

«OUR HELPER IS PART OF THE FAMILY!»

Domestic workers in the Philippines

Text and Pictures: *Bettina Beer*

Many people know of the international migration of Filipino domestic workers. This essay is about the situation of domestic workers employed in ordinary Philippine households. Since my first field trip to the Visaya region of the Philippines, in the early 1990s, I have been struck by the number of women and men living and working in households other than their own. It seemed that as soon as people could afford it – even those on a small income, perhaps based on remittances sent by relatives abroad – they would try to hire a domestic worker: it seemed, indeed, nearly impossible not to hire somebody to «help» with domestic chores. «Helping» is a common euphemism applied even to those employees who do all the housework as well as helping to look after the children and / or old people.

Under these circumstances, I have also been surprised at the absence of studies of local domestic workers in the Philippines. Of course, over the last twenty years the focus of much research in the social sciences has been on global connections and transnational movements; accordingly, much has been published about Filipino domestic workers abroad (Constable 1999, Liebelt 2011, Palma-Beltran 1992, Parreñas 2001, Pratt 1999), including their education (Debonneville 2014), the social and gender dimensions of the trade (Lan 2003, Porio 2007) and the forms of power it involves (e.g. Groves & Chang 1999, Lan 2013a, 2013b). Johnson (2010) offers a new perspective on migration and domestic work by investigating the cultivation of middle class identities of Filipino migrants in Saudi Arabia and their relationships to Filipino domestic workers. Employer and employee are con-

nected in a dynamic which links up with the specificities of intra-philippine and transnational migration, care and domestic work (Johnson 2010: 431). In popular global discourses too, the Philippines has become famous for the «export» of human labour, of e.g. seamen, nurses, domestic helpers, «entertainers» etc., and national narratives focus on migrants as «heroes of globalisation» whose «sacrifices» abroad have been so important for their families and the state.¹ Some famous cases of Philippine women who worked as domestic helpers in the Middle East and became victims of abuse and legal injustice have become paradigmatic cases for the picture of Philippine women working as servants.

Yet, it still strikes me that the research on domestic workers in the Philippines is surprisingly sparse. I could find only an ILO report, a single study of child domestic workers in Metro Manila (Camacho 1999) and a broader investigation by Trager (1988) on gendered internal migration in the Philippines that explains differences between rural and urban participation of females in the labor force in terms of the significance of domestic service, which is higher in urban centres. Domestic service is seen as «female» and is for women one of the most important sectors of occupation (1988: 81). Camacho's paper presents the results of interviews with 50 children below the age of 18 who migrated to Metro Manila as domestic workers. My own material from Bohol is consistent with some aspects of these works, while in other respects it contrasts, as may not be surprising, given the comparative poverty of the Visayas and the patterns of migration characteristic of the region.

¹ 1988 in an often quoted speech Corazon Aquino called them «new national heroes» (*bagong bayani*), (Liebelt 2011: 121).













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Many of my Visayan friends were surprised that I (even as a PhD student) had never employed a domestic worker. This attitude and the many domestic workers I got to know stimulated my interest in the topic. For example, I followed over several years the fate of Marta, a girl with an intellectual disability, from a remote village, working for a wealthy family in a small Visayan town; her mother used to travel to the town every fortnight, to collect her salary, but when I last visited the Philippines, Marta had left the household because she had had a child by one of her co-workers. Although the child was healthy, her parents and the employer opposed Marta's marriage because they presumed she might be less lucky in the future. This and similar cases that I know of have stimulated my interest in the general topic of domestic workers and their place in the social and economic life of the Philippines.

The domestic workspace

As I mentioned, in the Visayas, domestic workers are in general called «helpers». The government designation is «*Kasambahay*» a compound of *kasama*, meaning «companion», and *bahay*, «house»: somebody living and working in the household. In 2012, the Philippine government acknowledged the vulnerability of domestic workers and committed to international conventions through the *Batas Kasambahay Act* (Republic of the Philippines 2013). Cases like Marta's made me want to know more about the biographies and everyday lives of these less «heroic» workers. On the one hand, I became especially interested in the paradoxical relation between the physical intimacy of domestic workers and their employers and the social distance between them and wondered about ambivalences that it might generate. I was struck by how often people said things like «our helper is part of the family» or «we treat her as a family member».² On the other hand, I was interested in cases where a poor or young kinsperson from elsewhere had entered a household as a «helper»: here the dynamics of intimacy and obligation are liable to take on a different configuration. One of the broader issues these relations evoke is precisely that of the opposition between economic relations and kinship or friendship ties that sustain Western economic categories and parts of social science more generally.

² This phrase is not only used by Filipino employers and for Filipino domestic workers in the Philippines but also in other employment contexts of Filipino domestic workers (e.g. Constable 2007).

³ All pictures were taken during a field research in January / February 2015 on the Philippine Island of Bohol.

⁴ In a well-off family, which accommodated more domestic workers than family members in their household, «helper» had a separate table and space for dining behind the kitchen.

Since the 1990s, I have talked to domestic workers and their employers, and collected narratives about their relations (about, for example, criminal helpers, who robbed their employers, or about abusive employers). Whenever I have visited households in the context of my research on other topics (e.g. Beer 1996, 2002, 2014), I pursued accounts of domestic work relationships, especially those involving families that seem to specialize in providing such workers, sometimes to the same employing household across the generations.³

It is clear, so far, that the situations of workers and employers vary a lot depending not only on pre-existing social relations (of kinship, friendship or locality), but also on the age of the domestic helper, the duties expected of him or her, the number of helpers employed in the household, and whether a given worker lives there; the stage in the domestic cycle of the employers (infants or elderly in need of care) and of the workers are also significant. Sometimes female domestic workers need the support of other family members looking after their own children. In transnational contexts these connections between gendered care relations have been called «global care chains» (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2004, Parreñas 2005). They are similar in intranational Philippine work relations which can be and are often part of transnational care chains.

Some live-in domestic workers have a separate sleeping room, toilet, bath (**photos 2 & 3**), or a kitchen (**photo 13**); others sleep in the room of the child or elderly family member he or she cares for, and share the bath and kitchen with the family. Most helpers do not eat with the family, even when employers invite them to do so. The workers explained that they would not feel comfortable with their employers, preferring to eat alone – or if there is more than one helper in the family together with their co-workers – and unobserved.⁴ Being invisible to the family was more often than not one of their aims.

Part of the family?

In documenting here the diverse living arrangements of domestic workers, I aim to suggest the tensions and ambivalences that accommodating fellow Filipinos as domestic workers can generate (for a comparable study of modern Indian elites and

domestic servitude see Qayum & Ray 2003). Most households in the Philippines are centred on a nuclear family. These nuclear families are sometimes extended by ageing parents, children of relatives who have migrated, or other kin. Many Visayan Filipinos who work full time or who receive remittances employ domestic workers, sometimes more than one. Usually these are either an experienced mature woman with her own family (**photos 1, 5, 9, 14, 16**), young girls seeking their first employment (**photo 12**), or men who work in the gardens, do repair jobs, or look after pets or domestic animals (**photos 6, 10, 13**). Sometimes several members of a family work for a wealthy family (e.g. mother and daughter, **photos 8, 14 & 15**). It is a common practice to delegate small jobs like washing clothes to a *lavandera*, for example, in the neighbourhood or to family members of domestic workers. Employer-domestic worker relations are part of the widespread complex webs of patronage relations.

A good example of the kinds of ambivalences that can attach to the status of domestic workers are the so-called «working students» who work for food, a place to sleep and their school fees (usually paid directly to the school).⁵ These boys or girls are treated as children of the family, but have to do little jobs in and around the house. Such a student, although often a complete outsider, can have a very similar status as a relative's child from the province who needs a place to stay in town to go to school: an «employer» would point out that all children need to be educated and need to be looked after. Of course, when young, unmarried women enter a household, the control of intimate relations and sexuality (both outside and within the home) are an issue, which can be read as reinforcing the conceit that domestic workers are treated as family members. However, the relation between «employer» and «helpers» is always also a work relationship, one that involves negotiations about pay, working hours, free days, and other rights and obligations for both sides.

⁵ Johnson (2010: 440ff) gives a glimpse of ambivalences and tensions in the context of racism, discrimination and illegality of Filipino migrant employers and Filipino domestic workers who ran away from their Saudi Bosses in Saudi Arabia.

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AUTHOR

Bettina Beer has done fieldwork in the Philippines since the early 1990s, mainly in the central Visayas. She is Professor of anthropology at the University of Lucerne.

bettina.beer@unilu.ch

*Ethnologisches Seminar
Frohburgstrasse 3
Postfach 4466
CH-6002 Luzern*