

The Work-life Experiences of an Invisible Workforce – The Case of Live-in Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia

Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya

Abstract

This study offers original contribution by empirically exploring the work-life (WL) experiences of migrant women working as live-in domestic workers in Malaysia. Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) represent a significant proportion of migrant workers globally and play a key role in enabling the work-life balance (WLB) of others, namely the middle-class households that employ them. Yet their experiences have largely been invisible in mainstream WL literature. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 women MDWs from Indonesia and the Philippines working in Malaysia. The analysis focused on the intersection of the women's multiple dimensions of disadvantage, including gender, class, and temporary migrant status, in shaping their accounts of the WL interface.

Our findings show how any semblance of WLB in the MDWs' lived experience has given way to the needs of their employers and to the need to earn an income for their families back home. The study challenges WL research by underscoring the power inequities between the primary labour segment (middle to high-income household employers) and secondary labour segment (women MDWs) that shape our participants' alternative and disadvantaged lived experience of work, life, family, and WLB. It also points to the existence of policies and regulations that tolerate and uphold social inequalities and disadvantages that benefit primary labour segment workers to the detriment of secondary labour segment workers, including women MDWs.