

Dissertation Project - Olivia Killias

Working Title: Indonesian Domestic Workers at Home and Abroad

Discipline: Social Anthropology

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Abstract

Indonesia has sent millions of international migrant workers overseas, and the overwhelming majority of these workers are women employed in domestic service. Consequently, every year, hundreds of thousands Indonesian – mostly Javanese - women leave abroad as domestic workers through the established contract labour migration system to various destinations such as Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Hong-Kong, Kuwait or Singapore.

Empirically grounded in multi-sited, transnational ethnographic fieldwork, this research seeks to examine the labour arrangements of migrant Javanese women employed as domestic workers, both within and beyond the Indonesian borders, and to go beyond the “maid – madam” relationship that has so often been the main focus of scholarship on domestic service. By taking a processual look at labour migration, the research examines different but interconnected stages, sites and actors involved in the transnational “maid trade” – from the recruitment in the villages to Malaysia and back. The idea is to determine whether and how bonded labour can develop in contemporary domestic work arrangements. Elements of coercion leading to bonded labour may include certain terms and conditions in labour contracts that seriously restrict the possibilities for workers to change employers, practices of incarceration, debt, or the systematic use or threat of violence. By exploring connections with historical forms of bonded labour in Southeast Asia, especially indentured service such as it existed in Indonesia under colonial rule, this research seeks to reconsider contemporary narratives on “trafficking” and “new forms of slavery”, hoping to shed some innovative light on questions of “unfree” labour.

This dissertation project is part of a comparative research on “Contemporary Forms of Bonded Labour in Southeast Asia” (2006 - 2009) that is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and is run by the Universities of Bern (Heinzpeter Znoj, Annuska Derks, Olivia Killias) and Geneva (Jean-Luc Maurer, Christophe Gironde, Le Thu Huong). Currently, Olivia Killias is writing up her dissertation with a fellowship from the SNF. Throughout 2010 she will be a visiting scholar at the Humboldt University in Berlin and the University of Oxford (COMPAS).