



**NEGOTIATING SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION**  
*Spatial Needs and Strategies of Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong*

A Research Paper by

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## **List of Acronyms**

<b>BHWR</b>	: Bethune House for Women's Refuge
<b>FDH</b>	: Foreign Domestic Worker
<b>MDW</b>	: Migrant Domestic Worker
<b>MFMW</b>	: Mission for Migrant Workers
<b>OFW</b>	: Overseas Filipino Workers

## **Abstract**

Inquiring into the lives of precarious workers require new ways of thinking and re-thinking about their power, agency, and resistance. Singular axis and dualistic understanding of their power, agency, and resistance hinder our theoretical and empirical understanding of their struggles. A review of the mandatory live-in policy for migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Hong Kong illustrates a spectrum of labour relations as well as governmentality that seeks to control, regulate, and maintain female MDWs within the reversed and limited boundaries of public and private spaces. In this study, I specifically explored into the ambiguousness of the term suitable accommodation which is embedded in the context of employing MDWs in Hong Kong in terms of its spatial, power, and agency dimensions. Using a spatial emphasis, I looked into female MDW's marginal physical and abstract accommodations in Hong Kong's public and private spaces. I discussed how such policy, guised as a protective entitlement, functions otherwise as an oppressive tool that increases female MDW vulnerability resulting in indefinite working hours, lack of personal privacy, diet restriction, sexual discipline, among others. Employing a power and agency emphasis, I examined various motivations and aspirations of female MDWs in accommodating, negotiating, or resisting such spaces in the public and private realm. For most female MDWs, their gainful employment in Hong Kong allows them to pursue their motivations and aspirations for a good life not only for themselves but also for their loved ones back home. Female MDWs also strategically use their spaces to campaign and mobilize for better working conditions. In conclusion, against structuralist forces that subjugate and marginalize their labour, my interviews with female MDWs in Hong Kong invoke that they demonstrate multiple layers and forms of power, agency and resistance through individual rights-claiming strategies and collective resistance for survival and solidarity.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Normative discussion and scholarship around precarious workers are centered around their preoccupation with survival and overcoming insecurity. Precarious workers, particularly female workers, are painted as having little to no agency and weak class consciousness to work themselves out of poverty. This study, however, counters such theoretical assumptions and epistemological injustices by analytically examining female migrant domestic workers' complex power and agency as evidenced by how they navigate and negotiate restrictive public and private spaces in Hong Kong. It attempts to explain discourse and empirical realities in regard to the mandatory live-in policy for migrant domestic workers, change and resistance in relation to governmentality as well as various forms of power existing among actors. Using their spatial context as a starting point, I investigated how female migrant domestic workers are shaping negotiations and challenging the social, economic, and political structures that misrepresent them and marginalize their labour.

## **Keywords**

Female Migrant Domestic Workers, Domestic Labour, Migration, Agency, Power, Resistance, Space, Suitable Accommodation, Decent Work, Governmentality, Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong.

# 1 Introduction

*“Papanik na ako/ pergi ke atas”* This phrase was repeatedly mentioned in the course of my conversations with female migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Hong Kong. The phrases *papanik na ako* (Tagalog) as well as *pergi ke atas* (Bahasa Indonesia) are both translation of “I am going upstairs.” Vilma<sup>1</sup> explains that the phrase is dominantly used by MDWs to refer to being formally employed as domestic workers in Hong Kong. Putri adds that the phrase is particularly used to indicate spatial mobility in Hong Kong’s medium and high-rise residential estates. In Juliet’s words “working in Hong Kong as a domestic worker can be both difficult and rewarding: you just have to endure the work if you want to be able to provide for your family.” Initially, I thought that this was just a simple everyday phrase used among female MDWs but in the context of MDWs, being employed (going upstairs) could be metaphorically-compared to a ladder to which they achieve their personal and socio-economic aspirations in life.

It is a common sight every weekend to see female MDWs spending their rest days in Hong Kong’s public spaces. During my recent visit there, my good friend jokingly said that Lonely Planet could actually enlist female MDWs as one of the top sightseeing attractions in the city simply for the reason that they are highly ubiquitous and have existed way longer than popular establishments and landmarks in the sprawling metropolitan. Without taking offence, I found this statement is somehow true: MDWs have indeed been in the city of Hong Kong since 1970s, long before it attained its independence as an administrative region in 1997 as well as the installation of its very own Disneyland in 2005. Across major bank buildings, five-star hotels, and luxury brand stores, female MDWs, mostly from Southeast Asia, are scattered all throughout the city and would usually congregate in seemingly territorialized public spaces according to their nationality and ethnicity: Filipino MDWs usually gather at the Central shopping district, Indonesians occupy Victoria Park in Causeway Bay and Thais inhabit Kowloon Park.

Moreover, a quite uncommon and unusual sight is how MDWs spend their living and working days inside their employers’ private spaces. MDWs are legally-required to reside and work only in their employers’ household. This is with the provision that MDWs will be provided with a free and suitable accommodation<sup>2</sup>. In effect, for MDWs in Hong Kong, their working space is also their temporary home. However, in light of scarce and costly space in the city, most MDWs have to contend with enduring whatever space is available for them inside their employers’ households. Some MDWs are fortunate to have private rooms while many other MDWs are either sharing room with another member of the household or sleeping in scanty and cramped-up spaces like balconies, corridors, living room, cupboards, or even closets. Vaguely as it is defined, suitable accommodation as a legal term, is left for the interpretation of employers.

As a result, despite inclement weather, female MDWs would choose to spend their rest days in Hong Kong’s public spaces. Jovial faces and loud conversations in various dialects of female MDWs fill up the city’s public parks and roads, never minding if they are sitting and lying down on makeshift cardboard boxes. In one humid Sunday afternoon, I shyly asked Dewi what keeps her on staying in public areas during weekends under such sweltering weather and ogling sight of passersby, she quickly answered “It is my day-off and my friends are here too. We can fully be ourselves here because this is the only space that we have every weekend.” For female MDWs, every Sunday is particularly precious as it is the only time that they have to run personal errands like remitting money or sending parcels to their families, organize social events, and fully rest and recreate with their friends and compatriots. “Domestic workers have long stayed here [Central Station] for our rest days: it is part of our tradition every weekend to gather and organize here” said Sarah. Vicky said “It is better to stay here than at my employer’s house. I do not have a room of my own there and I am afraid if I stay indoors, they would just make me work.”

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<sup>1</sup> As per ethical considerations, names of respondents were changed for their safety and anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> A term legally-used by the government of Hong Kong which is also stated in the Standard Employment Contract for MDWs (see Annex A for Sample Document)

Intrigued by their statements, I asked how female MDWs can endure such working and living conditions in Hong Kong's public and private spaces. "Our rest days here allow us to be with friends and compatriots so we can do campaign and organizational work that will better our lives and conditions here as domestic workers" says Marichu. "I can endure staying and sleeping here so my family will have a good life back home" they all commonly added.

Similar to female MDWs who shared a glimpse of their lives to me, I also share the same notion that a good life is oftentimes attained overseas and abroad. As a young scholar-migrant from the Philippines, I grew up hearing stories and witnessing millions of fellow Filipinos leaving their families to seek employment abroad due to lack of viable economic opportunities in the country. This rather difficult decision of most overseas workers is, of course, motivated by the promise of better pay and decent working conditions so they can be able to better provide for their families. However, the common narrative I usually hear was of drudgery, victimization, and exploitation and rarely on how they are resisting or working towards better working conditions.

## 1.1 Background: Mandatory Live-in Policy for Migrant Domestic Workers

In such a fast-paced and globalizing economy, hiring MDWs is attractively convenient, affordable, and strategic for Hong Kong and its people, as local domestic workers and professional childcare and elderly services are expensive and paid for by the hour<sup>3</sup>. To hire an MDW, prospective employers must meet the minimum household income of HK\$ 15,000 (€ 1,731) or assets amounting to support the expenses for the two-year contract period (Hong Kong Immigration Department 2019). Employing households, locals or expatriates, must provide MDWs with a suitable accommodation with reasonable privacy, free food (or food allowance of HK\$ 1,075 (€ 124)) monthly, insurance, and medical treatment. MDWs are also entitled to all rest days, statutory holidays, and paid annual leaves as specified in the Standard Employment Contract and Employment Ordinance. All MDWs are legally employed through direct-hiring or placement agencies on a two-year, full-time, and mandatory live-in contracts. They are granted with a special two-year working visa which allows them to only work as domestic helpers in private households (Roodenburg 2019). Their work permits do not also entitle them to acquire citizenship despite the number of years they have stayed in the city rendering domestic services.

Over the past years, among other labour issues, MDWs in Hong Kong have been lobbying against the mandatory live-in requirement policy which compels them to work and reside only in their employer's residence. Since 2003, MDWs are no longer allowed to choose where to live as part of protecting the local workforce who are looking for part-time jobs (Siu 2018). Prior to this, MDWs were allowed to arrange live-out accommodations at the consent of relevant authorities and expense of their employers. In addition to this, MDWs are also compelled to follow the "two-week rule" upon termination of their contract.

This rule aims to prevent MDWs from taking jobs from local workers (Siu 2018) and working illegally aside from domestic work. Following this rule, an MDW should be able to find a new employer prior to the end of her contract. For some MDWs, they have to accept unfavorable working and living conditions within the private household because of financial obligations and the limited time window allowed. Otherwise, they are obliged to go back to their countries of origin and re-start the application process remotely. Various MDWs have expressed deep concerns in court and in streets, pointing to existing violations and potential threats to their labour rights.

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<sup>3</sup> A local Hong Kong worker could potentially earn as much as HK\$ 7,200 (€ 839,78) based on the minimum allowable wage of HK\$ 37.5 (€ 4.37) per hour while MDWs are only offered fixed amount of HK\$ 4,520 (€ 522) per month, for their work that does not have defined working hours. My own computation based on the minimum allowable wage and typical 8-hour and 6-day work load per month.

## 1.2 Assiduous Victims: Allegories of Female Migrant Domestic Workers

The expressed statements of female MDWs in this vignette, against such restricted and reversed environment, run contrary to the well-meaning yet often damaging representation of female MDWs as only victims and not active agents. Material injustices have been made against female MDWs epistemically. Victimization narrative have been continuously produced and reproduced throughout the years in media and academic scholarship. Normative and discursive representation of female MDWs is primarily focused on their ambiguous class and social identity. Female MDWs are widely referred to as structurally vulnerable and marginal group of precarious workers who are often experiencing unfair and exploitative labour conditions and falling through social protection cracks.

Existing literature portrays female MDWs as beautiful victims and sacrificing heroines (Schwenken 2008) who are seemingly forced and trapped in international reproductive labour (Parrenas 2000). They are disciplined according to the nature of the work they render (Yeoh and Huang 1998) and their sexuality (Constable 1997, Lan 2006, Pande 2017). However, despite their precarious conditions, female MDWs, function with personal and collective agency (Anderson 2010, Taha 2011) with various sense of motivations and aspirations (Siruno 2018), and are capable of building grassroot movement into national, regional, and international arena (Hsia 2009, Boris and Fish 2014).

Against a globalizing economy, discussions are slanted towards providing migrant workers with social security and labour protection (van Ginneken 2013, Hennebry 2014, Pape 2016, Tayah 2016). However, while social protection is at the core of discussions, little is known how these issues are linked to the spatial dimensions in which female MDWs work and live. The spaces that female MDWs live and work in extend and exacerbate their vulnerabilities, yet very few have connected these spaces to how they shape conditions and strategically demonstrate the complexity of their power, agency, and resistance in rather constrained and limited spaces.

The spaces that female MDWs inhabit as their temporary “suitable accommodation” away from home present a topic of high interest and concern. The term is vaguely interpreted and strictly embedded within inadequate spaces in the private household as well as in the ogling sights in public spaces, rendering MDWs more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The term also encapsulates a significant point of study not only in terms of physical spaces but also in terms of how female MDWs employ their power, agency, and resistance in such constrained environment. As Lefebvre (1991) rightly contended, the study of space provides a rich understanding of social relations of productions where social order is produced, performed, and challenged: it is both political and strategic especially for those who are using and controlling it. As such, I give ample focus on representational spaces or the lived spaces that female MDWs physically, emotionally, or intellectually relate or experience. Lefebvre identifies these spaces as “embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to clandestine or underground side of social life” (1991: 33) as well as “the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (1991: 39).

I use this conceptualization to refer to the spaces that female MDWs inhabit as well as their search for suitable accommodation interconnectedly. Hence, lived spaces and accommodation do not only refer to just physical and structural abstract spaces and its associated meanings and experiences but also an exercise of power, agency, and resistance. On one hand, I looked into how spaces are constructed and used to survey and control female MDWs in Hong Kong. On the other, I focused on how female MDWs are appropriating the same spaces according to their favor and interest. In so doing, I hope to illustrate an alternative academic narrative, countering typical drudgework and miserable representations female MDWs as victims in distress.

### 1.3 Justification and Relevance of the Study

*Academic Relevance:* academic scholars rarely focus on space as a site of agency, power, and resistance. This study aims to contribute to building scholarship on gender, labour, and migration with special emphasis on its spatial and power dimensions. Through various individual and collective spatial strategies of female MDWs in Hong Kong, I oppose theoretical assumptions that precariat workers are incapable of resisting against oppressive forces that marginalize their labour. In doing so, I also hope to foster a re-conceptualization and recovery of female MDWs' power and agency, not only emerging as a result of challenging exploitative labour conditions but also as acts that uphold, accept, or accommodate it (Mahmood 2005). This study also brings into discussion various structural barriers and labour relations as lived by female MDWs, but do not preclude their power and agency. While this research does not invalidate that such harsh living and working conditions exist among female MDWs, it also does not support any broad and simplistic claim that they are all forced into domestic labour. Any notion of forced labour is condescending and an affront to female MDWs' personal and political agency.

*Policy and Societal Relevance:* supposing that academic scholarship effectively bridges knowledge to effect policy and societal change, this study seeks to provide and embody alternatives to the status quo surrounding live-in accommodation for MDWs. It aims to influence better design and implementation of labor migration and social protection policies for MDWs. Moreover, this study embraces a broader appreciation and recognition of female MDWs as active and political agents for transformative change, shedding light into typical constructed oppositional practices and bifurcated identities (heroines and villains, exploiter and exploited). It posits that various gradations of resistance, agency, and power relationships exist among female MDWs, their employers, and the government of Hong Kong.

### 1.4 Research Question

This research is an inquiry into the lived spaces of MDWs as site of their power and agency. Specifically, I investigated: *How Filipino and Indonesian female MDWs in Hong Kong use their complex agency in navigating and negotiating spaces in the public and private realm.*

### 1.5 Structure of the Research

This research is organized in 5 sections. This chapter has provided a brief contextual information about the lived experiences of MDWs in Hong Kong's public and private spaces. Chapter 2 elaborates and explains select epistemological approaches germane to the study and analysis of MDW's space and agency. Chapter 3 narrates methodological considerations for obtaining empirical evidence for female MDWs' spatial conditions, agency and resistance, taking into account my positionality as well as various ethical sensitivities. Chapter 4 highlights and reviews empirical results and findings which are informed by invaluable insights and experiences of female MDWs in Hong Kong. Finally, Chapter 5 ponders with some conclusions and reflections for policy consideration and/or further studies. It is with fervent intention that this research is organized in such a way that the multiple power and agency of MDWs in Hong Kong are not only heard but also reclaimed.

## 2 Conceptual Framework

Suitable accommodation is a legal term that is embedded in the context of employing live-in MDWs in Hong Kong. As ambiguous as it is framed and used, the term is installed in the labour process for MDWs, laced with multiple social connotations in terms of spatial dimensions and in terms of power and agency dimensions. A critical look into how the government of Hong Kong framed it and the way it is currently responding to the seemingly increasing precarious work and living conditions of MDWs both at the private and public spaces, begs an important question that this study aims to answer: *How Filipino and Indonesian female MDWs in Hong Kong use their complex agency in navigating and negotiating spaces in the public and private realm?*

Concretely, in this chapter, I have outlined a general overview of the concepts I used to describe, analyse, and potentially answer the issue at hand. I used the term accommodation as an appropriate metaphor to convey several meanings along its spatial, power, and agency dimensions. These meanings have allowed me to see the dynamic process of how female MDWs are appropriating, shaping and negotiating their spaces in their individual and collective interests. As such, it is important to note, that the use of the word spaces in this study refers to both its tangible and intangible dimensions. With the hope of better understanding the issue, I looked into how female MDWs are governed in public and private spaces (Lefebvre 1991, Agnew 2005, and McKee 2009) and how it triggers their complex agency and power (Mahmood 2005, Gregson 2005, Parpart 2010, and Triandafyllidou 2018). Understanding these issues has enabled me to trace, distinguish, and surface various negotiation strategies and resistance (Katz 2004) of female MDWs (*refer to diagram below*):

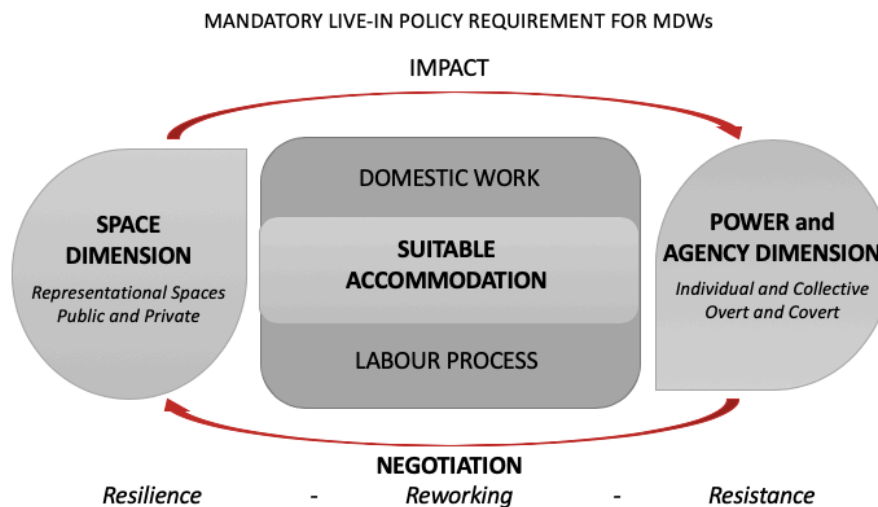


Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework (Author's Own Illustration)

### 2.1 Realist Governmentality

In Hong Kong, suitable accommodation is legally-embedded in a fast-paced economy that outsources live-in MDWs to provide not only reproductive labour for its citizens but also to maintain its political and economic interests. Using this perspective, the term suitable accommodation is seen as a strategic plan to legally control and sanction female MDWs in both physical and structural abstract spaces, confining female MDWs within the formal and informal peripheries of the household and hierarchies based on their class, gender, and race. In this segment, I explore governmentality as a lens to unpack suitable accommodation in all its spatial dimension, inquiring into key informant interviews, media, and policy-level discourses surrounding the mandatory live-in policy requirement for MDWs.

A Foucauldian approach to power, or governmentality, provides an analytical approach to look into how governing works and how does power flow through the practice of government. It effectively foregrounds interests, exposes material effects, and unravels techniques of how policies control, regulate, and dominate the subjects of governing. As a concept, governmentality is broadly defined as the reason or arts of governing, highlighting its various strategies, technologies, and programs of directing and governing human behavior (Foucault, in Rose et al. 2006). McKee (2009) identifies it as an analytical perspective which allows for asking new and different questions, seeking to go beyond the state and institutions, and deepening of our understanding of power in relation to social policies.

However, despite its wide popularity and invaluable relevance to critical social policy, governmentality has stimulated critical debates and conversations, arguing for renewed ways of analyzing the emergence and consequences of the ways of governing (Rose et al 2006). Kerr (1999: 173) challenged the concept for its “top-down and dualist conception of power, one that externalizes and marginalizes contradiction and struggle to become a theory of social reproduction rather than of transcendence.” Analogous to this, McKee (2009: 467) contended that the concept also fails to relate discourse to empirical reality, acknowledge critical emancipatory potentials and transformative agency of people, address social differences, and recognize the role of the state.

Realizing these criticisms, McKee (2009: 465) argues for a post-Foucauldian ‘realist governmentality’ approach to meet and transcend the limitations of ‘traditional discursive governmentality.’ McKee (2009: 479-481) explains the need to analyze the interaction between discourse and its empirical effects, recognize multiple voices from below as reflexive subjects that can accommodate or resist top-down endeavors, examine local contexts and factors affecting governmental rationalities, and, recognize the role of states and institutions. This conceptualization of governmentality has allowed me not only to visibly and legibly see the spatial issues that female MDWs face in Hong Kong’s public and private spaces but also significantly locate and situate their power and agency in relations to structural forces.

### **2.1.1 Accommodation as Physical Space**

Suitable accommodation is easily understood in terms of physical spaces in the public and private realm. Specifically, it refers to the tangible spaces that female MDWs work and live in. The term is a form of entitlement for live-in MDWs that is not legally-implemented and monitored. The government of Hong Kong has provided interpretation of suitable accommodation to employers, resulting in seemingly controlled and reversed marginal physical spaces. Some MDWs are living in obscure and scanty margins of the private household as well as in public areas, signifying their inferiority and negligible status in the city.

From this perspective, governmentality implies that female MDWs are highly desired workers for their dedication and diligence to work but highly unwanted as part of the local Hong Kong society. This is made evident in the in the rather limited available physical spaces provided to them in Hong Kong’s public and private sphere. On one hand, in private spaces, in light of the apparent expensive and tight housing market, some female MDWs are mostly sleeping in common areas in the household such as living room or kitchen. In some reports collated by MFMW (2017), while some female MDWs have private and suitable accommodation, a number of female MDWs are sleeping in balconies, cupboards, toilets, corridors, and other obscure spaces inside the private household. On the other, in public spaces, across lavish shops and financial establishments, almost all MDWs gather in public spaces every weekend, sitting or lying in cardboard boxes, appropriating parks, streets, bridges, or waiting sheds as their own private spaces.



### **2.1.2 Accommodation as Structural Abstract Space**

Suitable accommodation is embedded in the labour process of employing live-in domestic workers. In this perspective, accommodation is framed in an abstracted space along with its associated meanings (unfair treatment, diet restriction, etc.). It is enmeshed as a formal-legal sanction that deeply discriminate against and segregates live-in MDWs from other live-out domestic workers and the general local population. Such framing disregards rights of MDWs for decent living and working spaces and only favors interests of employers to pursue their own socio-economic pursuits.

This point of view has allowed me to see various ways and strategies of governing female MDWs in abstracted spaces. For most MDWs and civil society organizations, the two-week rule and mandatory live-in policy are not mechanisms to protect but rather, to control, regulate, and maintain their marginal social and economic status in the public and private spaces of the city. Various MDWs, civil society organizations, and interest groups have voiced out concerns surrounding the mandatory live-in policy, pointing to existing and potential threats to MDWs rights such as sexual abuse, verbal and physical violence, longer working hours, unsuitable accommodations, insufficient food provisions, performance of domestic duties not specified in the contract (MFMW 2017).

## **2.2 Complex Female Power, Agency and Resistance**

Against surveillance and legal sanctions in public and private spaces, female MDWs are conveniently construed and considered as oppressed, incapable of making their working and living conditions better. They are continuously represented as having weak class consciousness, pre-occupied with their work and unable to resist forces that marginalize them and their work. Unknown to many is that female MDWs are collectively and individually as well as covertly and overtly, pushing and negotiating for a more dignified and favorable spatial conditions in Hong Kong. They use limited spaces as an impetus to mobilize gender, class, and racial identities to push the boundaries for more decent work. However, their decisions to accept available and marginal public and private spaces are usually looked down as defeat, devoid of agency as well as personal motivations, interests, and political persuasions.

Agency is a topic that is extensively discussed in academic and feminist scholarship alongside political and moral autonomy in the face of power (Mahmood 2001). However, understanding female agency is rather a difficult and highly contested debate. It can be ascertained in various forms and degrees but often viewed in conflict with each other. Agency of women can be demonstrated in actively challenging patriarchal authority through voice (Kabeer 1999) or in strategic acts of silence and secrecy (Parpart 2010). The latter receives a lot of disapproval for normalizing abuse and justifying powerlessness while the former spurs great interest for celebrating and pushing female agency and empowerment to their limits. The point of this study, however, is not to differentiate female agency based on its modality nor deny structural forces that marginalize labour and women. Rather, on the ability of a woman to negotiate and empower herself against difficult situations. In this segment, I engaged with concepts that enable me to unpack the other dimension of suitable accommodation, capturing female MDWs' exercise of power, agency, and resistance for survival.

### **2.2.1 Accommodation as Performance of Power and Agency**

Analysing the spaces in which female MDWs live and work should not be constrained with just enabling academic discourse of how they are exploited, controlled, or even surveyed. Any effort towards discussing the plight of precarious workers should also illuminate how their various forms of power, agency, and resistance challenge and transform structural barriers and modes of oppression. An important contribution of this study is to look into the lived spaces of female MDWs in Hong Kong not only as a focus but also as a site to which they perform and exercise power, albeit figuratively, and agency.

I concur with Gregson (2005) that agency and structure can exist simultaneously, in parallel to each other rather than separately. The later does not preclude the former. I argue for critical contemplation and exploration of other forms of female agency and structure within a spectrum of subtle and complex yet empowering strategies. I argue together with Mahmood (2001: 210) on her conceptualization of agency as not tantamount to only resisting or progressive change but rather as a 'capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable'. Analogous to the work of Mahmood (2005: 168), I am interested to know in this context how the lived spaces of female MDWs affect their ability to "survive within a system of inequality and to flourish despite its constraints." In so doing, I do not wish to subscribe to the polemic and modernist binaries of understanding female agency as only either from both ends.

This conceptualization of agency provides me with a strong background to unpack and explore the power and agency dimension of the term suitable accommodation. Following Mahmood (2001) and Mahmood (2005), female MDWs endure, suffer, and persist their harsh spatial conditions because being employed as domestic workers is a way to get out of poverty and unemployment in their countries. It also allows them to be independent, gain economically, meet friends, organize groups, hold various programs, and ultimately, provide a good life for their families back home. Domestic work is seen as a means to potentially valued ends that will better not only their lives but also their loved ones.

In view of the apparent tight and expensive housing market in the city that even the general Hong Kong public is contending with, some female MDWs are also compelled to accept or negotiate their conditions of their living and working spaces in the public and private realm. The ways in which female MDWs choose to endure or resist constitute forms of active strategies and navigation into an environment where suitable accommodation is used as a legal-term but happens to be loosely interpreted and legally implemented.

On one hand, believing that there are considerate employers in Hong Kong who provide suitable accommodation and fair treatment, some female MDWs are not calling for all domestic workers to live apart from their employers provided that their conditions on humane treatment and employment security are met. These female MDWs are mindful that terminating their employment contracts, on grounds of unsuitable accommodation, would force them either to find a new employer or returning home after 14 days (two-week rule). As a result, they are willing to accommodate their limited spatial conditions because it provides them a strong sense of dependency to their employers and they do not need to worry about being unemployed, finding a new employer, looking for place to stay-in, finding food to eat, or even waking up very early to catch public transportation so they can attend to household chores daily.

On the other, other female MDWs oppose the inadequate performance of the government of Hong Kong as well as their employers towards providing them suitable accommodation. For these MDWs, the mandatory live-in policy requirement for MDWs, hence their spatial conditions and lack of suitable accommodation, positions them in precarious and marginal working and living conditions. These MDWs are demanding for a live-out option in case employers cannot provide suitable accommodation and meet fair and standard labour treatment to MDWs. Having a live-out option will preclude MDWs from any forms of insecurity and vulnerability in the city's private and public spaces. Such option for them is also deemed advantageous for other stakeholders: employers will get to enjoy privacy in their homes while the general public and government will be able to access and utilize public spaces effectively.

In both of these scenarios, I contend that power and agency of female MDWs are very strong and prominent. This is explained to what Mahmood (2005) identifies as the relativity of power as not only forcefully exerted but also expressed with strategically playing around

someone into using norms to get a favorable outcome. Departing from Foucault, Mahmood (2005) aligns and subscribes to the fluid and productive nature of power rather than being negative or restrictive. This is also similar to Sen's conception of "adapted preferences" (as cited in Gamage, et.al. 2015) who shares the same notion that power can take covert forms of negotiations such as silence or concession to existing arrangements, if such agreement between two parties would result in adaptation or advantage of the oppressed group over the status quo. For Parpart (2010), not speaking against powerful structures are also justifiable strategies for women negotiating their survival in extreme and difficult situations, empowering and enabling them to carry on from their burdens.

In all of these interpretations, power and agency can both be seen as the capacity to act (Li 2007) or "capacity to shape one's life and exploit opportunities or indeed open up new possibilities for one's self and their family" (Triandafyllidou 2018: 8). As such, in this perspective, accommodation is no longer seen in physical space or as legal term but in the capacity of a female MDW to use her agency gain favorable outcomes. Female MDWs' acceptance and accommodation of these spaces, according to their personal convictions or obligations, is considered as an active form and exercise of power and agency and not just passively giving in to structural constraints and limitations of their public and private spaces.

Perhaps, a key approach in understanding this complexity is to invite and recognize all voices, active or passive, of women from multi-axial perspectives and analysis of gender and power. In *Complex Equality*, Malik (2008) discusses the headscarf controversy in Europe and how the hijab can be a situs of agency for Muslim women. She starts by presenting two contesting ideologies that seek to obscure Muslim women from the discussion. On the one hand is the white feminists who believe that hijab is a symbol of oppression for women. On the other hand is the position of Muslim men who advocate for the wearing of hijab by women as an expression of religious identity and conviction. Both sides, according to Malik (2008), view the issue only from the point of view of single-axis equality—white feminists on the basis of sex, Muslim men on the basis of religion.

Malik (2008) invites us to see the issue from the perspective of complex equality—that is, from the point of view of both religion and sex. From this perspective, we can see that the hijab is a site of two competing oppressions—the prohibition of wearing hijab can be a violation of the right to religion and at the same time, the imposition from Muslim men of wearing it on Muslim women as discrimination based on sex. Through the lens of multi-axes (or complex) equality, a Muslim woman can wear a hijab as an expression of her religious identity and at the same time consider it not as oppression based on sex. Through complex equality, we see the Muslim woman as a person with agency, who can decide for herself, free from interference by white feminists and male Muslims. Thus, with the agency of Muslim women at the center, the hijab is no longer a symbol of oppression but rather an expression of empowerment. No longer is a Muslim woman dependent on white feminists for the advancement of her rights as a woman or on Muslim men for the protection of her religious rights. She can decide for herself, based on her religious and personal convictions, on whether to wear a hijab or not.

It is with great emphasis that most MDWs in Hong Kong confront harsh spatial conditions which require immediate policy action. However, to look at MDWs as passive actors waiting to be saved from their spatial conditions is nothing but a patronizing activity that continuously represents them having weak class consciousness. As Mahmood (2005: 174) also correctly observed, "to analyze people's actions in terms of *realized* or *frustrated* attempts at social transformation is necessarily to reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of *succumbing* to or *resisting* relations of domination." It is in this regard that reductionist conclusions and dichotomous categorization of the lives of female MDWs in regard to their seemingly harsh spatial conditions should be critically rethought.

### 2.2.2 Accommodation as Resilience, Reworking, and Resistance

Inseparable from the discussion of women's complex agency is the practice of resistance. In a similar way, resistance can be discerned and expressed in various forms and gradations: injustices and oppressive forces can be challenged with a wide-array of strategies of resistance, not only limited to speaking out or actively fighting against oppressive forces. Resistance foregrounds class consciousness of workers. However, resistance is loosely defined as only oppositional practices (Katz 2004). Growing up, I have only heard about agency as only speaking against the powerful and resistance as only fighting back against oppressors. I have supported and reproduced a single notion, limiting my own understanding of their plight but also countering logical reasoning. Most literature concerning precarious workers resistance is heavily focused on active ways of resistance while subtle strategies and everyday acts of resistance for survival remain a legitimate yet understudied theme. The short period of time I was with female MDWs in Hong Kong allowed me to see various forms of resistance in its gendered form and cultural performance.

Against such restricted and reversed environment, female MDWs perform social navigation through various acts of resistance, individually and collectively, to maintain and make sense of their stay in Hong Kong. Female MDWs' everyday acts of social navigation and negotiation in uncertain spaces and highly uneven and rapid power relations necessitate deep consideration and recognition.

Given the dynamism and various political persuasions of the female MDWs I interviewed, I argue that our basic assumption and operationalization of resistance need to be rethought. Female MDWs demonstrate various forms of everyday acts of resistance to improve their living and working conditions. These actions, covert or overt, are legitimate forms of their resistance and potentially contributory to their survival. Following Katz (2004: 242), I situate female MDWs' various forms of resistance alongside (1) *resilience* or the autonomous initiative of a female MDW to solve her problems on her own and not changing her spatial conditions; (2) *reworking* or the attempts of a female MDW to manage not only her spatial conditions but also other MDWs in Hong Kong; and (3) *resistance* or the deliberate defiance and obstruction of the spatial conditions that exploit and marginalize all female MDWs. For Katz (2004), these social responses are interconnected and can exist in parallel to each other.

### 3 Methodological Approach

Epistemology underlies methodology. The concepts I have sketched in Chapter 2 provided me sufficient understanding to qualitatively and empirically evidence female MDWs' lived spaces vis-à-vis their power, agency, and resistance for survival. In this chapter, I narrate how I have employed, obtained, and interpreted my data from my fieldwork visit in Hong Kong in July-August 2019. I also present here some ethical considerations, biases, and subjectivities that allowed me to gather necessary data from the field.

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

A total of twenty-seven face-to-face semi-structured interviews were accomplished in the course of doing this research. I combined both methodological and epistemological perspectives in data collection and analysis, marrying existing academic literature and insights from female MDWs. A life-story approach to interviewing was employed to which I asked about their demographic profile, migration history, work and living conditions, organizational affiliation, access to information, and spatial views (*see Annexes B and C for Interview Guide and Questionnaires*).

In this study, I specifically engaged with the lived experiences and spaces of female MDWs from the Philippines and Indonesia (*refer to Table 1 below*). I focused on this particular subgroup of the MDW population because they are significant in number and highly visible in Hong Kong's public spaces. According to recent estimates of the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2019)<sup>4</sup>, there are about 386,075 registered MDWs in Hong Kong in 2018, making up 10% of the city's workforce. Female MDWs consist of 98.5% (380,274) of the total MDW population in Hong Kong to which Filipino and Indonesian MDWs (97.8% or 371,901) are the majority. All respondents are female, within 22-42 years of age and with domestic work experience ranging from 4 months to 19 years in Hong Kong. Some of the respondents have previously worked as domestic workers in other countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, UAE, and Oman, etc.

Codename	Age	Educational Attainment	Civil Status	Nationality	Years in HK	Place of Interview
Michelle	28	High School	Single	Filipino	4 years	Central
Sarah	37	College	Married	Filipino	6 years	Central
Marilen	42	High School	Married	Filipino	5 years	Central
Vilma	44	High School	Married	Filipino	4 years	Jordan
Juliet	31	High School	Married	Filipino	1 year	Jordan
Lyn	37	High School	Single	Filipino	3 years	Jordan
Jennie	39	High School	Single	Filipino	5 months	Sheung Wan
Vicky	42	High School	Single	Filipino	4 years	Sheung Wan
Marichu	28	High School	Single	Filipino	3 years	Sheung Wan
Gemma	26	High School	Married	Filipino	4 months	Sheung Wan
Putri	40	High School	Single	Indonesian	19 years	Jordan
Dewi	39	High School	Single	Indonesian	17 years	Jordan
Emeli	37	High School	Single	Indonesian	15 years	Causeway Bay
Muthia	35	High School	Single	Indonesian	16 years	Causeway Bay
Adinda	27	High School	Single	Indonesian	3 years	Causeway Bay
Nur	30	High School	Married	Indonesian	4 months	Causeway Bay
Annisa	22	High School	Single	Indonesian	3 years	Causeway Bay
Wardarina	30	College	Married	Indonesian	4 years	Causeway Bay
Aisyah	40	High School	Married	Indonesian	8 months	Causeway Bay
Tasya	32	High School	Single	Indonesian	4 years	Causeway Bay

Table 1: Profile of Female MDW Respondents

<sup>4</sup> Male MDWs comprise 1.50% (5,801) as of 2018. This figure excludes number of undocumented MDWs in Hong Kong.

Aside from observing and conducting in-depth individual interviews with female MDWs, I also interviewed grassroots and civil society organizations (*refer to Table 2 below*) that are working towards organizing and protecting distressed migrants in Hong Kong and abroad. Engaging with these informant interviews allowed me to see organizational campaigns as well as policy-level discourse to gauge how they work and push their agenda towards a more dignified work for MDWs in Hong Kong. It also allowed me to trace workings of power from different stakeholders at different levels. Some of the organizational leaders I interviewed are MDWs themselves too. These organizations are: Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union, International Migrants Alliance, Mission for Migrant Workers, Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge, Asian Migrant Coordinating Body, United Filipinos in Hong Kong, and Indonesian Migrants Union.

Name	Organization	Position	Place of Interview
<b>Eni Lestari</b>	International Migrants Alliance	Chairperson	Jordan
<b>Sring Atin</b>	Indonesian Migrants Union	Chairperson	Jordan
<b>Aaron Ceradoy</b>	Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants	Coordinator	Jordan
<b>Norman Carnay</b>	Mission for Migrant Workers	Program Officer	Jordan
<b>Dolores Pelaez</b>	Asian Migrant Coordinating Body	Spokesperson	Jordan
<b>Emman Villanueva</b>	United Filipinos in Hong Kong	Secretary General	Admiralty
<b>Fish Ip</b>	Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Union	Program Coordinator	Yau Ma Tei
<b>Cynthia Tellez</b>	Mission for Migrant Workers	General Manager	Sheung Wan
<b>Edwina Antonio</b>	Bethune House for Migrant Women's Refuge	Executive Director	Sheung Wan

**Table 2:** *Profile of Organizational Respondents*

While female MDWs are highly visible in public spaces, locating, connecting, and gaining their trust proved to be rather difficult. It is in this regard that my personal and professional networks helped facilitate initial and prospective contacts. Initial participants were referred to by local colleagues working in grassroot and civil society organizations and the rest were chosen by me through extreme case purposive sampling. I have employed this sampling technique because it is the most effective in generating knowledge about specific aspects of MDW's work and life. This sampling technique allowed me to efficiently make a conclusion based on female MDW's agency. As Bernard (2002: 190) explains, this non-probabilistic technique is particularly appropriate when doing "life history research and qualitative research on special populations." While this sampling technique (oftentimes referred to as judgmental sample) is heavily criticized for its inherent and intentional selection bias, it "stays robust even when tested against random probability sampling" Tongco (2007: 147). Using this technique, I was able gauge not only female MDWs' personal experiences in regard to their work and living space, but also their notion and vision of good quality space.

For Filipino MDWs, interviews were conducted in conversational Filipino language which is a combination of Tagalog and English (*Taglish*). Interviews with Indonesian MDWs were co-facilitated and translated by an Indonesian MDW who is conversant in both Bahasa Indonesia and English. All interviews followed standard interview procedure: I explained my research study and objectives then requested their consent to interview and voice-record. Most interviews were conducted in public spaces (parks, waiting sheds, bridges, and public transit stations) where female MDWs are usually resting and doing recreational work. Most interviews were conducted in weekends, some were scheduled in weekdays during their work off-peak hours, and the remaining were done inside shelter houses. Some interviews, upon consent and approval of interviewees, were audio-recorded. The average interview duration lasts 45 minutes per individual interview. Throughout data analysis and writing process, I listened repeatedly to audio recordings. I also kept a fieldwork diary to take note of pertinent details and quotations as voiced by respondents, especially for respondents who did not agree to have our conversation

recorded. I also transcribed some relevant interviews and translated them into the English language. For brevity and easy flow of language, some quotations I took from interviews were slightly edited.

### 3.2 Scope and Areas of Study

Major ethnic MDW groups from the Philippines and Indonesia comprise key respondents for this research. Hence, it must be understood that this research does not provide a representative reality nor claim a general truth amongst all female MDWs or male MDWs in Hong Kong. The spatial needs, and strategies of female MDWs with unclassified immigration status (*sans papier* MDWs) were not taken into account due to their unavailability, rarity as well as the security risks posed by such exposure. Female MDWs from minority MDW groups, such as Thailand, Nepal, and Sri Lanka were not included due to time and logistical constraints. Inclusion of these actors and their social identities does not affect the overall objective of the research but would have enhanced the complexity of the research. Interviews with female MDWs of various gender identity and expression, generation, religion, and political persuasions were purely coincidental.

### 3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles and considerations for social research were strictly observed throughout the conduct of this study. I assured my respondents that their participation will be treated with utmost confidentiality and anonymity. Any information they shared to me outside of the research issue was within their prerogative, but nevertheless appreciated. Moreover, I guaranteed my respondents that all information they disclosed to me will only be used for academic purposes and that a copy of the final manuscript will be made available to them for perusal and review.

### 3.4 Positionality

I developed particular interest on this topic because, like my participants, I am a young scholar-migrant from the Philippines. I share similar regional, ethnic, and linguistic background with most of my respondents. My earliest memory of labour migration began at such a young age. My deceased mother, a registered nurse in the Philippines, always hoped of migrating and working in the US to provide a better life for us. This was at a particular time in the Philippines when demand for nurses abroad was just surging. She turned down several employment opportunities abroad and eventually resigned from her profession to personally take care of us growing up. It was a tough decision for her to settle considering her family's expectation of her and our own household economic situation then. She died regretting that she was not able to fulfil her personal career goals as well as being able to financially-provide for us, but she takes great pride in the fact that all her children were able to attend and graduate from respectable universities.

Moreover, to some extent in the past, my household has also benefitted from domestic workers. We have had local domestic workers from rural, sometimes depressed areas in the Philippines. They have immensely helped us with household chores despite not earning a lot as well as not having their own personal space in our simple home. Some of them have left our residence and their own families eventually to pursue domestic work abroad. Aside from this, I grew up watching movies and hearing personal stories of my countrymen, collectively called as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), who are either employed as domestic helpers, nurses, hostel staff, and construction workers in foreign lands and seas. I have always been fascinated by their personal stories and aspirations to work not only themselves but also their loved-ones out of poverty. The common narrative I usually hear was of abuse and exploitation and rarely on their successes and aspirations. Some literature portrays them as economic opportunists who are primarily driven by their personal choice to seek better employment, disregarding socio-economic, sometimes political, factors pushing them to leave their homes. I see them as people with active agency and power, changing and shaping their conditions as well as fighting against forces that discriminate and marginalize them.

## 4 Discussion, Findings, and Analysis

“Go on! What you are doing is good. Tell our stories in the Netherlands so they would know our lives here in Hong Kong. Is it going to be published in the newspaper or magazine? I want to see my name there, so I’ll be famous!” Muthia jokingly teased me with these words as I asked for her permission and consent to interview. It struck me hearing these words. The academic-insecure and researcher-wannabe part of me realized that this research study is not about me getting a good mark or getting published in respectable journals someday. These words reminded me that this study is beyond me: it is not my story to tell but of female MDWs who are not only toiling and surviving to make ends meet but also changing their lives, in their own little ways, for the better.

The ongoing discourse on the lived spaces of female MDWs in Hong Kong requires empirical and theoretical nuancing. It is both ontological and epistemological. The former focuses on the harsh spatial conditions that female MDWs face while the latter foregrounds their complex power and agency. In this chapter, combining media and policy level discourse surrounding the mandatory live-in policy for MDWs, I invite you to take a glimpse to the insecurities and strategies of the lives of female MDWs in Hong Kong. Their stories have guided me throughout this research writing process, so this is more of their stories than mine. After all, a researcher is nothing but a story-teller <sup>5</sup>. It is with high hope that I do justice to them in this respect.

### 4.1 Restricted Environment and Reversed Spaces: Female MDWs in Public and Private Spaces

In Hong Kong, live-in MDWs are embedded in an environment where class, gender, and racial hierarchies in the public and private spheres are inscribed, performed and accentuated. It shapes subjectivities and institutions in non-linear ways, most particularly in the performance of gender and class relations.

The class, gender, and racial identities of female MDWs in Hong Kong are greatly evident in the marginal spaces they insecurely live and occupy in the public and private realm. In private households, female MDWs perform normative expectations to women like cleaning, taking care of children and the elderly, and other household chores. In public areas, they are accorded with inferior treatment, racism, and discrimination because they come from developing countries. For most MDWs, their lived spaces in Hong Kong, is a testament as to how the government of Hong Kong and its people reinforce their seemingly inferior social identities and marginal migration and employment status. Female MDWs in Hong Kong can be similarly defined as to what Lan (2003) calls as the ‘intimate other’ who are highly desired for their assiduousness in performing domestic work but never as part of the family and society.

Despite their crucial role and socio-economic contributions, MDWs are accorded with marginal public and private spaces in Hong Kong. “They do not think that they owe it to us because we are migrants; we are not part of the society” said Putri. For domestic workers and activists, Putri, Marichu, Dewi, Vicky and Emeli, the spaces as well as the conditions of most female MDWs are part of a political and economic design that primarily accommodates the need of Hong Kong for cheap labour for its citizens. By living in to their employers’ households, MDWs do not only allow local women to participate in the local labour force but also help Hong Kong and its people achieve economic competitiveness. According to Marichu, social inclusion and protection of MDWs are not a priority of the government of Hong Kong because it wants to maintain MDWs as slaves and cheap labour in the city. For Emeli and

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<sup>5</sup> Apologies to Brené Brown.



Dewi, “It is difficult to be an MDW here because we don’t get much entitlements and we are discriminated against. We have no life aside from inside our employers’ house and during Sunday.” “Local employers are happy to have domestic workers within their financial capacity. They will not rally against the government because it provides them with affordable domestic workers who attend to their household chores, children, and the elderly” added Putri.

Supporting a post-Foucauldian governmentality, I argue together with McKee (2009) on the need to go beyond just creating discourse but also analyzing the interaction between discourse and its empirical effects as well as recognizing multiple voices from below as reflexive subjects that can accommodate or resist top-down endeavors. This conceptualization of governmentality provided me a more nuanced view of how female MDWs, as subjects of governing, are also agents capable of locating and situating their power and agency in relations to forces that dominate and marginalize them.

#### 4.1.1 Behind Closed Boundaries: Female MDWs’ Public Spaces

Against international labour rules and covenant on decent work, many MDWs in Hong Kong are accorded with inadequate and marginal spaces in the household where they work. They are either sharing a room with another member of the household or sleeping in common and cramped-up areas like living room, kitchen, cupboards, toilets, balconies, corridors, making them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitative practices in the household (Hollingsworth 2017, MFMW 2017, Blundy 2017). For MDWs and their organizations, the mandatory live-in accommodation give rise to pertinent issues in regard to their fundamental rights to safe and decent work.

A lot of protests have been launched in regard to the mandatory live-in policy, including filing of a judicial review to its unconstitutionality (Siu 2018). This is also in view of the recent torture and abuse to Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, an Indonesian MDW, by her employer. For most MDWs, this unfortunate event would have been prevented if MDWs were to live-out of their employers’ house. However, the government of Hong Kong remains adamant that no rights are violated in the implementation of the mandatory live-in policy. In the 2018 UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination hearing, the government of Hong Kong justified its position by arguing that the primary purpose of hiring MDWs to fill the *shortage of full-time live-in domestic workers* and not *local non-live-in domestic workers*. Hence, MDWs should agree to live-in with their employers and not look for live-out accommodations. According to the Hong Kong representative in his opening remarks:

“It has been our established policy that, as in many other jurisdictions in the world, priority in employment should be given to the local workforce, and importation of workers should only be allowed where there is confirmed manpower shortage in a particular trade that cannot be filled by local workers. Given that there is no shortage in supply of local non-live-in domestic workers, any change to the “live-in requirement” will go against the rationale for importing FDHs and the fundamental policy that local workers should enjoy priority in employment” (Government of Hong Kong SAR 2018).

This statement from the government of Hong Kong dodges the very concern that MDWs and their organizations have been protesting. It does so by ignoring and denying the harsh conditions of MDWs while also pitting it against the rights of other non-live-in workers. It also further reasons that MDWs are enjoying the same rights and entitlements with those of local workers and some benefits of MDWs are not even available to local non-live-in domestic workers.

A lot of reports in the past have documented the hostile spatial conditions of MDWs both in the public and private realm. My conversations with female MDWs, while also exposed the same narrative, also invoked how they use their multiple layers of power and agency:

▪ *Cramped Quarters and Lack of Privacy*

While some of the MDWs I interviewed have a room of their own, most MDWs are sleeping in common areas where they do not have privacy. For Gemma, her private space is her employer's common and public space. "I sleep in the sofa. Sometimes I would wait for everyone to sleep before I can sleep. It can last until past midnight and I have to wake up early too" she added. For MDWs who have their rooms, they are still uncomfortable given that they do not have access to its keys. "I feel like my employer can just enter and barge in anytime" said Adinda. Aside from contending with inadequate sleeping quarters, most households in Hong Kong are also equipped with CCTV. "It makes me feel conscious because the camera follows you around" said Nur. "It is fine with me. I know I am not doing anything bad, and I think the purpose is really for security" Nur ended. For Sarah, living out is fine. However, she also believes that living-in has its advantages too. "At least we do not have to wake up very early to catch the train. We also have food here, so we won't think about it anymore." "I just think of it as if they are my family; the kids are really like my kids too in a way" she mentioned.

▪ *Dietary Restriction*

"Sometimes it is a bit uneasy because most of them are vegetarians or likes to eat noodles. Whatever they eat you eat too. But know us Filipinos, we are heavy meat and rice eaters." This response from Annisa made me realized that for most MDWs, a big part of living in with employers is not only *staying* with them but also *getting along* with them. This entails eating whatever they are eating or in worst case, eating their leftovers. "I lost weight here. You need a lot of carbohydrates especially if you are working full-time" said Juliet. For Marilen, who has been working for quite a long time in Hong Kong now, food allowance is part of their entitlements. "Because I know my rights about food allowance, I demand my employer to give it to me when they cannot provide me with food then I cook my own meals" she mentioned.

▪ *Longer Working Hours and Maltreatment*

"My employer would always kick my bed, so I would wake up every time the baby is crying. Sometimes, I would wake up to her loud shouts at me. She's always hyped-up even at night. I don't have peace of mind whenever she's there" Jennie recalled. Inseparable to living-in with employers is having undefined working hours and being treated unfairly. For most MDWs, their working hours are not really defined. "I just endure and let it pass. There were days when the work is not a lot, there were days that it is stressful. I can take it but not the hurting" said Jennie. "We have to accept it, otherwise we will be sent back to placement agencies and start the whole hiring process" said Dewi.

#### 4.1.2 Out in the Open: Female MDWs' Private Spaces

"I need to leave early so they won't make me work" is a frequent and typical response I would usually receive from female MDWs whenever I ask them how they usually start their rest-days. For almost all MDWs, every weekend is precious as this is the only time that they can have interminable rest and recreation from a week-load of domestic work in their employers' household. They are excited to prepare their food and leave early in the morning to go to public areas where their compatriots and friends usually hang-out. "It is like you have just been released out of prison, you know?" Lyn laughingly said as she finds the right words to describe her feeling and excitement. "I look forward to Sundays because it is the only time I have to call and connect to my family and friends in the Philippines" mentioned Lyn as we walk and look for a shaded and quieter area in Central Station to conduct our interview. "This is where we rest and eat every weekend, rain or shine. I do not know when and how it started but when I arrived here, all domestic helpers are staying here already" Sarah added. "Of course, if I have my own room where I can sleep and relax, I will definitely not stay here [Victoria Park]" explained Aisyah.

These conversations concretized what Yeoh and Huang (1998) similarly observed: live-in situation positions domestic workers under pastoral sight and discipline, so they seek privacy, comfort, and personal freedom in public spaces. When the private space of female MDW is situated within the household's public space (i.e. living room, kitchen, balcony), the tendency is for them to look for privacy elsewhere: the public space then becomes their private space, which is relatively free from the supervision, control, and monitoring of their employers. In Hong Kong public spaces, however, MDWs are not only monitored by civil guards every weekend, they are also regarded as environmentally 'unhygienic' and causing public nuisance (Cheng 2018).

■ *Racism and Discrimination*

For most MDWs, their marginal status is not only evident by the little spaces they occupy in the household during weekdays. They are also contending with discrimination and marginalization in the city's public spaces every weekend. "Racism and discrimination are very strong here" said Putri when I asked her about her overall condition throughout her 19 years of stay in Hong Kong. "It is different for white people who just wear bikinis. They can lie down and do that as part of their picnic. They are allowed to do that but not for us because we do not wear bikini under the sun. We are seen as sore to their eyes and there are more regulations that prohibit us from seeking leisure or swim even in private buildings. The only reason you are not allowed to do that is because we are domestic workers" Putri exclaimed. "We are not allowed to be residents here even if we are here for a long time. When the government of Hong Kong discriminates, of course the employers also discriminate against us" Dewi supported.

■ *Lack of Privacy, Strict Monitoring, and Harsh Weather Conditions*

Against big financial buildings and major establishments, MDWs are scattered all throughout the city in rather territorialized spaces based on their country of origin and ethnicity on their cardboard boxes and tarpaulins and under their umbrellas. However, while public spaces are accorded to MDWs every weekend, monitoring and strict restrictions are still imposed by the city council. They "sit, eat and sleep on the ground, thus affecting the daily lives of the public, the operation of shops and the environmental hygiene in public places. The problem has persisted for many years and shows a worsening trend" said a lawmaker in a legislative council meeting in 2018 (Cheung 2018).

Despite their contribution to the Hong Kong society, the government does not mind providing them with a decent place to stay at during their rest-days, more so by giving them option to live-out from their employers. MDWs are exploited yet neglected. They insensitively considered as unhygienic in the public areas they occupy (Cheng 2018) yet the government of Hong Kong insists that the mandatory live-in policy for MDWs must stay (Siu and Lau 2018).

For their rest-days and in public areas, MDWs do not only recuperate but also reconnect with their families back home. "We do a lot of things here. This is where we rest, eat, and reconnect to our families and other domestic helpers." said Marilen. "We also do petty services such as selling food items, cleaning nails, and massaging to gain extra income" added Gemma. Since MDWs are not allowed to perform other work aside from domestic work, they use their spare time to run personal errands, perform organizational work, hold cultural events, as well as earn extra income by selling food items, clothes, and petty services. "Every weekend, you will see some domestic helpers selling small items, massaging each other, or doing each other's nails to earn additional income in secret" said Jennie.

Various efforts in the past have attempted to transfer them to parking spaces, pointing to them as abusing and impinging on the rights and access of the general local public to clean environment. Such efforts were vehemently opposed by MDWs and their organizations in light of the lack and inadequacy of their accommodation in their employer's residence. The Asian

Migrant Coordinating Body, together with its affiliate MDW organizations such as United Filipinos in Hong Kong and Indonesian Migrant Union, are continually campaigning against these issues with the district council. According to them, efforts to revisit and provide adequate and humane space to which female MDWs live and work are being deliberately stalled and neglected, dispossessing rather than empowering MDWs. For Vilma, these attempts of displacement as well as policy inaction towards redefining and providing adequate spaces within the public and private realm only shows how the government of Hong Kong, who greatly benefits from their labour, continuously neglect and exclude them.

These statements given by female MDWs are not only illustration of how they are embedded in marginal spaces. It also demonstrates critical consciousness of their conditions as well as their multiple layers of power, agency, and resistance. Female MDWs are not only acting on behalf of their liberal and non-liberal desires but also motivated by making sense of belongingness and community. Despite unfavorable spatial conditions, they were able to develop critical consciousness, individually and collectively, and forge solidarity to push their agenda and interests forward and moving.

Notwithstanding their susceptible spatial conditions in the private and public realm, female MDWs employ their complex power, agency, and resistance through a continuum of subtle yet empowering strategies in dealing with their difficult situations. Female MDWs operate their power and agency based on their desires for a good life be it for themselves, their families, or for their fellow toiling MDWs in Hong Kong. They accommodate, endure, and persist in such restrictive and oppressive spatial conditions because they receive benefits that have tangible and intangible value to them. Domestic work is a means to potentially valued ends, not an end in itself. For most of these women, while these spaces greatly affect and make them more vulnerable, their value as women are not predicated on the spaces they work and live but on their capacity to make meaning out of their difficult situation and survive.

## **4.2 Countering Allegories: Agentic Strategies for Aspirations and Survival**

Without doubt, explicit and implicit forms of spatial discrimination and othering in public and private spheres extend female MDWs already marginal and vulnerable conditions. Against such restrictive and challenging situation, it is amazing to see female MDWs navigating around the system and performing a broad range of negotiation strategies within the limits of their power, agency and acts of everyday resistance for survival. In the segment that follows, I introduce and focus on the life stories of Jennie, a Filipina, and Putri, an Indonesian, whose narratives mirror most of the lives of the female MDWs I encountered in my field study. Their life stories helped me illustrate further how precarious workers such as female MDWs are exerting multiple layers of power, agency, and strategies for survival when faced by severe forms of spatial and labour unfreedoms.

### **4.2.1 Endure and Resist: In Pursuit of a Good Life**

Departing from Foucault's notion of power, Mahmood (2001) provided an alternative perspective in thinking through power and agency as only the capacity to resist and emancipate oneself against oppressive structures. In her conceptualization, she argues that the 'capacity to endure, suffer, and persist' in rather restricted and constrained environment also constitute acts of power and agency. Similarly, Parpart (2010) reinforces this idea, promoting subtle survival strategies such as critical silence and secrecy as empowerment in oppressive situations. In her conceptualization of migrant's agency, Triandafyllidou (2018) defines agency as the capacity to act according to one's interests and their families against risks and uncertainty.

Inspired by these conceptual explorations on female power and agency, I discuss the various ways into how female MDWs are critically and consciously accommodating, enduring, appropriating, and resisting their harsh spatial conditions according to their conceptions of a

good life. I illustrate work and life narratives of two female MDWs: Jennie, a Filipina who is a breadwinner for her mother and 2 children, recently got separated, and have been working as domestic worker in Hong Kong for only 5 months, and Putri, an Indonesian single woman and a domestic worker-activist for almost 2 decades. In my conversation with them, Jennie and Putri invoked various motivations and aspirations to endure and resist their spatial conditions. Broadly and in different ways, Jennie and Putri are performing power and agency that enable them to make sense of their stay not only for themselves and their families back home, but also for pushing for a more dignified treatment to every MDWs in Hong Kong in general.

The extent to which why most female Filipinos and Indonesians work in Hong Kong can be ascertained in my conversation with Jennie, a Filipina MDW that I met in Bethune House for Women's Refuge (BHWR), a shelter for domestic workers in distress. Before we began our interview, Jennie warmly welcomed and offered me with a glass of flavored drink and some snacks to which I initially refused. "You are our guest here" she insisted to me as I arranged my things and prepare my questionnaires. I was a bit shy to take her offer knowing that I am already taking her personal time for my interview. Such kind gesture of generosity impressed me especially knowing that she does not have a gainful employment at the moment, and she was still recovering from her last traumatic encounter with her previous employer. I thought that despite of what happened to her and our similar cultural decorum, she is able to display normalcy of life little by little.

As I continued on with my conversation with her, I learned that Jennie fled from her employer's house because of physical and verbal abuse. She is currently staying in BHWR because she is waiting for her trial against a labour case she filed against her recent employer. I asked Jennie about the incident and she vividly shared:

"I didn't get lucky with my first employer here in Hong Kong. She was extremely violent, always shouting at me, deeply poking her fingers on my body, and knocking at things when she's mad. Several times she had hurt me" she recalled. "I chose her over the other prospective employer during my interview because she doesn't have a husband. I thought to myself this is good because I wouldn't have to be conscious about her getting jealous or something. What I didn't know is that she has anger issues."

This statement brought Jennie into tears, but she continued to share her story to me. She mentioned that she is already coping with the incident with the help of BHWR and a few friends in the city. I was surprised to know that she could choose a prospective employer in the initial phases of the hiring process. Jennie told me "It is better to live in a shared room than to have a jealous mistress." It struck me knowing that Jennie values a harmonious relationship with an employer rather than having her own personal space in the household. For Jennie, sleeping with someone in a shared room is part of being an MDW abroad. What is unusual for her is cohabitating with someone who is constantly jealous or has anger issues because she would not have peace of mind.

As she continued on to share her story, I learned more about her and the responsibilities she bears back home. Prior to going to Hong Kong, Jennie was also previously working as a domestic worker in Singapore for almost a decade. In Singapore, she was fortunate to be employed by expatriates who gave her good salary, accommodation, and flexible working schedule. In her years of working as a domestic worker, Jennie was able to buy a small piece of land and house back home. In her words, "even if it is not beautiful, at least won't be renting anymore." Her salary as a domestic worker was also able to sustain their family's needs and send her two children to school. Hearing these words from Jennie, I felt a strong feeling of pride and fulfillment not only from her as a single mother but also as an independent woman.

Jennie she was recently informed that her husband was having an affair with another woman and her mother was getting sick back home. Jennie decided to go home. She filed a 1-month leave which eventually lead to a few more monthly extensions and finally resulted in the

termination of her contract by her employer. Jennie broke up with her husband, took custody of her children, and attended to her ailing mother. Her savings were immediately depleted as days go by, so she applied as an aide for a government office. However, the salary was not sufficient and always delayed. Jennie knew she had to go back to working as domestic worker abroad to sustain her family's need. Her husband, a mechanic, only provides a meager PHP 2,500 (€ 38) monthly support to their household needs and matriculation of their children. Bearing all these responsibilities in mind, Jennie knew she has to go back to work as a domestic worker. Through her friend, she was able to get an employer in Hong Kong in no time. This situation, while not related to her spatial conditions in Hong Kong, is a relevant background for us to understand why MDWs such as Jennie choose to endure and persist their working and living spaces. They have to endure and persist because she has loved ones, whose lives are dependent on her choices and decisions, waiting for her back home.

In Hong Kong, Jennie agreed to share a room with the daughter (an infant) and sister of her employer. She was provided with a single mattress on the floor while her room mates were sleeping in bunk beds. She was not provided with a cabinet to place her belongings nor keep a key to their shared room. She was not allowed to enter the room until it is sleeping time. She was also not allowed to use her phone during work so she would usually sneak inside the toilet to contact her family. On top of everything, she was required to work for extended hours and unfairly treated by her female employer. Jennie shared:

"I was not allowed to rest on my bed nor use my phone even if my work is already done. I would just stand in the kitchen every time. She would always make me clean the house or arrange the clothes in the cabinet even if I have just cleaned and arranged it a week ago. I should always work. Work is what I came here for and not rest, according to my employer."

After enduring for some months, she realized that she cannot take the maltreatment anymore. She filed for 1-month notice to her employer, stating all the abuse she has to endure. "I told her I'm getting chills whenever she's there so she would know her problems. A lot of my friends told me to only mention that I will be terminating my contract for personal reasons so I will be released easily and without hassle. I did not follow their advice. She needed to learn her lesson, so I reported her to the police" said Jennie.

It struck me. From a subservient woman who endures and persists, Jennie resisted. She confronted her exploitation at various scales even though it would cost her a lot. Her resistance is not only against the maltreatment done to her by her employer but also against advice of MDWs who have stayed longer in Hong Kong. "I'm thankful to Bethune House" said Jennie. Bethune House has been instrumental to Jennie in making her life more livable for the moment. She would not have made her choice if she does not have a shelter to run to.

Despite the trauma that Jennie experienced with her employer, she is still on the lookout for employment opportunities in Hong Kong and in Singapore while waiting for her claims and case to be resolved. According to her, she will still do domestic work and she just got unlucky with her first employer. For her, staying in a mattress on the floor does not matter as long as she is being paid and not harmed. All she needs to do is to endure her work however difficult it may be. She is the breadwinner back home and she can't afford to see her children go hungry. Jennie and I ended our rather emotional conversation with a light yet meaningful note. In her own words:

"I am already separated with my husband and I need to support my children. I need this job. I can adjust with the lack of personal space as well as eating leftovers only as long as they provide me with humane treatment and salary. As in any other work, you just need to love and embrace it so you will be happy."

It struck me yet again hearing this from someone who was abused and unfairly treated. "Who is in their right mind would endure such terrible spaces and injustice when there is clearly a way out?" I exclaimed to myself. I was humbled by Jennie's response. Jennie's decision

to accommodate and endure her work and living conditions in Hong Kong, despite restrictive spaces and unfortunate circumstances, may be construed as disempowered defeat by many. However, for Jennie, her decision to accommodate and endure is made with critical consciousness and autonomy in taking control not only of her current situation but also for her dependents. This is her only choice and she needs to make meaning of it. She has accepted her marginal space in the household believing that the value and exchange of her work will bear more good fruits for a better life. For Jennie, her value as a woman and a mother is not predicated on where she sleeps or works but, on her ability to provide for and fulfill her responsibilities for her loved ones.

The conversation I had with Jennie reminds me of how heavy the load of responsibility a female MDW carries not only in Hong Kong where she works but also back home where she remotely handles responsibility of a mother, wife, and daughter. Admittedly, prior to meeting Jennie, I had a strong notion that I will stumble upon stories of drudgery and self-pity. I was deeply mistaken: I heard a story of resilience from a woman who, despite being pressed against a tough environment and difficult situations, still chose to endure and persist for her loved ones back home. Of course, Jennie has the choice to continue working in the Philippines so she could personally take care of her mother and children, but she chose not to. It is always easier for outsiders like me to dictate what option she could take because I do not bear the same responsibility she holds back home. For her, working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong could lift her family from poverty and provide better life chances for her children. She is willing to sacrifice her living and working in such restrictive spaces so she could potentially give a good life to her family. For Jennie, this aspiration is not simply an act of altruism but also provides her with a sense of fulfilment, assurance, and accomplishment that she is doing her best to attend to her motherly obligations and familial responsibilities.

Jennie has displayed power and agency through innumerable acts of resilience: from deciding to go to Hong Kong, having a cheating husband, attending to an ailing mother, to accommodating her marginal space in the household. For Jennie, she can accommodate and endure her spatial conditions in the household because she earns good money that provides food to the table. Also, she has friends who she meets every weekend in public spaces anyway. However, enduring physical and emotional maltreatment is non-negotiable for her. It is at this point that Jennie has performed power and agency through resistance. This is evident on the way she had defied advice of other MDWs to write her resignation on the basis of personal reasons. She has reported and filed a case against her employer, completely knowing that it could greatly affect her domestic work status, employment record, as well as income to financially provide for her family in the Philippines. From a subservient strategy based on endurance for her family, Jennie has converted and displayed a bolder strategy based on survival, self-respect, and self-preservation. “I am a human after all. What good will it make to my children if I am already dead?” ended Jennie.

While Jennie’s response to accommodate and endure resonated with most female MDWs who are faced with similar spatial situations in both public and private spaces, some MDWs are outright resisting and directly fighting back. Putri, an Indonesian domestic worker and well-known activist, is an example to how MDW groups actively lobby and campaign for decent work and its accompanying issues such as wage and workers’ rights.

Putri may be the most experienced and politically active among all female MDWs I have talked to in Hong Kong. I have known Putri as a colleague and comrade back when I was still doing advocacy work in an NGO in the Philippines. Her strong personality and activism in Hong Kong have inspired many MDWs to collectivize throughout the years. She initially arrived in Hong Kong in 2000 at a time of global financial turmoil and recovery, deeply influencing how she is currently living her life. Similar to Jennie and other MDWs, Putri went to Hong Kong primarily because of economic reasons. According to her, MDWs in Hong Kong are entitled to several rest days and holidays. She thought that these holidays would allow her to earn, save, and study at the same time. Putri shared:

“My parents did not allow me to go abroad and be a domestic worker. It was more of my choice. It took me a while to convince my family that I want to do it. I chose Hong Kong because of the holidays. I really wanted to have a life outside of my work. I wanted to go to college so much so I thought Hong Kong would somehow give me that opportunity of learning while working.”

At this point, I have already observed Putri's sense of autonomy, personal ambition as well as need to be financially independent from her family. Against a rough economic background and despite her parents' disapproval, she decided to work and remain in Hong Kong. Putri wanted to make a life for herself that she would not get otherwise if she stayed in Indonesia. Putri believed she will not be able to get any decent-paying job in Indonesia to work and study at the same time.

In Hong Kong, Putri is not only a domestic worker but also an activist. Her current employer, an expatriate, knows about her activism and provides her with decent accommodation. “I got my employer through friends and referral from network. I really avoided the agency because I do not trust them. If I go to the agency and they know my activism, they won't be convinced to find me an employer. I do not want my activism to be a problem in my hiring process” explained Putri. For many MDWs in Hong Kong, being hired by expatriate is an advantage. Expatriates pay more than the usual required salary, more lenient with work schedule, and usually have bigger spaces for a home. For Putri, having a considerate employer, more than the space they offer, matters a lot so she could fulfill her role as an activist and earn at the same time.

However, while Putri considers herself ‘lucky’ now for having adequate space and considerate employer, she also shares some unfortunate personal experience of maltreatment, especially with her first employer. She told me:

“The first one was really the worst. I have to share a room with a 14-year-old boy and then I have no mattress. The boy did not like me. They did not allow me to use washing machine. There was no privacy. Food was an issue also. After 4 months, I insisted on having my rest days, but I was only allowed to go out once a month. I used that time to find help. At that time, access to public information was not as good as today. I only spoke little bit English then. After 8 months, I escaped and came to Bethune House. My friends helped me sue them for denial of my rest-days and holidays.”

What Putri shared to me bothered and amazed me. Having known her for quite some time already, I never knew she has experienced working and living in such marginal spatial condition before. I have always pictured her as a strong woman, protesting and leading rallies and campaigns with grim determination. In retrospect, I thought to myself, Putri's experiences in the past have greatly shaped her values and principles not only as a domestic worker but also as a leader-activist. She is passionate about migrants' issues because she has experienced being in such kind of situation before too.

From this point, Putri made it clearly that she is navigating and negotiating her accommodation in multiple ways. Her spatial experiences, both physical and abstract, in the past helped her realize that she is worthy of human dignity and respect. Putri values her work and can endure sleeping in a shared room because she understands the dearth of spaces in Hong Kong. However, denial of her rights is non-negotiable. She does active organizational work so that other MDWs would know their rights as well. Putri collectively campaigns and mobilizes MDWs in Hong Kong, along with other progressive MDWs and migrant organizations, so they can push for better and more dignified working conditions in the city.

Every weekend, in public spaces, Putri and other MDWs are organizing educational discussions and campaigns for MDWs. She is able to pursue organizational work as well as manage her own work schedule because her employer knows her advocacy. In some other days, they are lobbying with the labour department of Hong Kong in regard to social



protection of MDWs. They are effectively appropriating limited public spaces to discuss and plan among themselves campaign and advocacy strategies. Collectively, these MDWs and their organizations have successfully won material gains over the years.

It is also worthwhile to mention how she self-taught herself to learn and speak the English language. For most Filipino MDWs, having learned the English language as an official language already puts them in an advantageous position to navigate the city and negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment. However, for most Indonesians, learning the English language is difficult as it is not an official language as well as part of basic education curriculum. I encountered this challenge in my field visit too. I had to interview Indonesian MDWs in batches so my colleague who translates for me would not be disturbed for a longer period of time. For female MDWs who speak limited English, especially Indonesians, negotiating their spaces has proven to be more difficult.

Throughout her stay in Hong Kong, Putri made an active decision to not settle or accept conditions similar with what she had with her first employer. In her own words:

“I refuse to have an employer who do not respect my rights or just treat me like a maid. I do not need high respect, but I need them to be sensitive with my other needs like proper working and resting hours. I need an employer whom I can talk to. I am looking for these kinds of things because I need to stay with them for years. If I cannot relate with them, then that’s an issue. You live-in with your employer and not live out. It is practically having an office. I don’t need to be friends with them, you just go there, do your job, leave at a certain time, and you’re good. But here, MDWs are live-in so you need to establish an emotional relationship. If you cannot talk to them or if they cannot talk to you as a person, then you will be feeling what I felt the first time I came here. They have to see me as a human.”

In this conversation, Putri enlightened me that her reasons for enduring marginal spaces in Hong Kong is premised on equality and dignity. She does not mind sleeping with other members of the family as long as she is not treated differently. “I do not mind sharing room and sleeping with kids but do not make me sleep on the floor while the kid is in the bed” she said. For Putri, having a good employer who understands her situation and sees her as a human with dignity and basic rights are enough reason to stay in limited spaces. “I understand their situation. They have become my friends in a way. I would like to help them, and they would help me too” Putri added.

What Putri said resonated with what most female MDWs employ as a strategy for negotiating their spaces. They maintain good relationship with their employers so their employers would provide them with better treatment. This could be in the form of managing their own work schedules and allowing them for longer breaks. For Putri, this is enough compromise she could make for the lack of privacy in both public and private spaces. Moreover, for most female MDWs, especially for those who have no wide social network, a big part of holding on to their work is managing their relationship with their employers. Once they found a considerate employer, female MDWs build trust and good work relationship with them. Trust is built in a lot of ways. Between employer and an MDW, this is expressed through mutual respect by both parties to their contract: the former provides decent living and working conditions while the latter attending to her tasks earnestly. Trust between both parties also include humane treatment and not doing harm to each other. In case of maltreatment and abuse, a strategy most commonly employed by both Filipino and Indonesian female MDWs are terminating their contract, looking for another prospective employers’ months ahead of their contract termination, or seeking refuge in shelter houses.

When female MDWs are at ease or comfortable with their employers, they are willing to sleep in marginal spaces of the household. Female MDWs understand that not all employers can afford more space in a tight housing market. Some female MDWs I talked to have seen how their employers have moved up the socio-economic ladder in the years they have stayed and rendered service. Some of them were eventually given their own rooms. This is also the

case for most female MDWs that I have talked to who constantly renewed their contracts with their previous employers regardless of their spatial conditions. For these MDWs, as long as they are given humane treatment and proper salary, they can compromise their private spaces like share a room with someone or sleep in the living room. “They have been like a family in a way” Sarah told me in a separate interview.

Connecting conversations together, I have come to realize that Jennie and Putri are not apart from each other. While their use of power and agency embraces liberal and non-liberal desires, Jennie and Putri share their recognition over the arduous spatial situation they are embedded in. What binds them together is their conception of a good life through performance of various forms of power, agency, and resistance in different situations. Jennie negotiates her accommodation for her personal and family needs while Putri negotiates accommodation also for herself and all MDWs. It is also worth mentioning that Jennie and Putri are both middle-aged women with different civil status, responsibilities, and countries of origin. On one hand, Jennie is relatively new to domestic work in Hong Kong and has 2 children to send to school and a sickly mother, among other responsibilities. On the other, Putri is single and collectivized. Jennie has more to lose than Putri in terms of material gains but Putri has more political interests to continue than Jennie. However, both share sentiments in regard to accommodating and enduring their spatial condition. When they are confronted with inhumane treatment, they both resisted. It must be noted that both Jennie and Putri endured their spatial conditions, albeit for a limited time, but are fine provided that their employers provided them with a humane treatment and dignified work. Jennie did not escape and sue her employer until she was being physically maltreated, and Putri until she was explicitly denied of her rest days. Lastly, Putri has more social network and friends in Hong Kong whereas Jennie is relatively new and not a member of any MDW organizations. Putri was able to immediately seek refuge at BHWR as well as pursue legal support because of friends who later on became her comrades. Jennie too through informal contacts and outreach of MDW organizations during weekend.

Individually, Putri and Jennie display various forms of resistance through resilience and reworking in confronting difficult situations. Putri displays reworking as resistance. Putri found her calling as an activist. Domestic work is more livable for her and other MDWs because she is negotiating for viable terrains of practice with her employer and with the government of Hong Kong in general. She might not have been able to go to college to pursue a university degree as what she fervently hoped before, but she takes pride that she is helping in consciousness-building in the community of MDWs in Hong Kong. Jennie’s story was not only of resilience to survive in the face of power but also reworking through making focused and pragmatic choices to her conditions.

I refuse to categorize either of their strategies as better or more agentic than the other. Individually, Jennie and Putri have exercised multiple layers of power and agency through a continuum and non-linear ways based on how they deem it applicable or appropriate. All their actions surrounding accommodating or resisting their spatial conditions, albeit not within our typical senses, are constitutive of power and agency in significant ways and potentially empowering to their interests and motivations.

#### **4.2.2 Subordination and Emancipation: MDWs Quest for Empowerment**

In her profound yet highly-criticized work, Mahmood (2005) cautions academic and feminist scholars about imposing liberation politics on women’s acts of agency. In the context of her work on Islamic women’s piety movement, Mahmood argued that women could be also be agents internalizing or supporting patriarchal religious traditions and not just those who are opposing or challenging it. Many feminists and scholars have wrongly accused Mahmood of being anti-feminist for politically neglecting the emancipation mandate of feminism in her work (Hirschkind as cited in Salam 2018). Mahmood recognizes the insights that feminism offers but veers away from its diagnostic and prescriptive nature of understanding women as

marginalized or oppressed. As such, Mahmood is interested in locating the political and moral agency of women the face of power or difficult situations. This conceptualization is also similar as to how Katz (2004) nuanced and conceptualized various social practices that are loosely called as resistance. In her work, resistance could also take form of resilience or independent actions to get by each day, reworking those actions that alter conditions, or resistance or actions that produces critical consciousness.

I find both scholars' brilliant conceptualization of agency and resistance as highly relevant to the case of MDWs who are enduring and persisting in such restrictive and reversed environment. In my short yet meaningful visit in Hong Kong, I have seen female MDWs strategically navigating and negotiating their spaces against an oppressive environment as well as normative discourses that represent them as the intimate other who needs saving. By accommodating their limited spaces in the public and private realm, female MDWs achieve dependency and employment security so they can save and provide socio-economic mobility for themselves and their families back home. "Okay, I understand that I do not have a space of my own in your household. Just give me good salary and do not hurt me" said Lyn. Some other MDWs accommodate public spaces because it is already a compromise to the dearth of private space in the household where they cannot fully express themselves. A few others accommodate their private spaces because their employers allow them to pursue organizational work or even manage their own work schedules with ease.

In so far as this study have shown, I invite scholars to reconsider mainstream notion and traditional discourse into how precarious workers, especially women, are governed and defined. In the context of this study, it is true that female MDWs are subjected to physical and abstract spaces that we may deem inadequate or restrictive to their growth and dignity. Female MDWs know this very well too. They endure, suffer, and persist because for them there is something bigger waiting for them in their countries of origin. This could mean a lot of ways imaginable like sending their children to school to get better chances in life, their family eating proper and nutritious food, supporting their younger brothers and sisters in their aspirations, or themselves saving capital to start their own businesses. They refused to be shamed for their ambitions, especially for surviving.

To call them as weak or having weak class consciousness is nothing but condescending to their power and agency. To strategically live and survive within a restrictive and hostile environment without collapsing is truly power in itself. Female MDWs know better. It must be understood that I am not glorifying their resilience nor justifying their restrictive spaces abroad. Normalizing or neglecting their current spatial conditions is repugnant. I am embracing a brand of power and agency that is often overlooked as weakness and disempowered choice. I am advocating an emancipation by themselves, not through our scholarship or grand gestures but through their own subtle yet powerful and agentic ways. As an outsider, it is always easier to say they are marginalized. We want to leverage our education to them and accord the same 'freedom and mobility' we also hold, never minding their own socio-economic contexts and opinions. Are we doing research to illustrate power of workers or are we just using them to empower ourselves? I am certain that there should be honesty among ourselves in this regard.

The focus on the lived spaces of female MDWs have not only proved how they are considered as the intimate other but also shown many ways into how such spaces can also be a site of their power and agency. In all of the stories highlighted above, both from a post-Foucauldian governmentality and agency perspective, female MDWs are demonstrating multiple forms of power and agency against hostile and restrictive spaces. Even those who are not part of any progressive organization demonstrate power and agency in their own ways. Indeed, their spatial conditions render them vulnerable, but it also allows them to individually and collectively exercise their power and agency according to their own interests and motivations. The negotiation strategies of female MDWs are not only motivated by their liberal and non-liberal desires for a good life for themselves and back home but also dependent on how their employers are treating them. They willingly negotiate their spaces for dependency,

employment security, protection, humane treatment, among many others provided that they are not being harmed or abused. These motivations also mirror various values and principles they hold dearly to themselves, such as self-respect, dignity, resilience, altruism, responsibility, and solidarity.

While I recognize the agency of female MDWs who choose to endure living and working in cramped-up spaces in Hong Kong, I also recognize the deep structural forces that compel them to enter this embodied labour. However, to dismiss the brand of power and agency that female MDWs exert as well as their subtle resistance as something passive, disempowering, less-aware, or unconscious is not engaging in good faith but only patronizing them as precarious workers in distress. Female MDWs are already transforming their conditions through various strategies for survival. It may seem subtle and figurative to many but powerful, agentic, and potentially empowering nonetheless.

## 5 Conclusion and Reflections

### Negotiating Spaces: Female MDWs Confronting Representations and Challenging Agency

Throughout the process of writing this study, I came to question my research countless times. Why am I writing this study again? Is there something more to just challenging our conception of agency and confronting usual narratives of female drudgery and victimization? How can I help free the vulnerable and toiling female MDWs? What is the use of this research for them? How can I give justice to their stories as I so willingly promised them? I was dumbfounded as this research cannot provide just a simple answer. Similarly, discussing results of this study with friends elicited mixed reactions. A few appreciated the value of portraying female MDWs in Hong Kong as a welcome respite from pictures of simplistic victimization. A number, however, expressed concerns on whether my study justifies the current power imbalance that afflict the situations of female MDWs. The latter desired a more emancipatory result from my study. “What now? If your study shows they are living in such depressing spaces, how then can your study emancipate them?” A fair and valid question, I thought to myself.

This question also proves the point and relevance of the research problem I posed earlier on: academic scholars and the likes continue to produce and reproduce material epistemic injustices to the plight and lives of female MDWs by considering them as helpless victims. Typical research studies conditioned us to propose solutions that we ourselves cannot and will not be able to do. We are trained to speak on our high academic horses and moral high-ground, disregarding the fact that the subjects of our studies are active agents of transformative change themselves.

Far from my justifying the present economic and structural realities, my study situates the emancipatory potential of giving voice to the female MDWs themselves. For too long, female MDWs have been depicted as damsels in distress and scholars as their knights in shining armor, with their scholarship as emancipatory tools. I take exception to this narrative as it is my view that they further victimize the very objects of this supposed emancipatory task.

Not to say that I had not fallen for similar well-meaning academic and political research mentality. I do not deny the exploitation and discrimination of female MDWs in public and private spaces of Hong Kong. These conditions are exploitative and need to be condemned in all its forms. However, to categorize female MDWs as helpless victims is not doing research in good faith but only patronizing and romanticizing their conditions. Likewise, discounting their brand of agency as disempowering because they ‘liberally choose’ to endure and persist automatically presupposes that we have a more valid and knowledgeable perspective from them. My research made me understand that we are not superior over female MDWs. In their own conscious and critical ways, the female MDWs that I talked to are already changing and transforming their lives, forging solidarity and support for their labour demands.

Just as there is value in documenting their exploitation, there is also greater value in documenting their various performance of power, agency, and resistance, albeit figuratively, individually, or covertly. My responsibility as an academic scholar is not to emancipate female MDWs but rather, to enable and influence conditions that will better their conditions. However, the emancipation of female MDWs by female MDWs is not possible without recognizing their inherent agency and capacity as actors to effect change in their own situations.

This is the point of this study. It is an invitation for scholars to celebrate and recognize the primacy of female MDWs’ agency and capacity to act in their own behalf. As a story-teller, I can only do so much by embracing their lives, standing for their rights, and telling their stories of resilience, reworking, and resistance in an environment enforced in such oppressive and restrictive conditions. If emancipation is truly the goal, then female MDWs should be at the forefront of this struggle. It is condescending for us scholars to take on this project upon ourselves.

As far as this study is concerned, I have argued that power, agency, and resistance of female MDWs in Hong Kong is complex. Representations of female workers, especially MDWs, have always been centered around their vulnerability, drudgery, and victimization in a seemingly unequal and onerous world (Chapter 1). I have outlined concepts to explain how female MDWs are controlled and regulated in Hong Kong's public and private spaces, and at the same time, how they are using power, agency, and resistance against these (Chapter 2). Specifically, I have unpacked and explored various meanings and social connotations of the word accommodation along its spatial and power and agency dimensions, namely: accommodation as *physical spaces*; accommodation as *structural abstract spaces*; accommodation as *performance of power and agency*; and accommodation as *alternative resistance*. The methodology employed in this study has effectively allowed to obtain empirical data to unpack and explore how female MDWs are navigating around restrictive environment and how there are negotiating it according to their interests, aspirations, and motivations (Chapter 3). While the data I gathered from my field visit may not capture universality among all female MDWs of various social identities and political persuasions, this study has led me to a deeper analytical understanding of the complexity of their power, agency, and resistance (Chapter 4). Against such a restrictive environment and difficult situation, Filipino and Indonesian female MDWs in Hong Kong demonstrate various gradations and spectrum of power, agency, and resistance, all of which are valid, legitimate, and potentially empowering to their own emancipation. The spatial strategies of female MDWs can be summarized as follows:

Spatial Dimension			Power and Agency Dimension	
Site	Conditions	Type	Strategies	Motivations
Private (as Public)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sleeping in the Common Room</li> <li>Lack of Privacy (Presence of CCTV, Sharing Room with Another Member of the Household)</li> <li>Monitoring of Employers</li> <li>Diet Restriction/Adaptation</li> <li>Extended Working Hours</li> </ul>	Individual (Covert)	<p>Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enduring in Exchange for Employment Security and Self Protection</li> <li>Building Trust and Relationship with Employer</li> <li>Relying on Food, Accommodation, and Transportation (saves them time and money)</li> </ul>	Dependency ( <i>saving up for remittance</i> ); Leniency ( <i>managing own work schedule</i> ) and Security of Employment
Private	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maltreatment</li> <li>Physical and Verbal Abuse</li> <li>Sexual Abuse</li> </ul>	Individual and Collective (Covert-Overt)	<p>Resistance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reporting to Authorities, Filing of Legal Labour Case</li> <li>Fleeing Away and Seeking Support and Refuge in Shelter Homes</li> </ul>	Survival and Preservation of Human Dignity
Public (as Private)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Racism and Discrimination</li> <li>Lack of Privacy (Loitering, Sitting, and Sleeping in Common Public Areas)</li> <li>Inclement Weather Conditions</li> </ul>	Collective (Overt)	<p>Reworking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occupying Public Spaces</li> <li>Doing Recreational Activities with other MDWs (Beauty Pageants, Cultural Performances)</li> <li>Campaigning, Holding Educational Discussions, Indignation Rallies</li> </ul>	Solidarity, Sense of Belongingness and Community
Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Racism and Discrimination</li> <li>Inclement Weather Conditions</li> <li>Monitoring and Surveillance of Police Officers</li> </ul>	Collective and Individual (Overt-Covert)	<p>Reworking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connecting to Family</li> <li>Sending Parcels and Remitting Money to Home Country;</li> <li>Running Personal Errands</li> <li>Selling Petty Services</li> <li>Renting a Dorm</li> </ul>	Interminable Connection to "Home"

**Table 3:** Summary of Findings: Spatial Strategies of Female MDWs in Hong Kong

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## ■ Annexes

### A Sample Employment Contract for MDWs

D. H. Contract No. M

#### EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT (For A Domestic Helper recruited from abroad)

This contract is made between .....  
("the Employer") and ..... ("the Helper")  
on ..... and has the following terms:

1. The Helper's place of origin for the purpose of this contract is .....  
.....
2. (A)† The Helper shall be employed by the Employer as a domestic helper for a period of two years commencing on the date on which the Helper arrives in Hong Kong.  
(B)† The Helper shall be employed by the Employer as a domestic helper for a period of two years commencing on ....., which is the date following the expiry of D.H. Contract No. .... for employment with the same employer.  
(C)† The Helper shall be employed by the Employer as a domestic helper for a period of two years commencing on the date on which the Director of Immigration grants the Helper permission to remain in Hong Kong to begin employment under this contract.
3. The Helper shall work and reside in the Employer's residence at .....
4. (a) The Helper shall only perform domestic duties as per the attached Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties for the Employer.  
(b) The Helper shall not take up, and shall not be required by the Employer to take up, any other employment with any other person.  
(c) The Employer and the Helper hereby acknowledge that Clause 4 (a) and (b) will form part of the conditions of stay to be imposed on the Helper by the Immigration Department upon the Helper's admission to work in Hong Kong under this contract. A breach of one or both of the said conditions of stay will render the Helper and/or any aider and abettor liable to criminal prosecution.
5. (a) The Employer shall pay the Helper wages of HK\$ ..... per month. The amount of wages shall not be less than the minimum allowable wage announced by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and prevailing at the date of this contract. An employer who fails to pay the wages due under this employment contract shall be liable to criminal prosecution.  
(b) The Employer shall provide the Helper with suitable and furnished accommodation as per the attached Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties and food free of charge. If no food is provided, a food allowance of HK\$ ..... a month shall be paid to the Helper.  
(c) The Employer shall provide a receipt for payment of wages and food allowance and the Helper shall acknowledge receipt of the amount under his/her\* signature.
6. The Helper shall be entitled to all rest days, statutory holidays, and paid annual leave as specified in the Employment Ordinance, Chapter 57.
7. (a) The Employer shall provide the Helper with free passage from his/her\* place of origin to Hong Kong and on termination or expiry of this contract, free return passage to his/her\* place of origin.  
(b) A daily food and travelling allowance of HK\$100 per day shall be paid to the Helper from the date of his/her\* departure from his/her\* place of origin until the date of his/her\* arrival at Hong Kong if the travelling is by the most direct route. The same payment shall be made when the Helper returns to his/her\* place of origin upon expiry or termination of this contract.
8. The Employer shall be responsible for the following fees and expenses (if any) for the departure of the Helper from his/her place of origin and entry into Hong Kong:—
  - (i) medical examination fees;
  - (ii) authentication fees by the relevant Consulate;
  - (iii) visa fee;
  - (iv) insurance fee;
  - (v) administration fee or fee such as the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration fee, or other fees of similar nature imposed by the relevant government authorities; and
  - (vi) others: .....

In the event that the Helper has paid the above costs or fees, the Employer shall fully reimburse the Helper forthwith the amount so paid by the Helper upon demand and production of the corresponding receipts or documentary evidence of payment.

\* Delete where inappropriate.

† Use either Clause 2A, 2B or 2C whichever is appropriate.



9. (a) In the event that the Helper is ill or suffers personal injury during the period of employment specified in Clause 2, except for the period during which the Helper leaves Hong Kong of his/her\* own volition and for his/her\* own personal purposes, the Employer shall provide free medical treatment to the Helper. Free medical treatment includes medical consultation, maintenance in hospital and emergency dental treatment. The Helper shall accept medical treatment provided by any registered medical practitioner.

(b) If the Helper suffers injury by accident or occupational disease arising out of and in the course of employment, the Employer shall make payment of compensation in accordance with the Employees' Compensation Ordinance, Chapter 282.

(c) In the event of a medical practitioner certifying that the Helper is unfit for further service, the Employer may subject to the statutory provisions of the relevant Ordinances terminate the employment and shall immediately take steps to repatriate the Helper to his/her\* place of origin in accordance with Clause 7.

10. Either party may terminate this contract by giving one month's notice in writing or one month's wages in lieu of notice.

11. Notwithstanding Clause 10, either party may in writing terminate this contract without notice or payment in lieu in the circumstances permitted by the Employment Ordinance, Chapter 57.

12. In the event of termination of this contract, both the Employer and the Helper shall give the Director of Immigration notice in writing within seven days of the date of termination. A copy of the other party's written acknowledgement of the termination shall also be forwarded to the Director of Immigration.

13. Should both parties agree to enter into new contract upon expiry of the existing contract, the Helper shall, before any such further period commences and at the expense of the Employer, return to his/her\* place of origin for a paid/unpaid\* vacation of not less than seven days, unless prior approval for extension of stay in Hong Kong is given by the Director of Immigration.

14. In the event of the death of the Helper, the Employer shall pay the cost of transporting the Helper's remains and personal property from Hong Kong to his/her\* place of origin.

15. Save for the following variations, any variation or addition to the terms of this contract (including the annexed Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties) during its duration shall be void unless made with the prior consent of the Commissioner for Labour:

(a) a variation of the period of employment stated in Clause 2 through an extension of the said period of not more than one month by mutual agreement and with prior approval obtained from the Director of Immigration;

(b) a variation of the Employer's residential address stated in Clause 3 upon notification in writing being given to the Director of Immigration, provided that the Helper shall continue to work and reside in the Employer's new residential address;

(c) a variation in the Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties made in such manner as prescribed under item 7 of the Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties; and

(d) a variation of item 4 of the Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties in respect of driving of a motor vehicle, whether or not the vehicle belongs to the Employer, by the helper by mutual agreement in the form of an Addendum to the Schedule and with permission in writing given by the Director of Immigration for the Helper to perform the driving duties.

16. The above terms do not preclude the Helper from other entitlements under the Employment Ordinance, Chapter 57, the Employees' Compensation Ordinance, Chapter 282 and any other relevant Ordinances.

17. The Parties hereby declare that the Helper has been medically examined as to his/her fitness for employment as a domestic helper and his/her medical certificate has been produced for inspection by the Employer.

Signed by the Employer \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Employer)

in the presence of \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of Witness) (Signature of Witness)

Signed by the Helper \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Helper)

in the presence of \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of Witness) (Signature of Witness)

\* Delete where inappropriate.



### SCHEDULE OF ACCOMMODATION AND DOMESTIC DUTIES

1. Both the Employer and the Helper should sign to acknowledge that they have read and agreed to the contents of this Schedule, and to confirm their consent for the Immigration Department and other relevant government authorities to collect and use the information contained in this Schedule in accordance with the provisions of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.

2. Employer's residence and number of persons to be served

A. Approximate size of flat/house ..... square feet/square metres\*

B. State below the number of persons in the household to be served on a regular basis:

..... adult ..... minors (aged between 5 to 18) ..... minors (aged below 5) ..... expecting babies.

..... persons in the household requiring constant care or attention (excluding infants).

(Note: Number of Helpers currently employed by the Employer to serve the household ..... )

3. Accommodation and facilities to be provided to the Helper

A. Accommodation to the Helper

While the average flat size in Hong Kong is relatively small and the availability of separate servant room is not common, the Employer should provide the Helper suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy. Examples of unsuitable accommodation are: The Helper having to sleep on made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy and sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex.

☐ Yes. Estimated size of the servant room ..... square feet/square metres\*

☐ No. Sleeping arrangement for the Helper:

☐ Share a room with ..... child/children aged .....

☐ Separate partitioned area of ..... square feet/square metres\*

☐ Others. Please describe .....

.....

.....

B. Facilities to be provided to the Helper:

(Note: Application for entry visa will normally not be approved if the essential facilities from item (a) to (f) are not provided free.)

(a) Light and water supply ☐ Yes ☐ No

(b) Toilet and bathing facilities ☐ Yes ☐ No

(c) Bed ☐ Yes ☐ No

(d) Blankets or quilt ☐ Yes ☐ No

(e) Pillows ☐ Yes ☐ No

(f) Wardrobe ☐ Yes ☐ No

(g) Refrigerator ☐ Yes ☐ No

(h) Desk ☐ Yes ☐ No

(i) Other facilities (Please specify) .....

.....

.....

.....



4. The Helper should only perform domestic duties at the Employer's residence. Domestic duties to be performed by the Helper under this contract exclude driving of a motor vehicle of any description for whatever purposes, whether or not the vehicle belongs to the Employer.

5. Domestic duties include the duties listed below.

Major portion of domestic duties:—

1. Household chores
2. Cooking
3. Looking after aged persons in the household (constant care or attention is required/not required\*)
4. Baby-sitting
5. Child-minding
6. Others (please specify)

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. When requiring the Helper to clean the outside of any window which is not located on the ground level or adjacent to a balcony (on which it must be reasonably safe for the Helper to work) or common corridor ("exterior window cleaning"), the exterior window cleaning must be performed under the following conditions:—

- (i) the window being cleaned is fitted with a grille which is locked or secured in a manner that prevents the grille from being opened; and
- (ii) no part of the Helper's body extends beyond the window ledge except the arms.

7. The Employer shall inform the Helper and the Director of Immigration of any substantial changes in items 2, 3 and 5 by serving a copy of the Revised Schedule of Accommodation and Domestic Duties (ID 407G) signed by both the Employer and the Helper to the Director of Immigration for record.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Employer's name and signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Helper's name and signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\* delete where inappropriate

☐ tick as appropriate



## B Interview Guide and Questionnaire (Female MDWs)

Interviewee Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Place: \_\_\_\_\_  
Contact No: \_\_\_\_\_ Email (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

- Confirm consent to interview and voice record
- Explain what the research is about and stress confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency
- Consent to follow-up by phone in case of further questions
- Inform participant of the topic and sections of the interview

### RESEARCH QUESTION

#### NEGOTIATING SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION

##### *Spatial Demands and Strategies of Migrant Female Domestic Workers in Hong Kong*

This research is an inquiry into the lived spaces of female MDWs in Hong Kong. Central to this issue is how Filipino and Indonesian female MDWs in Hong Kong use their complex agency in navigating and negotiating spaces in the public and private realm. To answer this, I inquired into the consequences of the mandatory live-in policy for MDWs. I also focused on the knowledge and social identities of female MDWs in identifying spatial boundaries and geographies of control and exclusion vis-à-vis their spatial needs and strategies for resistance. Moreover, I contemplated on their motivations and aspirations for a good life and relate it their vision of good and quality work and living space

#### PROFILE OF RESPONDENT

Nickname	Educational Attainment
Age	Place of Origin
Gender and Civil Status	Children, if any
How often do you communicate with your children and other family members back home? How do you cope without their presence?	

#### BASIC MIGRATION HISTORY

- Date of arrival in HK;
- Number of years working in HK (elsewhere if applicable)
- Means of arrival (agency, referral)

#### EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

- How is your life here in HK?
- How is your relationship with your employer? How about your relationship with your previous employers?
- Can you describe you day-to day tasks to me? How it usually begins and ends.
- How flexible is your work?
- Do you get enough rest for the work you are performing every day? Why or why not?
- What do you find most attractive/ most satisfying about your job? How about the least attractive?
- How do you feel about this? How do you think you can change it?
- How much do you earn monthly? Do you still get to save?

#### SPATIAL CONCERNS

- Are you currently living-in with your employer? Do you have your own living space?
- Can you describe to me your living (personal) space?
- Do you find your living space comfortable and safe? Do you like it?
- Have you experienced any kind of discomfort or issues (privacy) in relation to your accommodation? How has this affected your health, privacy, religion, personal time, etc.
- Negotiation: Was there a chance/ time in the duration of your work where you have actively negotiated with your employer the terms of your living

accommodation? What were their response to it? Was there a change after the process of negotiation?

- How do you envision a good working and living space? How would you describe a good and quality work in regard to your current living space? What should be included/ what should not?
- How important it is to have a personal living space aside from the one you are having now?
- If given a chance (and should your employer agree), what would you change in your current live-in arrangement? What should be the conditions for a good living accommodation?
- Given the chance, would you opt to live-in still with your employer, or live-out?
- What do you think are the problems in living in with your employers? Can you relate some experiences?
- Would you consider living out with your employer if you have a place to stay here in HK?
- Others

### **SUNDAY ACTIVITIES**

- What are you doing here? How do you usually spend you rest day/s? Where do you usually spend it?
- Negotiation: How do you settle with your employers your stay in the house (or not) during your rest day? In times of harsh weather conditions?
- Should they disagree, where do you stay? How much do you pay?
- Why did you choose this place among other available spaces in the city? Why are you spending your rest-day here? Do you like spending your rest day outside of your work place? What is it like spending your rest-day in a public area?
- Do you like spending your rest day outside of your work place?
- How does it make you feel being away from your employer's house (sight)/ work place in your rest day?
- Where do you see yourself spending your rest day if you are not here in public area?
- Do you mingle with other domestic workers aside from your fellow people?

### **SOCIAL NETWORKS**

- Do you have friends, relatives here in HK??
- Are you part of any organization here in HK? What role/s do you play in these organizations?
- How would you describe your level of participation as well as engagement with these organizations?
- Are you aware of your rights as a domestic helper?
- Where do you get information about your rights as a domestic helper here in HK?

### **ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS**

- Anything else you would like to share with me?

### **REFERRAL**

- Do you know any other MDWs who might be willing to participate in my research?
- 
- Thank the interview participant;
  - Get email for copy of interview transcription and final analysis/ manuscript;
  - Stop recording.



## C Interview Guide and Questionnaire (Organizations)

Interviewee Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Place: \_\_\_\_\_  
Contact No: \_\_\_\_\_ Email (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

- Confirm consent to interview and voice record
- Explain what the research is about and stress confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency
- Consent to follow-up by phone in case of further questions
- Inform participant of the topic and sections of the interview

### RESEARCH QUESTION

#### NEGOTIATING SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION

##### *Spatial Demands and Strategies of Migrant Female Domestic Workers in Hong Kong*

This research is an inquiry into the lived spaces of female MDWs in Hong Kong. Central to this issue is how Filipino and Indonesian female MDWs in Hong Kong use their complex agency in navigating and negotiating spaces in the public and private realm. To answer this, I inquired into the consequences of the mandatory live-in policy for MDWs. I also focused on the knowledge and social identities of female MDWs in identifying spatial boundaries and geographies of control and exclusion vis-à-vis their spatial needs and strategies for resistance. Moreover, I contemplated on their motivations and aspirations for a good life and relate it their vision of good and quality work and living space

### PROFILE OF THE ORGANIZATION

Can you briefly introduce me to your organization?

- What are the programs you are implementing in regard to helping MDWs here in HK?
- How long have you been here in HK as well as in your organization? What is the role you are playing in your organization?

### STATE OF PLAY

Alongside Singapore and the Middle East, Hong Kong continues to be one of the most attractive places for MDWs to seek domestic work employment abroad. To date, it hosts around 385,000 MDWs who are given a lot of benefits in terms of food, medical, flight, accommodation, minimum pay, etc.

- *Do you agree with this statement? What or where do you think the host country is lacking in terms of providing social security to MDWs?*

You have been here for quite some time now (helping MDWs in distress), what can you say have been the most controversial issue that MDWs confront? What is the current state of MDWs here in Hong Kong?

- *What are their demands of MDWs for social protection? Do you see demands of MDWs changing over time? Does it vary from every race or religion?*
- How do you locate social housing/ shelter in the needs and priorities of MDWs here in HK?
- With your years of active engagement with MDWs, how important is it for them to have a private space of their own? Why is private space a matter of good living and working experience?
- How important is it to have a counter space in the absence of a public or private space for MDWs?
- Live-out option is illegal, here in HK. What do you think are the disadvantages/ advantages of live-in arrangements for MDWs? Do you think other living arrangement options for MDWs should explored? What are these?
  - *How are governments (sending and receiving) are helping in this regard?*
  - *For Bethune: what are the issues and challenges you encounter in running such program for MDWs?*

## SPATIAL NEGOTIATION and ACTIVISM

- How do you, as an organization, negotiate spatial issues of MDWs with the government of HK (as a host country) as well as to the governments of sending countries the issues and demands of MDWs?
  - *How MDWs participate in these efforts?*
  - *How does the government of HK receive (or not) the issues you are forwarding?*  
*Has there been a change in action over the years?*
- How do you think MDWs in HK are marginalized in public and private space?
- Can you describe to me how it MDWs came to occupy major streets of Hong Kong every Sunday for their rest days? Has it always been like that? Since when they start occupying these public spaces?
  - *How do you see MDWs developing or innovating private spaces in public spaces?*
  - *What are the dynamics between state forces/ businesses and MDWs and MDWs among other MDWs in terms of space occupation every Sunday?*
- How would you describe or envision a safe and adequate work and living space for MDWs?
  - *What are the conditions for this to become a reality?*
  - *What are your demands to the both receiving and host country in this regard?*

## ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

- Final words? Anything else you would like to share with me?

## REFERRAL

- Do you know any other MDWs who might be willing to participate in my research?
  - Thank the interview participant
  - Get email for copy of interview transcription and final analysis/ manuscript
  - Stop recording

## D Select Photos from Inside and Outside



**Picture 1:** *Physical Accommodation of Female MDWs (Photo Courtesy of MFMW/ Norman Carnay)*



**Picture 2:** *Physical Accommodation of Female MDWs (Photo Courtesy of MFMW/ Norman Carnay)*





**Picture 3:** *Female MDWs Resting in Public Spaces (Photo by Author)*



**Picture 4:** *Female MDWs Practicing for a Dance Performance in Central Station (Photo by Author)*



**Picture 5:** *Busy Female MDW's Connecting to Home (Photo by Author)*



**Picture 6:** *Female MDW's Occupation of Public Spaces (Photo by Author)*





**Picture 7:** *Female MDW's Participating in Cultural Performances (Photo by Author)*



**Picture 8:** *Female MDW's Participating in Cultural Performances (Photo by Author)*