Beyond the Binary: Information and Communication Technology as a means of Empowerment Amongst Singapore's Foreign Domestic Workers.

MA (Hons.) Geography

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this dissertation has been composed by me and is based on my own work.

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Abstract

The 'information society' has transformed access to information into a "power resource" (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003, p.9) and a human right. Denying access to functions of technology, such as: communication, political mobilisation and educational tools (Hilbert, 2011), perpetuate cycles of low income, unemployment and a lack of education. It exposes technology's relationship with "power, privilege and oppression" (Eubanks, 2012, p.42). This prompted research on how the 'digital divide' and exclusion from the information society perpetuates power imbalances and subsequent inequality (Eubanks, 2012) amongst low-income female migrant workers in Singapore. This study begins to bridge the gap between literature on the gendered digital divide and foreign domestic workers through a 'bottom up' examination of empowerment. This was achieved through 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women in *Aidha,* an initiative providing Singapore's domestic workers with skills in financial planning and entrepreneurship through technology. Space, transnational mothering and entrepreneurship were focused on in particular, as emerging key themes during the interview process. It was found that technology-facilitated empowerment affords greater negotiating power to individuals to manoeuvre between and within processes of marginalisation. However, it was also found that empowerment is often confronted by new obstacles that are tied to the systems of marginalisation that cultivate it. As a result, technology enabled participants to negotiate dualisms between public/private space, absence/presence, and surviving/thriving, exerting their autonomous agency.

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Contents

1. Introduction

The increasing globalisation of economies and information (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003) has facilitated greater employment opportunities internationally, increasing the number of low-income, overseas migrant workers within countries such as Singapore (Chib *et al.*, 2013). However, this has resulted in the growing number and size of subaltern communities (Chib *et al.*, 2013), exacerbating issues of cultural tension, socioeconomic inequality and ultimately, social justice.

In 2007, foreign domestic workers (FDWs) constituted over 1/5 of Singapore's foreign workforce (Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore, 2007, p.1), with one in every five households employing a live-in female FDW (Chib *et al.,* 2013). FDWs are often primary sources of both emotional and financial support for their families overseas (Chib *et al.*, 2013), despite extended periods of separation. Their "long-term yet perpetually 'temporary' residency in Singapore" (Thompson, 2009, p.360) has forced them into a constant state of 'otherness' in which they are largely separated from the host society in multiple ways. For instance, migrant workers were previously excluded from jurisdictions of local labour laws concerning job stability, occupational rights (particularly rest days and holidays), and employment mobility (Chib *et al.*, 2013). This lack of protection combined with hostility amongst host cultures, difficult economic conditions and unstable legal statuses contribute to overwhelming stress of low-income migrant workers (Chib *et al.*, 2013). This disregard for FDWs' welfare highlights their treatment in Singapore as an issue of social justice.

The concept of a 'digital divide' emerged to address the gap between poorer and more affluent groups with regards to access of information through technology. It has prompted research that explores how marginalised groups are excluded from participating in the current 'information society' (Eubanks, 2012). Scholars have increasingly recognised the gendered dimension of the digital divide in which low-income women's access is hindered by structural inequalities, including: reduced literacy and overall education; financial status; and time restraints resulting from traditional gender roles that entail domestic responsibility (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003). This emphasises the fact that technology is not an artefact (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003) that exists in a political, economic and social vacuum. It has the ability to "reinforce power relations embedded within social structures" (Chib *et al.*, 2013, p.22). Virginia Eubanks highlighted this in her book, 'Digital Dead End', in which she recognises that it is not an issue of distribution, but of "power, privilege and oppression" (Eubanks, 2012, p.42). Ultimately, this reveals complexities surrounding the digital divide, surpassing the previously black and white theorisation of the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. These issues converge in the context of Singapore's FDWs, as they experience the interactions of gendered, class and racial oppressions simultaneously.

In a world where public information is a "power resource" (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003), a lack of Internet access can exacerbate the negative circumstances of marginalised groups. Hindering communication, political mobilisation, and access to critical information and resources like cost-effective healthcare and educational tools through the Internet (Hilbert, 2011),

perpetuates vicious cycles of low income, unemployment and a lack of education. However, this highlights how technology can be used to empower. By making these resources more accessible, it creates access to decision-making processes that benefit wellbeing (Oxaal and Baden, 1997), whilst challenging social structures.

However, much like continually "evolv[ing] and chang[ing]" constructions of gender and technology, (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003, p.11), this dissertation will examine empowerment as a fluid process, rather than an absolute state. Instead, empowerment exists on a spectrum, where it manoeuvres in between and against resistance and oppression, rather than in a binary state. Inadequate access to technology, coupled with the ability of technology to reinforce levels of disadvantage accentuates the complexities of empowerment, investigated by this dissertation. The fluidity of empowerment will be revealed through an examination of Internet use amongst FDWs in Singapore, and how opportunities that arise from access to technology show how technology-facilitated empowerment can be met with greater resistance against social change and the formation of new obstacles. This will be investigated through the following research questions:

- What are these women using information and communication technologies (ICTs) for?
- What barriers are they facing in terms of access and use?
- Have they overcome these barriers and if so, how?
- How have they adapted their use to their contexts?
- Are they using ICTs in the pursuit of particular outcomes/goals?

- How do they define empowerment?

- Do they feel more empowered as a result of their access and use of ICTs?

<u>Outline of Study</u>

First, a review of current literature will be provided, followed by an outline of the theoretical approach and methods used. The following chapters will then explore the fluidity and continual construction of empowerment by examining the use of ICTs by FDWs in Singapore in the context of: negotiating the boundaries of the public and private sphere, identities of transnational mothers, and entrepreneurship as a coping mechanism. The public-private dichotomy is used to discuss how mobile communication facilitates enactments of community, challenging notions of unequal entitlement to public space. However, this creates further obstacles by tethering them to their positions as FDWs, and reinforcing their 'otherness' in public space within Singapore. The construction of identities as transnational mothers will be explored to reveal the preservation of former identities as a source of comfort and empowerment. Conversely, this creates opportunities for the reinforcement of traditional, patriarchal gender roles. Lastly, entrepreneurship will be used to illustrate how its function as a coping mechanism can simultaneously serve as a form of resistance to their current social position within Singapore.

2. Literature Review

The following literature review will outline how this dissertation intends to unify the increasingly intertwined, but currently fragmented literature on: the gender digital divide, FDWs, emotional geographies of the home, and transnational mothering.

<u>Gender Digital Divide</u>

The increasing integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into social systems (Rogers, 2001) emphasises the connection between the digital divide and social justice, as a lack of access can reproduce structural inequalities. This is evident through the knowledge gap hypothesis, in which more privileged individuals gain access to critical information faster than those of "lower status segments", exacerbating existing inequality (Rogers, 2001, p.96). This has led to exploration of how technology can benefit the privileged yet continue to disadvantage the marginalised (Rogers, 2001). It demonstrates how modernity through technology is essentially a "euphemistic metaphor" (Thompson, 2009) for its failure to address issues of socioeconomic privilege. This is largely referred to in the literature as "information keeping", which acknowledges the vested interests of privileged groups in maintaining inequality by "hoarding information resources" to preserve their 'wealthier' position (Eubanks, 2012, p.42).

Social position as a determinant for an individual's relationship with technology provides an avenue to study the gender digital divide, by examining gender inequality through a structural lens. It dismantles the misconception that women are inherently 'technophobic', encouraging the exploration of barriers that obstruct women's ability to "embrace digital communication" (Hilbert, 2011, p.479). Consequently, this reveals technology's potential to empower women through the opportunities it can create, such as political mobilisation, access to time and cost efficient resources etc.

However, arguments against policies and programmes focused on technology's potential for empowerment and social change frequently adopt a technologically deterministic view, assuming "the direction of social change is from the technological to the societal" (Thomas, 2008, p.19). It also adopts the elitist belief that "any new communication technology that has important impacts" will inevitably disadvantage some whilst advantaging some (Rogers, 2001, p.107). These perspectives are problematic as they rely on a distributive paradigm that disregards how social position shapes an individual's capacity to engage with technology as efficiently and effectively as the privileged. This also assumes that "lagged adoption will not significantly exacerbate the position of disadvantaged social groups", despite the emergence of more subtle divisions in use and subsequent significance (Liff and Shepherd, 2004, p.1).

The emergence of domestication theory, however, has challenged these technologically deterministic approaches by examining the social terms that shape access and how technology is adopted within a user's environment and routine (Liff and Shepherd, 2004; Berker *et al.*, 2005; Thomas, 2008). Unlike

technological determinism, domestication theory claims that both user and technology are simultaneously transformed (Thomas, 2008), underpinning the "double articulation" of technology as "both object and medium" (Berker *et al.*, 2005, p.377). This forms a more constructive framework in which to examine the gender digital divide. Its emphasis of "the symbolical meanings of technologies" (Berker *et al.,* 2005, p.126) and its recognition of the need for a situated approach (Mehra *et al.*, 2004) suggests the use of a reflexive, analytical account of technology that addresses the digital divide's root in privilege.

Furthermore, this concept of the simultaneous constitution of social position and technology can be extended to Kennedy *et al.*'s (2003, p.76) argument that "when people do technology, they are also doing gender". This addresses socialisation arguments that explore how the biological essentialism underpinning gender roles, is manifested within technological use. This is especially recognised within traditional households where women spend less time online due to domestic responsibilities that limit their free time (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, "gender relations shape technology and technology in turn, shapes gender relations" (Henwood, 1993, p.39). This implies "how gender is created and perpetuated" (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003, p.73), which will be explored in this dissertation. In particular, this dissertation seeks to investigate whether Kelkar and Nathan's (2002) view that ICTs have the potential to redefine traditional gender roles, especially for women that lack the resources to engage with higher education is true in the case of Singapore's FDWs.

Strategic versus Practical Empowerment

The distinction between 'practical' versus 'strategic' needs within feminist theory (coined by Molyneux (1985), but popularised by Moser (1989)) has been widely criticised for its simplistic categorisation of women's gender interests. It defines practical needs as the necessities "identified by women to assist their survival [within] existing power structures" (Reeves and Baden, 2000, p.14), while strategic needs refer to actions that challenge their "subordination to men" (Moser, 1989, p.1803). This is not only counterproductive to examining the complexities of feminist theory, but incorrectly assumes that gender interests can "be conceived in an abstract, universal manner" (Wieringa, 1994, p.837). Ultimately, this undermines intersectional feminism's emphasis on the heterogeneity of women's experiences, dependent on their privilege resulting from class, race and sexuality. It ignores the ways in which subordination can be challenged by tactfully reproducing an 'accepted' identity (Wieringa, 1994).

This implies that strategic gender interests are more 'advanced'. It relies on the premise that gender concerns are only considered 'strategic' once theoreticians or planners have analysed and agreed to its terms, revealing its top-down approach (Wieringa, 1994). This consequently denies women the freedom to define their own interests as strategic (Wieringa, 1994) and assumes that all resistance is reactionary (Foucault, 1978). For instance, Wieringa (1994) uses the analogy of a woman who cooks, provides sex and pampers her husband in order to leave the home. This example is arguably 'strategic' as although she is

negotiating within her 'accepted' role, it is still being challenged as it is used as a means to an end. Nevertheless, it is easily perceived as 'practical' from above.

Moser (1993, p.41) also claims that "planning for the needs of low-income women" is not inherently 'feminist' until it addresses their strategic gender needs. This implies that practical gender needs are disconnected from feminist processes (Wieringa, 1994). This dissertation, however, will criticise this assumption by demonstrating how FDWs use technology in a way that both supplements their existing social positions, whilst simultaneously challenging them.

Singapore's Foreign Domestic Workers

While research has been conducted on the use of technology amongst transnational migrants and migration as "creat[ing] a new communicative space" (Skrbis, 2008, p.238), literature surrounding FDWs is minimal. The existing literature (Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007; Huang and Yeoh, 2007; Thomas, 2008; Thompson, 2009; Chib *et al.*, 2013) currently remains separate to research on the digital divide, revealing an important gap that this dissertation aims to bridge.

FDWs as the "quintessential other" are "viewed through refracted lenses of nationality, class, race and gender" (Thomas, 2008, p.13). This provides an important perspective on social groups who are positioned at the juncture of multiple forms of marginalisation. Additionally, their lack of legal protection, despite their critical contribution to Singapore's society and economy, warrants significant attention (Thomas, 2008). Analysing their active negotiations within

the "complexities of Singapore's telecommunications technoscape" (Thompson, 2009, p.367) gives insight into the interaction between social position and relationships with technology. It helps to examine how FDWs use and adapt to technology within their own social contexts.

Transnational Families and Mothering

Technology is considered predominantly as a coping mechanism for migrant stress and as an essential staple for the 'transnational family'. However, its connections with empowerment are underdeveloped. Technology functions as a coping mechanism by acting as an "emotional anchor" (Thomas, 2008, p.56) that maintains feelings of closeness with their "distant social network", whilst helping FDWs to "adapt socially and culturally to the host society, [by] form[ing] networks with other migrants" (Chib *et al.*, 2013, p.22). This is particularly challenging as many FDWs receive infrequent breaks and rest days (Chib *et al.*, 2013). However, technology provides them with greater negotiating power within their everyday context. This dissertation will investigate whether technology as a coping mechanism can therefore be seen as a form of empowerment.

This is particularly pertinent as current literature also acknowledges technology's potential to either empower or reproduce prevailing power relations. This is evident as mobile communication can be used "as a form of resistance" for migrant mothers, offsetting their feelings of homesickness and isolation (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.262) and allowing them to escape traditional patriarchal gender roles (Nath, 2001) (i.e. by providing avenues that allow them

to exert greater control over finances). But it can also reproduce them by tethering them to traditional expectations of motherhood. Furthermore, technology can reinforce existing power relations between FDWs and their employers, as mobile phones are often used to issue orders and as a surveillance tool, thus become a potential source of stress (Chib *et al.*, 2013). It again emphasises the need to research the delicate balance of technology's ability to either empower or continue to oppress.

Similarly, another contradiction is observed within the context of transnational mothers. Some migrant mothers are praised for supporting their families financially, yet they are simultaneously subjected to the expectations of a traditional family (Uy-Tioco, 2007). This frequently results in the maintenance of relationships by performing caregiving rituals via mobile communication (Rakow, 1992). Technology therefore provides a platform in which they can "enact culturally construed roles as mothers" (Thompson, 2009, p.377), tethering them to their 'socially accepted' gender roles. Although this is frequently theorised as a form of oppression, this dissertation rejects the assumption that 'traditional mothering' is inherently oppressive. Instead a situated approach is adopted that inspects the subjectivity of empowerment, both in the context of transnational mothering and more generally.

Uy-Tioco's (2007, p.264) exploration of whether FDWs are empowered through technology's influence on their role as transnational mothers concludes that "no real empowerment" occurs, as agency remains conditioned by "the social processes from which it emerges" (Parreñas, 2003, p.34). This is similar to the problematic antagonism Thomas (2008) creates between independence and

the maintenance of close marital and family ties. It undermines technologically mediated communication's ability to transform relationships in a manner that destabilises traditional concepts of motherhood. This can allow symbolic room for redefining motherhood by the terms decided by the mother herself.

These perspectives are (ironically) overly idealistic. Claiming empowerment requires escaping from the social processes that contribute to marginality implies that true empowerment exists in a social, political and economic vacuum, which is arguably impossible. The hierarchy this creates controversially implies that empowerment entails a shift to a position where previous forms of marginalisation can no longer affect them. This is arguably impossible without the occurrence of a fundamental transformation in institutional and social processes.

These perspectives enable the treatment of groups like FDWs as homogenous, as they become defined by the social processes dictating their marginality. It falls into the same theoretical fallacy as Moser's (1993) 'practical' and 'strategic' needs, in which an individual's definition of empowerment is contingent on acknowledgment by authority 'from above'. Assuming that empowerment requires an existence beyond oppressive processes of their social position imposes overly rigid and simplistic views of empowerment as a concept. These rigid boundaries should be rejected in favour of a more fluid theorisation of empowerment that addresses the context of the individual, rather than expecting a universal form of empowerment for FDWs.

Therefore, concepts of transnational motherhood will be used to examine the subjectivity of empowerment by investigating how technology enables FDWs to "contest the myth of the male breadwinner but retain the myth of the female

homemaker" (Parreñas, 2005, p.334). This allows them to "perpetuate [elements of] their original identity", while altering their identity as a loved one (Thomas, 2008, p.81) to redefine motherhood.

Blurring the Public and Private sphere: The Home as a Site of Struggle

As live-in employees, FDWs' existence within their employers' home occurs at the blurred boundary of public and private space, "forcing a redefinition of [the] intimate and personal" (Giddens, 2001, p.61). This results from the fact that "the spaces and boundaries of the home are not theirs to control- either materially or ideologically" (Huang and Yeoh, 2007, p.200). Therefore, it identifies the need to incorporate emotional geographies that challenge the dominant concept of the home as "a site of positive familiar emotions" (Huang and Yeoh, 2007, p.197), which ignore how public and private space "does not begin and end at the front door" (Allan and Crow, 1989, p.5). This dismantles the assumption that the home functions as a vacuum that is immune to "the disciplinary practices that regulate our bodies in everyday life" (Johnston and Valentine, 1995, p.99). Rather, the home is "a site where power relations are played out" (Huang and Yeoh, 2007, p.198).

Therefore, the home and the negotiations of and within it are considered within this study. Specifically, technology's role within the home is examined to determine how it can reinforce the power and privilege of the employer, but still enable FDWs to "transcend the physical confines of their employers' homes" (Thomas, 2008, p.83). This dissertation will therefore address the complexity of the home as an emotional landscape (Huang and Yeoh, 2007). This will facilitate

an understanding of technology as a mechanism of resistance, challenging the

"personalistic idioms of power" in which employers "control workers' access to

food, shelter, communication and rights or private space and time" (Thomas,

2008, p.13).

3. Methodology

Ontology and Epistemology

This study approaches technology "as a cultural product" (Henwood, 1993, p.3) in order to address its "non-neutral" interrelation with societal gender relations (Morgan *et al.,* 2004, p.4). It is therefore more concerned with gender equity rather than access, signifying the need for a structural, rather than distributive approach to the 'digital divide' (Eubanks, 2012). The use of technology by FDWs is framed as an issue of social justice rather than distribution, to facilitate a structural and systemic analysis (Eubanks, 2012), highlighting the suitability and constructiveness of a feminist approach.

More specifically, the dissertation's focus on FDWs requires in-depth insight on the local, rather than the universal experiences of women (Morgan *et al*., 2004). This highlights the suitability of a post-structural and postmodern feminist analysis. It facilitates an exploration of the complex interplay between gender, race and class within the pursuit of gender equity, rejecting the treatment of women as a homogenous category. This therefore signifies the differences in "needs, preferences, and interests" (Reeves and Baden, 2000, p.10) not only between genders but amongst women. It avoids the issues surrounding a 'universal' form of equality or empowerment, in favour of gender equity.

This dissertation recognises gender as a social construct and the need to disassemble its rigid binaries to produce less-oppressive politics (Haraway,

1991). However, it does not extend to the fluidity of gender identity, as it lies beyond the research scope.

Research Method

Qualitative Approach

The primary data collected for this study is entirely qualitative as a quantitative approach would create a "falsely concrete body of data" that would produce "atomistic 'facts' and figures" (Maynard, 2013 p.11), fracturing the experiences of these FDWs. Although quantitative measures are useful for determining gender indicators, they are unable to sufficiently explore the complex interplay between broader social and cultural factors (in this case, personal empowerment and the relationship/connotations between individuals and technology) (Morgan *et al.*, 2004).

Instead, this dissertation uses "women's experiences as core research data" (Mehra *et al.*, 2004, p.792) as "feminist research must begin with an open-ended exploration" of women's lived realities (Maynard, 2013, p.12). This avoids the imposition of rigid and "externally defined structures on women's lives" (Maynard, 2013, p.12), permitting an exploration of their experiences within their own contexts.

Interviews

Primary data was collected through 14 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with FDWs within Singapore, coming from the Philippines, Indonesia (which constitute the majority of Singapore's FDWs) and Myanmar. All participants consented to an audio recording of each interview, used for transcription. These interviews were arranged by Marjanne van der Helm, the Programmes Manager of *Aidha. Aidha* is a non-profit organisation in Singapore providing financial and computer literacy programmes for FDWs. All participants were either students or graduates of the programme, were over 18 years old and had lived in Singapore for at least 2 years. Each interview lasted between 25 minutes and one hour.

I am indebted to Marjanne as her credibility within *Aidha* and belief in this project, facilitated a smoother interview process by helping participants understand the purpose and integrity of the research. The interviews were conducted within *Aidha's* classrooms, providing a comfortable, familiar environment, make it significantly easier to build rapport. Interviews were not conducted in employers' homes, where the employer could misconstrue the interview as a "check on the their treatment of their maids" (Thomas, 2008, p.37). This would risk creating a false sense of surveillance, which would likely affect responses. Each interview was conducted privately to encourage openness so that participants could freely share personal experiences.

A semi-structured approach was adopted to create the format of an "evolving conversation" (Arendell, 1997, p.345). This allowed for the research to adapt to participants' responses when telling their stories, rather than being limited to a fixed research agenda (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Beginning with "a substantive frame" (Weiss, 1994, p.193) created conversational scaffolding for the interview process. This allowed participants to contribute their own descriptions and accounts, avoiding the imposition of "externally defined structures" on their experiences (Maynard, 2013, p.12). For instance, a semi-structured approach encouraged the participants to define 'empowerment' within their own terms and contexts, allowing for more nuanced analysis. Topics raised by participants could also be addressed, adding depth to this research (Patton, 2002) by increasing my awareness of previously invisible areas (Maynard, 2013). There was therefore an opportunity for participants to expand on passing comments that could potentially be relevant to analysis. This was particularly useful in instances when the women were perhaps not explicitly aware of the significance of issues raised.

This study could have benefitted from focus group discussions, but due to their limited availability, finding a suitable time for multiple participants could prove fairly inconvenient for the women.

Positionality

As a middle income, Eurasian expat that has lived in Singapore for over 10 years, I am coming from a position of privilege. It was therefore crucial that I

remained reflexive and sensitive to how translating knowledge between differentiated levels of privilege affected my interpretations (Rose, 1997). This was ensured through "self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher" (England, 1994, p.82), acknowledging the unequal levels of privilege that construct my position and biases (Haraway, 1988).

Accounting for the power relation between myself as the researcher, and the participants during the interview process was critical (McDowell, 1992). To achieve this, I began each interview with a brief explanation of my personal background, including my Indonesian heritage, my upbringing in Singapore, and my status as a student. I provided a brief overview of my research aims and scope, but most importantly, my research motives, being that after having lived with a FDW for over 18 years who has always been considered 'part of the family', I wanted to investigate the realities of the experiences of FDWs from an academic perspective. This added a personal dimension, which allowed me to establish myself as a relatable individual, rather than purely a researcher, resulting in more personalised, emotional responses.

Limitations

The participants' involvement in *Aidha* offers a bias, as the programme is inherently structured to empower FDWs through technology. However, the objective of this study is to investigate how technology can simultaneously reproduce disadvantage. The semi-structured format of the interviews helped

overcome this bias by providing space for improvised questions, which uncovered examples of how technology was used to disempower.

All of the interview participants spoke English yet in all cases, it is their second or third language. This likely obstructed some of the subtle nuances of the ideas and experiences that were conveyed. This was particularly true for participants who lacked confidence in their ability to speak English, as they initially refrained from exploring their ideas further. Mitigating this barrier was largely a combination of fostering a supportive, patient environment where I clarified my willingness to explain any parts of the interview they were unsure of, as well as using prompts to encourage them to continue their train of thought when necessary. This involved encouraging nods while maintaining eye contact, "echo prob[ing]" where I reiterated what the participant said and asked them to expand (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p.198) and verbal affirmations to encourage them to continue their course of thought.

Lastly, I cannot assume the experience of the participants provides a true reflection of all FDWs within Singapore. However, the purpose of this study is not to achieve a universal representation or solution to gender inequity. Rather, a situated, partial perspective is adopted, which addresses its limitations (Haraway, 1988). I therefore do not seek to produce "objective" knowledge, but critical knowledge, exposing at least part of previously overlooked experiences of FDWs in Singapore.

4. The Elasticity of Empowerment and Space

"They expect for all women to stay at home. Women cannot go overseas,

women cannot go far…I have to change this mindset."

(Warih, 37, Indonesian)

Feminist literature regarding the "co-related and interpenetrative" nature

of private and public space (Saunders and Evans, 1992, p.99) is particularly

useful in understanding the role and place of ICTs in the realities of life as a FDW

(Berker *et al.,* 2005). The dichotomy between the private and public sphere has

been examined closely, particularly within Socialist and Marxist feminism,

revealing how the division of labour perpetuates social systems (Kennedy *et al.*,

2003). The traditional connotation of the public sphere (with men, formal work,

and governance) and private sphere (with women, family, and sexuality)

identifies the basic structure of the "gendered social order" (Lorber, 2001, p.22),

which is "pervasive in people's lives – both physically and virtually" (Kennedy *et*

al., 2003, p.75). This boundary is therefore blurred within the context of FDWs,

as their site of professional work is within someone else's home, with a family

that is not hers. FDWs consequently exist at the intersection of public and private

space within their host countries, as they are neither at home nor in the public

sphere within their employer's home. Their employer's home acts first and

foremost as their place of work, where they are subjected to the bureaucratic

dynamics of the employer-employee relationship (Blunt, 2005). They are also

unable to escape their position as a FDW in 'public', as they are often stereotyped

and subjected to negative stigmatisation by local communities, creating hostility.

Analysing FDWs' use of technology facilitates a greater understanding of how they negotiate and mediate the public-private dichotomy. This negotiation creates elasticity, providing them with the flexibility to exist within both simultaneously. This is a form of empowerment as it enables FDWs to reclaim a sense of privacy and autonomy at work (Thomas, 2008), and allows them to enact forms of community (Thompson, 2009). This defies the concept that they 'do not belong' in public space, increasing their power by facilitating self-determination (Thas *et al.*, 2007). This 'elasticity' will be explored to contest the argument that empowerment cannot occur within "the social processes from which it emerges and takes place" (Parreñas, 2003, p.34). It is instead argued that empowerment does not occur in a vacuum, existing independently from previous processes of marginalisation. This will be demonstrated in how empowerment through mobile technology used by FDWs, allows them to overcome barriers, but also confront new obstacles that arise as a result. It connotes how empowerment exists on a spectrum rather than a binary, as the pursuit of empowerment can be met by greater resistance for the subject. The chapter will first analyse how technology aids the effective use of public space in enacting forms of community, but also tethers FDWs to their employment status. The chapter will then examine how ICTs provide support systems that FDWs do not have direct access to until their days off, thus creating an channel for support networks to be brought into the (employer's) home. However, this enables the issuing of demands, instructions and surveillance by employers, compromising privacy and allowing technology to transform into a source of stress.

Segregation and the City: Resisting notions of unequal entitlement to space

Mobile technology allows FDWs to use public space effectively, by being the medium through which social activities are co-ordinated, creating and reinforcing support networks. Mobile phones thus act as an instrument in which migrant workers can "mobilise and enact" multiple forms of community (Thompson, 2009, p.372). These forms of community are "strategies employed in navigating the space between 'home' and 'host'" which enable FDWs to strengthen their ties to their homeland, whilst simultaneously "(re)creat[ing] a 'home away from home'" (Yeoh and Huang, 2000, p.413). This acts as a form of empowerment because it allows them to forge their own space within the host country, enforcing their equal entitlement to public space. Resistance to this entitlement stems from perceptions of FDWs "as aliens who have no part to play in public life and therefore no place in the public arena belonging to the citizenry" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.588). This underpins the issue's root in power and privilege, rejecting notions of public space as "a social leveller" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.585).

During 'off-days', FDWs are, in theory, afforded autonomy, free time and personal space, which they do not have within their employer's home (Thomas, 2008). However, this assumes that they receive "a degree of privacy under the cloak of anonymity" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.585), which is not the case. In reality, they are tethered to their positions as FDWs, showing that the public and private sphere "do not begin and end at the front door" (Allan and Crow, 1989, p.5). FDWs in Singapore are frequently subjected to stigmatisation and stereotyping, making public space a platform and instrument in the process of

'othering' (Ruddick, 1996). These women are discursively constructed as inferior (Pratt, 2004), through the transposing of "poorer economic development and educational opportunities within the[ir] home countries" onto them (Huang and Yeoh, 2007, p.207). Coupled with the belief that they are less entitled to access of public space, this initially results in ostracisation.

However, all of the participants in this study expressed an appreciation of the helpfulness of mobile technology in coordinating social activities and gatherings during off-days. This ostracisation is then transformed into feelings of solidarity and camaraderie. The formation of communities and networks of FDWs during off-days, generate what is commonly referred to as 'weekend enclaves'.

Weekend enclaves begin as "accessible public meeting-points" and evolve into large gatherings of FDWs, often loosely segregated according to nationality (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.593). This indicates empowerment as they reject notions of themselves as "passive recipients…[of] how space is understood, defined and used" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.595), thus using online communication to "def[y] and challenge the boundaries that set the social margins" around them (Panagakos and Horst, 2006, p.118). However, these larger enactments of community also perpetuate resistance against their use of public space, as mentioned by Joy:

> "We always hear that we are a burden from others…maybe because they say that there's already a lot of population in Singapore, so now us domestic workers make it worse."

<p align="right">(Joy, 53, Filipina)</p>

This highlights the broader perception of weekend enclaves as a burden within Singapore, as areas such as Lucky Plaza, Zhujiao Market and Golden Mile Complex are frequently overcrowded on Sundays. Resistance to these forms of community are often rooted in the ability of the performance of cultural practices to emphasise the "difference" or "unlikeness" of FDWs (Ahmed, 2001, p.19). Often, this is extrapolated into the view that "ties to their homeland [are] unpatriotic and even threatening", fostering mistrust amongst the host society (Panagakos and Horst, 2006, p.118). This was mentioned by Chona:

> "Sometimes negative things about domestic workers in Singapore come out, so even the good things are not noticed. They think we are all the same. Even if you are not doing it, you are treated like you are doing it."
>
> (Chona, 33, Filipina)

This reveals the tendency for the host country's population to make negative generalisations about FDWs, which is arguably assisted by these gatherings. The assembly of FDWs through their similarities (typically by religion or nationality) in weekend enclaves aids this by presenting Singapore's FDWs as being constituted of multiple, homogenous clusters. This reveals how although mobile communication facilitates a transition between "mundane [social] coordination", to an empowering, "instrumental and expressive use…[transforming] the presentation of self" (Ling and Yttri, 2002, p.142), it can exacerbate social tension. This challenges these notions of entitlement to public space, aggravating pre-existing processes of 'othering', reinforcing differences, and consequently

fostering mistrust amongst the host population. This emphasises how the use of technology to facilitate seemingly mundane processes like social gatherings, "relate[s] to grander social processes and structures" (Berker *et al.*, 2005, p.4), resulting in simultaneous empowerment and marginalisation.

Helicopter Employers: Rationalising the surveillance of the 'brazen siren' and the 'perpetual child'

FDWs' interactions with public space are often shaped by a degree of their employer's control, in which they exert power by enforcing rules that restrict their FDW's private time and space (Thomas, 2008). For instance, most FDWs in Singapore have "a specified Cinderella hour" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.592) – a curfew for when they need to be home – enabling employers to dictate the exposure of their employees to public space. However, Yuliani demonstrated that the absence of a prescribed "Cinderella hour" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.592) facilitated further control as she reflected on her curfew on her day-off:

> "I wake up and do my job in the morning, after that I go. Then I come back from the school, but I have to wait for the bus… sometimes we need to wait for 15 minutes, so he's not happy. When I come early, they do not want to eat at home, I come late, they say, "I want to eat dinner but you don't come back". Makes me look so bad, right?"
>
> (Yuliani, 34, Indonesian)

The imposition of shifting time constraints during Yuliani's day-off exemplifies how employers exploit their power, minimising employees' free time in public, for their own convenience. This exposes the intertwined relationship between the power dynamics and social relations during working days and off-days (Yeoh and Huang, 1998). However, Yuliani described how the ability to communicate these restrictions by text messaging with her employer helped her manage her time accordingly. This allowed her to use her day-off more effectively by maximising her free-time, and therefore providing greater freedom whilst still under the 'control' of her employer.

Additionally, as "the maid ventures out beyond the disciplinary gaze of the employer", suspicion regarding "the enormities of which the 'other' is capable" often arises (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.590). This results in the perception of the employer's control as a necessity, which provides FDWs with the 'moral guidance' and supervision they supposedly require. Ultimately, this uncovers employers' primary concern of "the susceptibility of their maids to moral and social pollution" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.590). This presents a paradox in which FDWs are simultaneously presented as a "perpetual child" (Radcliffe, 1990, p.385), whilst having the potential to transform into "a brazen siren" once freed from "the protective harbour of the domestic sphere" (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.594). This came to light as Glory Ann discussed the stereotypes that have been imposed on her in Singapore:

> "When we are here and people from other countries talk and say we are doing something wrong...especially when you have more savings they

think, "oh this money comes from the dirty one." I don't want them to judge or believe what they hear...It is not wrong to work as a domestic worker. It is also a clean job."

(Glory Ann, 29, Filipina)

These assumptions fortify suspicions projected onto FDWs, which serve to rationalise technologically mediated surveillance during 'off-days'. Surveillance is often masked under the 'veil of protection', despite its imposition of a patronising mechanism of control over their temporary 'freedom' and autonomy. This highlights how negative stereotypes reinforce the power dynamic between employer and employee, bolstering the subordinate status of FDWs. For Chona, Aidha played an instrumental role in defying these stereotypes:

"My family knows I am in Aidha, my dad was happy when I told him...I told him "you know, I'm studying every Sunday." He's just happy because I'm not doing something like other domestic helpers."

(Chona, 33, Filipina)

This reveals the construction of an obstacle as FDWs are forced to either endure invasive surveillance on their off-days, or feel obligated to embody the antithesis of these stereotypes, in the hope of earning trust and consequent privacy. Thus it reveals how relative empowerment can occur, albeit as a result of compromise.

Resistance to these stereotypes often occurs in the form of transparency afforded by constant communication, which simultaneously provides freedom yet tethers FDWs to the domestic sphere and "the political economic structures

they cannot escape" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.264). This is evident in Yuliani's statement:

> "I always use my phone because [my employers] text me a lot...if I want to go out to the playground or market, to socialise or relax, I can text them. They text me if they need me to do something."
>
> (Yuliani, 34, Indonesian)

This demonstrates the elasticity of this 'tether', as Yuliani's mobile phone allows her to leave the house once she has finished her chores, giving her greater freedom. Yet it also acts as a potential source of stress when used to issue orders through SMS-messaging (Chib *et al.,* 2013). Freedom is afforded through the transparency created by mobile communication, which was evident in Aini's (34, Indonesian) reference to how her employer's ability to "check on [her]...builds trust with [her] employer." Therefore, despite its ability to tie them to her employers' homes, Yuliani and Aini expressed satisfaction with technology's role in enabling them to socialise and provide a diversion from their routine (Thomas, 2008), showing it to be a beneficial trade-off. This emphasises the importance of considering the continuum of connectivity (Warschauer, 2003) in understanding social terms on which access to technology is dependent (Liff and Shepherd, 2004), which in the case of FDWs are the completion of chores and employee transparency.

Additionally, Yuliani and Ritchelle mentioned negotiations of these social terms:

"People are thinking very bad of domestic workers. But if we can show the people the good story of helpers who have learnt something in Aidha, it is easy to keep the day off."

(Yuliani, 34, Indonesian)

"Because of Aidha, our employers trust us. When we ask if we can go to a workshop, they know we're students so they give us full permission. They are willing to help. We attended a Google workshop last time and learned how to create our own business page and website. As a domestic worker, you don't have many chances to get these opportunities."

(Ritchelle, 36, Filipina)

This highlights how off-days are perceived as a "significant site of negotiation", which often reveals the volatility of the employer-employee relationship, as rest days are a legal right (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p.595). *Aidha* therefore becomes a useful tool for negotiating power, further revealing how the transparencies ICTs afford foster trust, granting these women greater freedom.

Inviting Support: Resisting authority and exercising rights

The freedom to form social networks amongst FDWs is hindered by strict regulations surrounding holidays and regular breaks (Chib *et al.,* 2013), and their inability to control the boundaries of the home, either ideologically or materially (Huang and Yeoh, 2007). This guides them to bring the "outside world into their lives" (Thomas, 2008, p.79), reclaiming the terrain of the home (Mack,

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2004) by creating sense of belonging within a space of alienation (Blunt and Varley, 2004). This is achieved by the use of mobile communication to connect FDWs, who are likely to experience loneliness and exclusion (Rakow, 1992).

Mobile technology empowers FDWs through its ability to provide constant support networks that would otherwise only be seen on off-days, into the (employer's) home. By allowing FDWs to connect emotionally (Thompson, 2009) and "compare notes" on their rights (Thomas, 2008, p.11), mobile communication acts as both a strategy of self-protection and emotional form of empowerment. Joy demonstrated the tactical isolation some employers impose on their employees:

> "My last employer didn't want me to mix with domestic workers, because they were scared and worried that because [some FDWs] have been here for a long time…they know things, and will say something…and you will get a boyfriend, you will leave, you will make more demands because you know your rights."

> (Joy, 53, Filipina)

This reveals the vested interests employers have in obstructing the ability of FDWs to form social networks. It also reveals the power of support networks in helping FDWs become more aware of their rights. Ultimately, enforcing this control is an act of "information keeping" (Eubanks, 2012, p.42), as it sustains the existing power imbalance by reinforcing the hierarchical structure of the household. This is an important issue as many FDWs within Singapore are

unaware of their legal rights and access to help, as legal provisions seldom take the particularly vulnerable position of the worker into account (Thomas, 2008).

Support networks provide greater power for workers to stand for their rights, which would be difficult to achieve alone (Thomas, 2008), highlighting its role in empowerment. For example, mobile communication often helps FDWs secure more favourable employment opportunities and escape from abusive employers (Rahman *et al.,* 2005). It stresses the importance of mobile communication's role in "strategies of resistance and sites of power" (Thomas, 2008, p.14). Joy explained the vulnerability of first-time FDWs in detail:

> "If you are a first timer, you will follow whatever the employer says, because you are worried they will get angry. You don't know Singapore yet so you just follow what they say. Last time [my employers] kept everything, [my] work permit, [my] passport. They're worried you'll run away, so they keep it."

> (Joy, 53, Filipina)

This signifies how employers can exploit power imbalances and consolidate their authority by preventing FDWs from comparing notes on what they are entitled to and which demands are acceptable. Despite the work of NGOs and social support centres, FDWs often lack access to these services due to a lack of awareness or by restrictions enforced by employers (Chib *et al*., 2013). This reveals the importance of technologically-mediated communication's role in

building and maintaining support networks (Gee and Ho, 2006), contributing to empowerment.

This chapter has therefore examined the elasticity of both empowerment and the boundary between public and private spheres. It revealed how technology increases the flexibility of the public-private dualism. This empowers FDWs through their ability to contest notions of unequal entitlement to public space by enacting forms of community, and their ability to construct support networks. However, technology is also used to reinforce the power imbalance between the employer and employee by extending the reach of control mechanisms. This has emphasised the importance of considering the social terms on which access to technology is dependent (Liff and Shepherd, 2004) and how they shift in response to empowerment. Therefore demonstrating how empowerment does not occur in a vacuum, void of resistance.

5. Transnational Mothering: Everywhere and Nowhere, So Close Yet So Far

The gendered digital divide emphasises the need to root analyses in "how gender is created and perpetuated" (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003, p.73), begging the question of how social roles are carried out through technology (McQuail, 1987). Existing literature has focused on how women spend less time online as a result of domestic responsibilities that limit their free time (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003). However, in the context of some FDWs, their responsibilities abroad (particularly duties of mothering) arguably increases time spent online as they strive to mediate their fused-identity of a transnational mother and as a FDW. The preservation of traditional forms of mothering, coupled with their status as substantial/ primary earners within their families, reveals how gender roles can be both reproduced through technology and migration. However, this chapter will argue that this is not inevitable. Technology creates opportunities to contest and negotiate gender roles, empowering FDWs to exercise their agency, by redefining motherhood.

Although the maintenance of traditional forms of mothering are perceived as an added responsibility and the perpetuation of gender roles, the critical element is choice, not outcome. Short-sighted arguments that assume the Internet should be used for the same amount of time and in the same ways by men and women (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003), should be avoided. Instead, causes of these differences and their ramifications need to be better understood (Kennedy *et al.*, 2003). For instance, women use digital media in a variety of ways to fulfil multiple, overlapping roles as daughters, mothers, employees, friends etcetera (Frizzo-Barker and Chow-White, 2012), highlighting their complex

"technological ecology" (Chib *et al*., 2013, p.20). This is a central premise to arguments that technology tethers and confines women to gender roles despite migration (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). However, arguments claiming that technology "actively participates" in the perpetuation of gender roles (Kennedy *et al*., 2003) ignore the reciprocal influence of technology and social contexts on each other (Thomas, 2008; Thompson, 2009). Therefore, although technology may have the potential to reinforce and challenge gender roles, the outcome is dependent on how it is used (Kennedy *et al.,* 2003). This chapter will consequently dispute technological determinism by approaching technology as a screen upon which its uses project meaning.

Horst and Miller (2012) argue that every relationship is mediated, as they are "framed through cultural practices" (Longhurst, 2016, p.124). However, these 'frames' are often so effective and seamlessly constructed that they are not perceived as frames (Goffman, 1959). Technology is no exception, as its impact is often taken for granted, making it invisible (Baym, 2010). However, critically evaluating technology can make it visible again, demonstrating its ability to 'frame' cultural practices (in this case, transnational mothering). It reveals ability to disrupt binaries between presence and absence, and proximity and distance (Longhurst, 2013). The Internet is a critical mechanism within transnational mothering as it creates opportunities for meaningful contact despite physical distance. It "rearticulate[es] practices of everyday life and lived spaces" (Valentine, 2006, p.370). It therefore acts as a "nodal point for furthering communications and intimacies" (Longhurst, 2013, p.671), helping to maintain closeness between geographically distant networks (Chib *et al*., 2013). This

chapter will explore how FDWs use the Internet to renegotiate and shape their lived experiences of motherhood.

Neither Here Nor There: Redefining a dual existence

Migration instigates drastic changes in FDWs' identities as loved ones (Thomas, 2008). In combination with the incorporation of ICTs within family and household culture (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992), they develop a form of "absent presence" (Pertierra, 2005, p.26), in which their relationships are shaped and mediated by mobile communication (Uy-Tioco, 2007). This creates opportunities to reconfigure dimensions of identity, and establish "new and radical" ones (Pertierra, 2005, p.27). This is pertinent to discussions of motherhood as its socially constructed nature shows there is opportunity to "entangl[e] and reconfigur[e] maternities as in-between and multiple", to provide analytical room to "de-essentialis[e] the mother's body" (Longhurst, 2008, p.8). This will uncover constructions of motherhood through time and space (Holloway, 1999, p.91), and how it can be reconfigured through the use of technology.

The time-space compression created by technology's ability to overcome spatial barriers (Harvey, 1989) allows FDWs to "exercise a daily presence" (Pertierra, 2005, p.23) with their families at 'home', disrupting the absent/present binary. This allows them to "straddle two worlds at the same time" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.260), a vital component of transnational mothering. This allows FDWs to adopt a dual role as a source of both emotional and financial support for their families, positioning them as a "dominant parental figure" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.260; Chib *et al.,* 2013). This is contested as a form of empowerment, as they are still subjected

to the expectations of a traditional family, despite being praised for supporting their families (Uy-Tioco, 2007). This leaves them caught amongst "endless justifications" for their physical absence (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009, p.255).

However, this demonstrates the fluidity of empowerment as technology's facilitation of decision-making power and processes by FDWs, challenges gender roles by extending the boundaries of maternal care (Longhurst, 2013). This is evident in Joy's statement:

"I don't want my family to have the same experience I did when I was young, with no food…it's not me saying I want to be rich, I just want to be middle class, so we can buy what we want to buy, we can eat what we want to eat…that's why I work in Singapore until 16 years. Because I wanted to come back after 2 years, but after those 2 years I had no money."

(Joy, 53, Filipina)

Within Joy's experience, it is apparent that breadwinning has become an extension of motherhood, rather than an alternative, as it acts as a mechanism to demonstrate support by providing her family with stability. Remittances therefore express maternal love, "affirm[ing her] place in the family" (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009, p.259). While technology can reconfigure the identity of FDWs as loved ones, the process remains "attach[ed] to embodied experiences and practices" (Madge and O'Connor, 2005, p.83). Ultimately, this illustrates the fluidity of empowerment by exemplifying how challenging normative gender expectations can still be perceived as conformity to them.

Moreover, technology enables empowerment by easing the transition of FDWs into positions of primary earning through communication, creating transparency. Although constant communication has also been seen to "increase rupture and conflict" within families (Madianou and Miller, 2012, p.2), adapting technology's use according to the household's interests and values ultimately affords FDWs with greater decision-making power. Joy's statement demonstrated this:

> "It's not so good…having a conversation when I am here and they are there. You're always arguing, "where's the money goes" But for me, I like to do that because I want to help my own family."
>
> (Joy, 53, Filipina)

This statement reveals how despite resistance to her exerting authority, she was still able to exercise an 'absent presence', letting her obtain control over family finances through constant monitoring. In addition, technology's production of time-space compression eases processes of financial decision-making by enabling real-time communication, creating avenues of open discussion with the family. This was evident in the following statements:

> "I would share my budgeting and saving plans with [my husband] so that he can slowly understand and one month, I'll be able to say no to [giving money to] them. He's very upset, but when I slowly talk to him, I explain that if I go back then we can start our business it will be easier for our family. We won't need to go abroad."

"Technology makes this easier because I am very far away from my family so we contact them through the phone…It makes the communication easier. So the decisions are easier because I have more time explain why I am not sending money as much. Without technology I have to send a letter…how many months will that take? Now it's very easy, it's just a cell phone call! And if they have questions they can talk to me. Sometimes it is hard to make these decisions, they are my family, they are my heart and soul."

(Glory Ann, 29, Filipina)

These statements reveal how the instantaneity of mobile communication has allowed them to "momentarily suspend their physical separation" (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.260) when making decisions, aiding conflict resolution. This illustrates the simultaneous transformation of their social and technological contexts as "ruptures [in] the order of gender" (Parreñas, 2005, p.331) are mitigated by technological use. It also furthers the argument that empowerment initially amplifies resistance, highlighting how empowerment is constantly under negotiation. Ultimately, this reveals how 'absent presence' creates space for the redefinition of motherhood, empowering FDWs by creating new channels of decision-making, reinforcing the control of these women within their families.

Long-Distance Mothering: Preserving the traditional

Furthermore, arguments that claim technology inevitably reinforces

gender roles (Uy-Tioco, 2007) oversimplify behaviour, and fundamentally ignore

the use of technology as a source of comfort and how it can redefine

motherhood. More specifically, technology's ability to fulfil traditional forms of

mothering (Uy-Tioco, 2007) often acts as a source of comfort, by allowing

transnational mothers to "perpetuate their original identity" (Thomas, 2008,

p.81). They are then able to "contest the myth of the male breadwinner but

retain the myth of the female homemaker" (Parreñas, 2005, p.334), redefining

motherhood according to their own contexts. Although social reproduction

occurs through habits that reinforce social order (Bahloul, 1992), a more in-

depth analysis of the subtle differences emerging in Internet use (Liff and

Shepherd, 2004) is essential in exploring how seemingly mundane practices of

the everyday can be "instrumental and expressive...regarding the presentation of

self" (Ling and Yttri, 2002, p.142). It highlights how these assumptions fall into

the same theoretical trap as categorising women's needs as either strategic or

practical, by ignoring the potential for tactful reproductions of an 'accepted'

identity to challenge subordination (Wieringa, 1994). Within the context of

transnational mothering by FDWs, this signifies how maintaining traditional

forms of mothering cannot simply be dismissed as passively conforming to

gender roles.

A false antagonism is often assumed between the independence of

migrant workers and close family ties (Thomas, 2008). This assumption rests on

the premise that greater technological connectivity binds workers to their

responsibilities and families, furthering claims that unmarried FDWs are more independent and less involved with their families (Thomas, 2008). However, satisfying these responsibilities is not inherently patriarchal or oppressive, until enforced against their will. This behaviour could also be examined as a form of resistance. For instance, mobile communication is a mechanism of resistance for FDW mothers in its ability to defy the dislocation of migration (Uy-Tioco, 2007), challenging the binary between proximity and distance. This is achieved as it allows them to produce an intangible existence that "extend[s] beyond their lives as domestic workers" (Thomas, 2008, p.83) and reduce the emotional stress of separation (Chib *et al.,* 2013). Although this may not directly diminish the institutional or structural powers acting against them, it must be recognised as intervening against their daily experiences of structural inequality (Parreñas, 2003).

Moreover, this defiance of the proximity/distance binary reveals the transition of mobile phones as objects for 'mobile people' to devices that assist restricted people in overcoming their constraints (Thompson, 2009).
In regard to transnational mothering, mobile technology facilitates the monitoring of child education and behaviour, demonstrating how technologies are incorporated and redefined according the interests and values of the household (Silverstone *et al*., 1992). This emerged in Evelyn's statement:

> "I purchased the *IXL* app for my children, so I can monitor their learning and skills. I can check their record…to see if there's anything they don't know how to do. So if I know they are poor in this, then I can contact them and teach them! Yeah as a mother it's very tough! So every Sunday before

I go out, I have to discuss with them, "why you don't know how to do this

and that?""

<div align="right">(Evelyn, 31, Filipina)</div>

Despite the presence of her husband, Evelyn has taken on this caregiving

responsibility, supporting Uy-Tioco's (2007) observation that even after the

migration of mothers, fathers seldom become the primary source of care, despite

their physical presence. This is a form of resistance in its mitigation of the

adverse impacts of separation on children, such as the declining school

performances in families with geographically distant mothers (Parreñas, 2005).

Similarly, Aini also employs strategies of 'parenting from afar':

"Sometimes people in the village talk like very rough…bad words…So I

teach [my son], "now you're this age, I don't want you to use the bad word

under social media." Because I saw him use bad words on Facebook! I got

so angry! I said, "This is not the way you talk to people, even only your

friends. It's not nice for people to see.""

<div align="right">(Aini, 34, Indonesian)</div>

Aini's ability to discipline her son and regulate his Internet activity from abroad

highlights how technology may tether FDWs to their positions as mothers, but it

does so in a way that allows them to exert care and authority, compensating for

their physical absence.

In addition, the maintenance of maternal relationships via mobile communication reveals the care-giving functions of technology (Rakow, 1992), developing a "currency of care" (Kaur and Shruti, 2016). Joy (53, Filipina) expressed the difficulty of "be[ing] far from [her] family, looking after other kids, [even though] for [her] kids there is nobody", signifying how mobile communication may ease the difficulties of separation (Ling and Campbell, 2010) by practicing 'absent presence'. Communication therefore provides "concrete reinforcement" of her parental love (Parreñas, 2003, p.141), despite physical separation. This is similar to Ritchelle's (36, Filipina) experience in which she has "regular timing[s] for talking to [her] family...[marking] a day to really focus on them." This exemplifies how transnational mothers achieve "semblances of intimacy" by establishing set routines (Parreñas, 2005, p.328). This is sustained in Aini's (34, Indonesian) certainty that her "son knows that [she] care[s] about him. Because everyday [she] message[s] him, saying 'how are you, how is school?'" Longhurst (2016, p.128) argues that text messages distance subjects from "rawer, more intense embodied feelings." However, for FDWs, it operates as a more digestible form of emotional support and connection, creating a tangible representation of parental love. Therefore, it illustrates how technology's ability to facilitate intimacy and acts of maternal care, empowers migrant mothers to refute notions of their physical absence as equating to emotional absence.

This chapter therefore concludes that although gender roles can be both reproduced and contested through technology and migration, it is not inevitable. Rather, technology facilitates the dismantling of absent/present and proximity/distance binaries (Longhurst, 2013), creating avenues of

empowerment that enable FDWs to exercise their agency, providing

opportunities to redefine motherhood.

6. Entrepreneurial Endeavours: Thriving to Surviving

Empowerment is frequently theorised as a form of instrumental resistance that directly diminishes structural and institutional inequality (Parreñas, 2003). This is overly simplistic and problematic in the context of technology as it ignores how instrumental resistance can also act as a coping mechanism. Within the context of FDWs, ICTs behave as disembedding mechanisms, enabling an elastic form of identity. They can escape imaginatively from their location (both the employer's home and the host country) (Morley, 2000), and distance themselves from their status as FDWs. This chapter will demonstrate how the participants used instrumental resistance, in the form of entrepreneurial endeavours, as a coping mechanism to reassure them of their individual identities and the impermanence of their status as FDWs. Also, their adoption of technology will be examined to reveal how their use is actually a tactical decision that enables them to participate with and endure societal change. Therefore dismantling the dichotomy between Molyneux (1985) and Moser's (1989) strategic and practical gender interests, and consequently challenging the distinction between empowerment as a mechanism to "cope with the requirements of life more efficiently versus…transform[ing] the conditions of life" (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003, p.4).

Aidha's curriculum has an entrepreneurial focus that encourages each student to use online tools to start their own business within their home country, while they are still in Singapore. Though entrepreneurship is not an applicable example for all FDWs within Singapore, it provides a useful demonstration of how FDWs can produce an identity beyond their status as FDWs (Kennedy *et al.,*

2003). For this reason, entrepreneurship will not covered extensively, but will be used as an analytical lens to expose how challenging structural power makes the 'everyday' more bearable.

Focusing on the Horizon: The impermanence of migration

Entrepreneurial endeavours serve as a coping mechanism in that they justify reducing remittances, providing FDWs with greater financial decision-making power. They also enable FDWs to bring the "outside world into their lives" to produce an identity that extends beyond their status as FDWs (Thomas, 2008, p.79). This is empowering as it allows them to perceive themselves as autonomous individuals, rather than being defined by their employment. Furthermore, entrepreneurship provides a goal/focal point that reduces the disorientation of migration (and the new identity it assigns them), helping the participants cope with their daily realities. This provides them with assurance of their temporary positions as FDWs in Singapore, by creating tangible steps towards their return home to their families and positions of greater financial stability.

Chona, who is currently an Aidha student revealed how technology has helped her endure the emotional impact of being a FDW:

"Working as a domestic worker really makes my confidence go down, sometimes I ask myself why I am doing this. I used to cry out of frustration because I didn't know how to express myself. But now I am

more confident in my decisions and I feel empowered. My decisions are more informed. Technology helped this."

(Chona, 33, Filipina)

Chona's experience reveals how the practical advice and opportunities for self-education that technology has afforded her (McQuail, 1987), acts as a disembedding mechanism (Morley, 2000). They allow Chona to transcend the emotional difficulties of being a FDW by empowering herself through her decisions. In this instance, the confidence she has reclaimed stems from her certainty in her decisions, restoring her self-worth and identity as an individual. Samsyah described a similar experience as she stated:

"The other women help my self-discipline by reminding me that if I don't save, I will be back to where I started...I want to build a house for myself...start a business so I don't have to work overseas."

(Samsyah, 30, Indonesian)

This reveals how exerting greater control over her finances has allowed Samsyah to regard herself as an "individual with support networks and long-term goals which transcend...[her] employer's home" (Thomas, 2008, p.83), distancing herself from her status as a FDW. Social support theory emphasises the importance of this as a coping mechanism through the notion that an individual's psychological wellbeing is improved through interactions within a social network (Chib *et al.*, 2013). Technology has assisted both Chona and Samsyah in making decisions, by providing them with greater control and certainty. This has

helped them cope with the emotional difficulties of the realities of FDWs, by allowing them to resist being defined by their employment.

Moreover, Joy describes how formulating a plan to achieve her business allows her to ensure the impermanence of her residence in Singapore:

"Of course [my family] want me to go back home, but I told my kids that 'you need to have your job there first.' Because if you have no job, then I will go back home, and then what do we do? In my age, I cannot return back to Singapore."

(Joy, 53, Filipina)

This challenges the dichotomy between strategic and practical gender interests (Moser, 1989) by identifying how 'practical' decisions, such as staying in Singapore until certainty can be created 'back home' in Joy's case, can lay the foundation for 'strategic' actions like starting her own business. Thus, it exposes the danger of simplified planning tools, as they ignore the complexity of the social conditions in which these decisions occur (Wieringa, 1994). This also supports Silverstone *et al.*'s (1992) argument that households adopt and redefine technologies according to its interests and values. In this instance, Joy is using technology to communicate her rationale behind staying in Singapore and establishing a source of income before her return. This draws parallels with Evelyn's experience:

"I admit I am thrifty…but I didn't realise I am not saving enough for my goal…I don't have a time frame. I wanted to build a house in two years

time, but I didn't compute it and I realised that what I'm saving is not

enough…I've learnt in financial management [classes] we have to have

our time frame so we can compute it. 'How much do you need to save

every month to complete that task in a years time?'"

<div align="right">(Evelyn, 31, Filipina)</div>

This demonstrates how creating an objective and using technology as a planning

mechanism has helped Evelyn control her spending. Joy and Evelyn's statements

therefore show how they have used technology in a constructive manner,

allowing them to manage themselves financially, therefore adapting technology

to serve a meaningful purpose in their lives (Lie and Sørensen, 2002).

These examples demonstrate how technology facilitates the greater

elasticity of identity by showing how its avenues for personal expression and

achievement (in this case through financial decision-making) allow FDWs to

assert their position as individuals. This reveals the interrelated nature of

instrumental and 'trivial' empowerment by exemplifying how their increased

ability to resist being defined by their role as FDWs and ensure its

impermanence, allows them to cope with the disorientation of migration.

<u>Playing to Win</u>

Furthermore, technology also serves as an important tool to 'keep up'

with the "new global knowledge-based economy" and the social change it entails

(Huyer and Sikoska, 2003, p.1). Existing literature on the digital divide regards it

as necessary to avoid exclusion (Berker *et al*., 2005) and further marginalisation

<div align="right">54</div>

(Knight, 1995). Hilbert (2011) argues that greater digital inclusion can disrupt cycles of unemployment, a lack of education and low income, by providing greater access to educational resources to foster skills (Kelkar and Nathan, 2002).

In the context of the participants' entrepreneurial endeavours, this denotes the need to examine how FDWs extend beyond mere access to technology, to its constructive use. Rogers (2001) argues this stems from a content or learning divide, rather than an access divide. It signifies the inadequacy of currently proposed interventions, such as increasing public access points. This suggestion is insufficient as it assumes those with minimal exposure have the ability to achieve meaningful application (Rogers, 2001). This arose in Samsyah's interview:

> "I spoke with one friend who did not know why I joined *Aidha*, she just thought, "I can't take this work because I don't know what I would use it for." Some people want to have a better future, but even when she was in *Aidha*, she didn't know what she wanted to do. So she just saw the deadlines as deadlines. She didn't know what the targets were for."
>
> (Samsyah, 30, Indonesian)

Samsyah's friend's unreceptiveness to the programme stresses the importance of considering perceptions of utility (Chib *et al.*, 2013) in the "practical and emotional adaptation of technologies" (Lie and Sørensen, 2002), which define its transformative potential within the individual's life. This is similar to Liff and Shepherd's (2004) argument that the Internet must be incorporated into the

daily lives of the individual to be meaningful, which in this case, it was clearly not.

Both arguments demonstrate how dependency is an outcome of the perceived necessity of technology. Correspondingly, Samsyah's attitude indicates meaningful adoption by expressing her desire to "play the game and turn it to [her] advantage", rather than "los[ing] out completely" (Society for International Development and UNESCO, 1998, p.14). This is similar to Glory Ann's (29, Filipina) mindset as she emphasised that even though "the world keeps changing, [she] need[s] to go on, no matter how hard it is." These attitudes operate along the same frequency as the belief that women no longer "have the luxury to ignore ICTs" and the information society (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003, p.5). It indicates that the meaningful and constructive adoption of technology is a social phenomenon (Liff and Shepherd, 2004) dependent on its perceived significance. This is critical when considering technology's ability to mitigate or exacerbate marginalisation within the information society, as it emphasises the need to consider the necessary social infrastructure, upon which technological adoption can be built.

These examples demonstrate how although the incorporation of ICTs into daily routines serve as a seemingly trivial form of empowerment, it also operates to resist exclusion from the information society. It is therefore an instrumental form of resistance to the notion that their subaltern position is a result of how they interact with technology (Thompson, 2009, p.377).

This chapter has therefore demonstrated the interrelated nature of seemingly 'trivial' forms of empowerment and instrumental resistance that

diminishes inequality more directly (Parreñas, 2003). This is evident in how developing an identity beyond being a FDW (e.g. by starting a business) simultaneously challenges structural power and helps them endure and overcome daily realities. Finally, the domestication of technology by FDWs illustrates how seemingly inconsequential behaviours can work to challenge greater processes, such as overcoming their exclusion from the 'information society.'

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has revealed that technology facilitates empowerment through the granting of certain freedoms. Yet, it does not occur within a vacuum that exists independently from the processes of marginalisation it resists. Technology-facilitated empowerment instead, creates new obstacles that obstruct social change. This demonstrates how the mediums through which empowerment and oppression occur are not mutually exclusive.

This was evident in technology's ability to tether these women to their positions as FDWs and mothers. This conveys the fluid nature of empowerment through ICTs, in that it resists some processes of oppression, whilst bypassing others. However, that is not to say the empowerment of these participants through technology should be underestimated. Instead, it indicates the need to extend and apply the reflexive and situated approaches of intersectional feminism to theorisations of empowerment. This would dismantle the counterproductive 'empowering' versus 'un-empowering' dualism, enabling feminist discussion to surpass assumptions and attempts to seek a one-size-fits-all solution. Ideally, this would encourage recognition of the complexities of the lived realities of historically overlooked groups, increasing their visibility, rather than perceiving it as an obstruction.

Furthermore, this research has revealed how technological empowerment occurs largely through the disruption of multiple dualisms, creating new opportunities for resistance. It reiterates how empowerment is not

necessarily the negation of oppressive forces, but the process of obtaining negotiating-power. Further research into the employer-employee or marital/family relationships as 'sites of negotiation' would advance this understanding.

In continuation, a (tabloid, broadsheet and social) media analysis would supplement the findings within this study, continuing to bridge the literature between the gender digital divide and FDWs. A media analysis would enhance this study's findings by providing a more in-depth understanding of the dominant narratives surrounding FDWs in Singapore. A particular focus on the public online presence of FDWs, especially on social media, would advance this understanding by revealing the ways FDW use online spaces as spaces to contest oppressive narratives.

Finally, this study reiterates and enriches contestations of technological determinism by demonstrating how the social power of the privileged enables them to manipulate how technology is used, to sustain their status. This gives greater insight into how acts of "information keeping" by employers (Eubanks, 2012, p.42) can be masked by the veil of protection and professionalism.

Ultimately, inequality is not an inevitable result of technology. While technology does not exist in a social, political or economic vacuum, it is not necessarily 'active' in reproducing marginalisation. Instead, technology can be perceived as a screen onto which its users project meaning. It highlights the

problematic relationship between social position and power/control, which

deprives the marginalised of their control over the touchscreen.

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