resource center, organizing functions to gather the domestic workers together, counseling for a variety of needs and accommodations in case the domestic worker needs a safe place to stay. And there is the welfare aspect, “Those who encounter problems are assisted.” If they are sick someone from the embassy visits them in the hospital. Contact with embassy workers helps Filipina women realize there are people looking out for them. If there happens to be a legal case Filipina/Filipino lawyers are available through the embassy to defend them, inform them of their rights and advise and offer them guidance.

The attaché labor officers at the Philippine embassy agreed that when regulations are followed, rights are not taken away from the workers; an agreement made between the employer, agent and domestic worker validates worker support. They said there was “no consciousness of depravation.” The domestic workers agreed to the terms and conditions with which they are working. On the other hand, sometimes the domestic workers come here as tourists only to be duped by agents that get the women to sign agreements that are in the agent’s favor. Sometimes the women owe the agent six or even eight months of their income or parts of their income. There are agents that advertise “Fly now, pay later” to lure the women into using them as agents. When women come to Singapore through these means they do not sign the employment
agreement made between the Philippine government and Singapore. So, if they agree to a lower wage only to find out other Filipinas are making S$100 more a month, the Philippine embassy can’t speak in their favor because they signed an agreement.

The employment agreement with the employer states terms and agreements and the minimum standards before a foreign employer hires a foreign domestic worker. These include guaranteed wage stated, days off, medical benefits, mechanisms for dispute settlement and termination rights for both sides. The Philippine government is not interested in a unilateral agreement because they want their workers to have rights. For example, they want the employer to shoulder the cost of the return air ticket. A woman in agreement with a non-government contract may be told she is responsible for the return air ticket.

Migration Policy

Clearly presented in this thesis, the Filipina overseas workers have more protection than other women coming to Singapore to work as domestic workers. This is largely due to the fact, as previously mentioned, that Filipinas are by far the majority of domestic workers in Singapore. The author of Philippine Labour Migration writes that in Singapore women were migrating from the Philippines in large numbers and the demographic impact was significant. Interestingly, this number would have been even greater except for the policy changes implemented after the Contemplacion case (Gonzalez III 1998). Flor
Contemplacion was a Filipina domestic worker that was tried in Singapore for the death of two people: a young Singaporean boy and another Filipina worker. She was found guilty and put to death by hanging. The case was controversial because the Philippine government felt that Contemplacion was set up and innocent. Because of the confusing evidence, the government felt she should have been sent home rather than put to death. During the trial, ties between the two governments were almost severed and it took over a year after Contemplacion's death for Singapore and the Philippines to achieve a workable level of cooperation. Ironically, policy changes by the Philippine government were implemented because of the death of Contemplacion, along with the Philippine elections. Gonzalez writes, "This series of events created an indelible impression in the minds of many Filipinos and changed the course of Philippine-Singapore bilateral relations and consequently overseas labour migration policy" (Gonzalez 1998: 7).

Migration policy is shifting and the Canadian government provides a working model of this shift. Women I interviewed who came to Singapore to work as maids have families of their own at home; children, parents and husbands are left behind. Often a woman's husband may also be a migrant worker in another country and their children are with grandparents. In Canada, there are people interested in seeing that migrant workers have a "landed migrant" status, which would enable them to bring their families over to Canada after two years as well as provide the freedom to work outside domestic work after five years (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997). Authors of a Canada based study of
domestic workers, clarify the difference between being a member of the household versus being a member of the family. They argue, "...domestic workers lack the benefits normally accorded to adult family members...[and a] reason for rejecting the family member analogy is that it obscures the fact that domestic workers have families of their own" (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997: 11).

The expectation of domestic workers to live without their family while emotionally investing in another family is a denial of basic human rights.
CONCLUSION

The plight of women domestic workers together as a class of workers face difficulties because of individual, social and economic conflicts. As individuals their responsibility to their family outweighs the hardships faced by overseas work. Socially, they are put into choiceless positions because the global economy is making it harder for poor countries to sustain themselves without foreign money and jobs. Women migrants are forced to migrate in order to find jobs; their trade of work for money to be sent home to their families and thus to their home country's economy makes it hard for overseas exploited employment to be suppressed or stopped. There is increased employment when overseas jobs are a possibility, but this leaves the workers positions powerless in a world-systems context. Singapore's political system makes it easy for illegal workers to join the workforce even though sending countries do not allow it (Momsen 1999). Workers have fewer rights and are easier to exploit when they do not have the support of their government.

The case in Singapore is parallel to migrant women's experiences through space and time. Reformed policy and increased involvement of NGOs will ultimately allow migrant workers to be effectively and justly compensated in their jobs. Attention must be paid to the gender differences in migration policy as well as involvement from sending and host countries in cooperation with each other and with domestic workers. Using policy from other countries (such as Canada) as a model is an effective way to reform current policy to increase justice and
decrease exploitation. The plight of domestic workers is a human rights issue. To ignore these concerns would be to participate in the cause of these women's hardships.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are several recommendations for addressing human rights of migrant women. Empowering women in their lives is essential to gain a holistic human rights perspective within migrating women's experiences. From a socialist feminist perspective, maids in Singapore have unequal access to the fruits of this economy and their own economy. As a socialist feminist, I recognize that maids, as a class of workers, must pool together and unite for better working conditions. However, Singapore prohibits the formation of unions and so pooling together and organizing is difficult. Also, the maids do not see themselves as a class of workers, and so are limited. Small changes in policy building and awareness would be a start to this organization. The maids, as my thesis suggests, are resisting in some fashion, such as the classes held by Sister Ana and the phone calls received by Hope. These small forms of empowerment and resistance may be a start to organizing programs and awareness to implement change.

Current objectives of policy building regarding domestic worker issues should be “to conduct research on the causes and consequences of Asian female labour migration” and to find out what kinds of programs will “minimize the negative effects and maximize the positive effects” (Lycklama 1989: 22). Programs focusing on migrating women’s issues would increase human rights. Conducting research to better implement empowerment programs is recommended.
Because certain strategies are bound to be culturally constructed, the act of empowering must move beyond culture bound perceptions and become culturally sensitive; there can not be a universalized claim of what empowerment is or what it should entail. Ann Ferguson does maintain that there must be a universalized understanding of social justice, that women’s rights are human rights, in order for an empowerment strategy to exist. Her modified Empowerment Strategy or Paradigm “...emphasizes field-based inquiry and development programs that can be situated in particular women’s realities rather than universalized claims” (Ferguson 1998: 6). These claims start with women’s current situations and an understanding of local ways. The researcher, though an important participant, is far from the central character in this participatory process. Ferguson writes:

This methodology can be thought of as similar to participatory action research methodology, with the additional feature that it insists on a process of self-interrogation by funded researchers and an acknowledgment of their power position in the construction of the knowledge being researched. The aim is that participatory practices can attempt to counterbalance researchers’ power by insisting on a group process of self-reflection to correct results that reflect this inherent power (Ferguson 1998:6).

I recommend that research projects be headed by well trained facilitators with specific goals to increase migrants rights through culturally sensitive policy building. Maids must be involved in the process as co-researchers and negotiators.

Maids depend on foreign domestic work for employment. Eliminating the levy or introducing a landed-migrant status, like Canada, so the migrants could
live outside their employers home would improve working conditions. Again, Canada can be used as a model; there are locals in Canada that argue that the “live in” status of foreign workers promotes a lack of respect of human rights and that foreigners should be given the same rights as local workers. This would also encourage women to become a migrant workers legally.

A hotline specific to domestic workers would improve their access to resources. In an article in *The Straits Times*, Meena Shivdas recommends a hotline for domestic workers. This would be a safe place for women to express their concerns. Because of the seclusion of the workers, a hotline would link them up with other workers and people who advocate for their rights. Volunteer maids could take calls in their homes and the disruption to their work schedules would be minimal. Local NGOs with hotlines set up already could open a line specific to domestic workers.

Similarly, support groups for maids would allow them to outlet their thoughts, feelings and concerns about their experiences. Support groups for maids facilitated by the aforementioned NGOs would be a safe place to hold these support groups. The NGO would have to be open on weekends, particularly Sunday, as this is the most common day off for maids.

All countries allowing their people to exit their home country to work must have guidelines to protect their workers. Guidelines specific to women are
essential because women's experiences differ from men's experiences in legitimate ways.\textsuperscript{15}

I recommend fieldwork and research categorically related to migrant women's issues. A focused ethnographic study (FES) would incorporate a systematic process for gathering qualitative information on specific areas, such as health care practices, into my previous fieldwork (Wilson 1999). The majority of migration research in the past has been specific to men and certain health factors have been virtually overlooked minus a few blips here and there. For example, more knowledge on how migration effects mental health is important because mental health issues are invisible and have been ignored. Some of the women I interviewed show basic signs of depression.

I recommend a Participatory Action Research study to be conducted in Singapore with domestic workers as the main contributors. Together with the focused ethnographic study mentioned above, policy regarding women domestic workers will come to the forefront of policy change specific to female migration.

Research shows that the most critical time of migration is pre-departure. The information given to women and their families is often inaccurate; information must become more accurate. The final stage of the migration process may have a limited orientation, but at this stage it is too late to back out because contracts have been signed, fees have been paid and arrangements for

\textsuperscript{15} Momsen proclaims that in 1990 the UN "adopted the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families". Only eight countries have accepted the UN's proposal and twenty countries are needed to make it legally enforceable. Increased participation in this proposal would make phenomenal differences in the treatment of maids.
the maids have already been made. A useful tool to spread information about migration is the media. Talks by repatriated maids would also be a useful way to spread information about what migration is like for other women.

Increased information can reduce the number of women migrating illegally. Governmental incentive can reduce the amount of illegal migration as well. For example, offering free airfare to women who make overseas arrangements through an accredited agency would motivate women to go through proper channels. In addition, female labor attachés educated in current labor standards and specific gender issues would make embassy and agency connections more desirable (Lim and Oishi 1996: 110).

Lastly, NGOs in Singapore must get involved with domestic workers’ issues. In my experience at AWARE, little attention was given to the situation of women migrant workers currently in Singapore. The hotline does not receive calls from domestic workers and the members of the organization are not involved in current situations of domestic workers. I recommend to AWARE and other NGOs that have a human rights / humanitarian focus to get involved with domestic workers. Power sharing and egalitarian relationships must be built out of a common effort to end oppression of women. Oppression of women cannot end while other women are being suppressed.
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APPENDIX
Interview Questions

Domestic workers:
- Why did you choose to come to Singapore to work?
- How did you feel after you came?
- How did you hear about the opportunity to become a domestic worker in Singapore?
- How did you come up with the money to pay agent fees?
- Was your family supportive?
- How did your family cope with your decision to work overseas?
- How did you adjust after arriving in Singapore?
- Did you experience homesickness?
- What are your plans for the future?
- Do you want to return home or move on to another country?
- What are your experiences with your employer?
- Does the family you work for have children?

Embassy officials:
- What is the demographic impact of sending women overseas for work?
- What is the economic impact?
- Does this type of emigration (out-migration) reduce unemployment in your country?
- Are there any other major factors influenced by emigration of women from your country?
- How are women repatriating into their countries of origin treated?

Employers, locals and agents: (used in casual conversation with locals and in more formal settings with employers and the one agent I interviewed)
- When did domestic workers start to be employed in Singapore?
- Where are domestic workers coming from?
- How are they recruited or by what means do they come to Singapore to work as domestic workers?
- Are domestic workers experiencing any problems? What are they?
- Are benefits being acquired? What are they?
- Are there programs or services available to assist them?
- What is Singapore’s general perception of domestic workers?
- What are the main sources of financing and the terms applied to assist domestic workers to get to Singapore?
- How do the women pay this money back?
- What percent of their salary is taken out if salary deduction is used to pay back agent fees?
- What is the levy? How does it work? Why is there a levy?
WHAT AN OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKER (OFW)/DOMESTIC HELPER IN SINGAPORE AND THEIR EMPLOYERS SHOULD KNOW

The Philippine Government, through the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995 (Republic Act 8042 or R.A. 8042 for short), ensures that the highest possible degree of protection and care are extended to the Overseas Filipino Workers and to their families.

In keeping with the intention of the above law to safeguard the rights and welfare of the Filipino worker in Singapore and in order to avoid abuse particularly of the women workers, the Philippine Embassy in Singapore has implemented an "Agency Accreditation Scheme". Under this scheme, the Embassy recognizes only those employment agencies that abide by POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) rules. Only these agencies are authorized by the Philippine Government to obtain and deploy Filipino workers and to have their "Standard Employment Contract" processed at the Philippine Embassy.

Following are some frequently-asked questions (FAQ) about R.A. 8042 and about the "Monitoring and Protection Scheme" of the Philippine Embassy:

Q1: WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR A "STANDARD EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT" FROM THE EMBASSY AND WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
A: Under R.A. 8042, all overseas Filipino workers must be covered by a standard contract. That contract spells out the duties and obligations of both employer and employee as well as that of the agent who brought the worker into Singapore. The contract is valid for two (2) years and is renewable upon mutual consent of the worker and the employer.

Q2: WHY MUST PROCESSING OF OFW DOCUMENTS BE MADE THROUGH AN "ACCREDITED AGENCY"?
A: The Philippine Government no longer allows "direct hiring" since the employee often ends up at the shorter end of the bargain. The Agencies that have obtained accreditation with the POEA and the Philippine Embassy have all undertaken to be party to resolving any possible disputes that may arise from the employer-employee relationship. For this reason, their service – and their role -- are considered important enough to be made a requirement in the legitimate procedure of hiring Filipino domestic workers.

Q3: WHY DOES THE EMBASSY REQUIRE A NEW "STANDARD EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT" EVEN IF THE EXISTING CONTRACT IS STILL VALID?
A: The Embassy routinely suggests a new contract in cases where the current one has less than six months validity left. It has been observed that many employers and employees often neglect to renew their Contract -- particularly if the employee is not renewing the Work Permit or is not expected to travel outside of Singapore at the time of expiration. This may cause major inconvenience if, for example, some disagreement arises between employer and employee. The absence of a valid Contract defining the employer-employee relationship severely limits the options for resolving potential conflict. The Ministry of Manpower itself strongly urges an employer-employee contract. The Philippine Embassy, in consultation with well-meaning Singapore agencies, drew up a simplified one that is both easy to understand and which is periodically updated with inputs from all quarters.

Q4: WHAT BENEFITS DOES THE "STANDARD EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT" BRING?
A: Among these are:
• Minimum salary of $350 per month;
• No salary deductions;
• Four (4) days off every month;
• Car washing and body massage are not allowed;
• At the end of the contract, free transportation (one-way) to the place of origin in the Philippines;
• Upon contract renewal, round-trip transportation to & from the Philippines plus fifteen (15) days paid leave.
Work Permit Conditions

CONISTIONS OF WORK PERMIT OR VISIT PASS

1. ________________, holder of Passport No. ________________ hereby undertake that:
   1. I shall not engage in any form of employment, paid or unpaid, other than the employment and with the employer stated in the Work Permit or Visit Pass.
   2. I shall carry the original Work Permit or Visit Pass with me at all times and must produce it for inspection when required to do so by an Employment Inspector, Immigration Officer or Police Officer.
   3. I shall not be a partner/director in any company, firm or partnership.
   4. I shall not engage in any form of business or manage any business as a sole proprietor.
   5. I shall not indulge or be involved in any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities in Singapore.
   6. I shall not cohabit with a Singapore Citizen or Permanent Resident.
   7. Any relationship between me and a Singapore Citizen or Permanent Resident shall not result in the birth of any child.
   8. I shall not become pregnant (during my employment in Singapore) as a result of my relationship with a Singapore Citizen or Permanent Resident (applicable to females).
   9. I shall submit myself to medical examination by a registered Singapore doctor as and when directed by the Controller of Work Permits.
   10. I will be expelled or prohibited from entering Singapore if condition 5, 6, 7 or 8 is breached.
   11. In the event I cease to hold a Work Permit or Visit Pass, conditions 5, 6, 7 and 8 shall still be applicable to me. Breach of any of these conditions shall result in me being prohibited from entering Singapore.

Signature of Work Permit/Visit Pass Holder ___________________________ Date ___________________________

I hereby solemnly declare and affirm that the signature above is that of the abovenamed Work Permit/Visit Pass holder.

Name of Employer: ______________________________________________

Signature of Employer ___________________________ Company Stamp (if applicable) ___________________________

Date: ___________________________

CONISTIONS OF WORK PERMIT OR VISIT PASS
(COPY TO BE RETAINED BY WORKER FOR INFORMATION)

1. ________________, holder of Passport No. ________________ hereby undertake that:
   1. I shall not engage in any form of employment, paid or unpaid, other than the employment and with the employer stated in the Work Permit or Visit Pass.
   2. I shall carry the original Work Permit or Visit Pass with me at all times and must produce it for inspection when required to do so by an Employment Inspector, Immigration Officer or Police Officer.
   3. I shall not be a partner/director in any company, firm or partnership.
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   11. In the event I cease to hold a Work Permit or Visit Pass, conditions 5, 6, 7 and 8 shall still be applicable to me. Breach of any of these conditions shall result in me being prohibited from entering Singapore.

Signature of Work Permit/Visit Pass Holder ___________________________ Date ___________________________

MOMWP01090-599
## Medical Report

### 6 Locomotor/Neurological
- Significant limb amputation or deformity
- Limb movement and co-ordination
- Significant spinal deformity
- Other significant abnormalities

("Significant" should be interpreted in relationship to the work required to be performed by the candidate.)

### 7 Endocrine disorders eg thyrotoxicosis

### 8 Mental state

### V Other Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Description</th>
<th>Abnormal</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chest X-Ray - to be taken in Spore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Please attach report. A large X-ray film is required for those whose reports carry remarks indicating TB scars eg. scarring, pleural thickening, etc. Otherwise, a small X-ray film is sufficient).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(a) Albumin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VDRL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing - Unable to hear ordinary conversation at 2m</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision (Should be at least 6/12 in both eyes with or without glasses)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(a) Vision Acuity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*S. Typhi Culture (for jobs which entail handling of food, please attach report)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood film for Malaria (Please attach report)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV (AIDS) (Please attach report)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(HIV (AIDS) Test must be done at laboratories approved by the Ministry of Health. The HIV Test result must be attached to this report for submission to Work Permit Department at the time of work permit collection).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### VI Other relevant findings:

__________________________________________________________

### VII Certification

I certify that I have examined the abovenamed person and my findings are as recorded above.

In my opinion, this person is FIT/UNFIT* for employment as a foreign domestic worker

__________________________________________________________

Signature __________________________ Name (In BLOCK LETTER) __________________________

Address ________________________________________________________________

Date __________________________ Telephone Number __________________________________________

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* 3 consecutive days' stools and urine specimens for S Typhi Culture.

**EMPLOYERS TO NOTE**

Domestic workers may be infected with various communicable diseases which could be transmitted to your children and other family members through poor personal or food hygiene. These diseases included cholera, typhoid, paratyphoid and hepatitis B. It is therefore advisable that your domestic worker is also screened for carrier disease of these diseases.