



**Migration and Information  
Communications Technology Use:  
A Case Study of Indonesian Domestic  
Workers in Singapore**

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Working Paper 24

December 2014

## Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the following organisations for their assistance in conducting this research: Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), especially John Gee and Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, Masjid Mujahidin Singapore and AIDHA Singapore. We would also like to thank all the surveyors and the respondents who generously gave up their time to participate in this research.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore. This project was funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). DFID supports policies, programmes and projects to promote poverty reduction globally. DFID provided funds for this study as part of that goal but the views and opinions expressed are those of the authors alone.

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This is an output from a project funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the use of Information Communications Technology (ICT) among Indonesian Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) working and living in Singapore. Drawing upon a survey (n=201) with Indonesian domestic workers and follow up in-depth interviews (n=38), the paper points to recent changes in the technological landscape in Singapore which have altered FDWs use of ICT. This includes cheaper mobile devices and increasing access to free internet, either at their place of employment or in public space. In turn, we suggest the utilisation of ICT has shaped the migration experiences of women in three key areas. Firstly, it has allowed FDWs to more readily straddle the transnational divide their migration creates by making communication with friends and family an instantaneous and everyday occurrence. Secondly, we show how this access is contingent upon issues of trust and negotiation with employers, who often possess passwords for home-based internet and can place restrictions on their employees' use of ICT. Thirdly, we show how the use of ICT can provide FDWs with a degree of social empowerment, by allowing them to connect globally to a range of information.

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## List of Abbreviations

BNP2TKI	Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (National Board for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers)
FDW	Foreign Domestic Worker
ICT	Information Communications Technology
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
SMS	Short Message Service, also commonly referred to as a text message

## Summary

The phenomenon of increasing female labour migration in Asia has coincided with a transformation in the Information Communications Technology (ICT) landscape. Whereas devices such as laptop computers, smart phones and tablets were once seen as the domain of the elite, these technologies are becoming increasingly affordable. Moreover, Singapore, a key destination country for Indonesian women who migrate as foreign domestic workers (FDWs), is one of the world's most technologically advanced cities. As more women are migrating in a context with increasing access to ICT, this working paper seeks to understand how the use of ICTs can shape the migration experiences of FDWs in Singapore.

The use of ICT by FDWs is of particular importance if we consider that in Singapore domestic work is largely a live-in form of employment that has been characterised as both precarious and isolating. Furthermore, the general inability to monitor employment conditions within the domestic realm has meant that FDWs can work long days with little breaks. Until recently, when the Singaporean government implemented a recommended rest day for all FDWs, it was legally possible for a FDW to work her entire two year contract without any entitlement to a day off.

Therefore, as this paper shows, there is great potential for ICT to reshape the migration experiences of these women who have often been marginalised in the context of their employment. This working paper draws upon a survey (n=201) with Indonesian domestic workers and follow up in-depth interviews (n=38). It discusses three key areas where ICT use has the potential to reconfigure the identities and experiences of FDWs in Singapore.

The first is that ICT use allows FDWs to manage 'multiple selves'. By this we mean that whereas previously women may have had to rely upon a slow back and forth of letters to communicate with family and friends back home, or use public telephones with calling cards, ICT use has created an environment whereby women can have instantaneous communication with family and friends. In a sense, this much more readily allows domestic workers to straddle the transnational divide that their migration creates and allows a presence both 'here' and 'there'. Moreover, social media applications such as WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook have all served as a means by which women can reduce the costs associated with communication. Given the relative ease with which women can communicate, they can maintain key relationships with family left behind, for instance checking on their children's homework, whilst also assuming the role of migrant worker. We also highlight the importance of mobile phones, in particular for those FDWs who do not enjoy a day off. Findings from our survey show that over two thirds (n=46) of the 63 women surveyed who did not have a day off owned a mobile phone. All of these women reported using their phones to maintain communication with family in Indonesia, as well as friends in Singapore and Indonesia.

Secondly, we found that the use of ICT is very much dependent upon trust and the negotiation of access. While mobile phones are extremely common among FDWs (90 per cent of the 201 women in our survey had one), interviews revealed that women were often only entitled to have a mobile phone after a certain period of service (usually one to two years). Similarly we found that women also had to negotiate access to home Wi-Fi networks, which enable them to connect to the internet for free. In discussing the notion of access, we highlight how FDWs' access to technology is embedded within existing power relations, which typically give the employer the upper hand.

Our third set of findings centres around the theme of ICTs providing FDWs a degree of social empowerment, in that ICT access allows FDWs to connect globally to a range of information. Therefore, while ICT access is often contingent upon employers, when FDWs do use ICTs, it can provide them with a sense of equality in terms of the information they can gain access to.

## Introduction

Indonesia is a key source country for migrant labour in the Asian region. As economic shifts towards dual income families has helped create a 'care deficit' in many industrialised Asian nations, there is also a shortage of labour to fill the gap in care giving occupations and the maintenance of households. Indonesian women, who have become their nation's main labour migrants, are key to filling this 'care gap'. Female migrants accounted for 78 per cent of all Indonesian international migrants in 2010, although in recent years this number has dropped to 54 per cent, as the Indonesian government has placed restrictions on FDWs entering certain destination countries (BNP2TKI 2014).

Singapore, with a high demand for care work is a common destination for Indonesian women who become FDWs. The Ministry of Manpower reports that as of December 2013, a total of 214,500 FDWs are employed with valid work permits, reflecting a growth rate of 9.4 per cent from its December 2009 base of 196,000 FDWs (Ministry of Manpower 2013). The majority of these FDWs come from Indonesia and the Philippines, while domestic workers from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Bangladesh have also been reported to be increasing in number (TCW2 2011).

When migrating to Singapore, women who become FDWs are also entering one of the world's telecommunications hubs. According to a global survey, Singapore ranks second out of 144 countries in the Networked Readiness Index. Household access to the internet has grown from 65 per cent in 2003 to 84 per cent in 2012. Meanwhile, individual access to the internet has grown from 53 per cent in 2003 to 72 per cent in 2012 (IDA 2012). In terms of internet download speeds, Singapore has the second fastest internet download speed in the world, with an average of 68.51Mbps, which is three times more than the average global download speeds of 18.52Mbps (Ookla 2014). Meanwhile, mobile telecommunication subscriptions for voice, short messaging system (SMS), and mobile internet services (3G and 4G) have been pegged at 8.4 million subscriptions as of March 2014. With a population of just under 5.4 million (Department of Statistics Singapore 2013), this points to the ubiquitous nature of ICT in Singapore, particularly when it comes to mobile handheld devices.

While considering Singapore as both a key destination for Indonesian FDWs and a global telecommunications hub, this paper is interested in uncovering how ICT use among domestic workers influences their migration experiences in the city-state. In particular this working paper has two key aims:

1. To explore how ICT use assists Indonesian FDWs in Singapore to bridge the divide created by their migration in terms of maintaining relationships with left behind family members.
2. To understand how ICT use affects power relations between FDWs and their employers.

## Domestic Work: Precarity and Isolation in Singapore

The industrialisation of Singapore has not only reorganised labour, but has also restructured family life as more women become part of the workforce (Yeoh and Huang 1999; Yeoh 2006). The increasing participation of women in the work force has resulted in a 'crisis for household production', not only through decreasing marriage and fertility rates, but also through creating a care deficit in the domestic sphere (Tai 2013: 1152). As an intervention, the Singaporean government created a migration policy to introduce foreign domestic workers from less-developed countries to fill in the void in the reproductive sphere of the household (Yeoh 2006).

Despite the growing number of foreign domestic workers in Singapore, it has been noted that the migration policy for low-skilled and low-waged foreign workers has at its core a 'use and discard' philosophy (Yeoh and Chang 2001; Yeoh 2006). Among the migrant workers, female foreign domestic workers have been identified as 'particularly vulnerable to various forms of discrimination, exploitation, and abuse by virtue of their gender, temporary migrant status, and the nature and location of [their] work' (Yeoh *et al.* 2004: 9). The short-term work permit policy for FDWs, along with the fact they are not covered by the Employment Act, makes domestic work a highly precarious and flexible type of labour.

Domestic workers occupy a unique place in Singapore. The live-in nature of their work means that for many domestic workers the division between the time and space provided for work and leisure becomes blurred. In either case, there exists a complex interplay between the work and home environment and the relationships this entails, with a domestic worker never really separated from her workplace, even after her duties for the day have finished (Yeoh and Huang 1999). Hence, the live-in nature of domestic work makes FDWs highly dependent on their employers even for basic necessities, and makes it harder for the domestic workers to carve out their own personal space and time.

Some of the policies implemented by the Ministry of Manpower as measures to protect vulnerable migrants are often ironically used to further enforce a precarious and isolated work environment. Prior to 2010, the Singapore government imposed a security bond of S\$5,000 and a personal accident insurance of at least S\$10,000, to be paid for by the employers to ensure the FDW's safety and well-being (Ministry of Manpower 2009). If the FDW married a Singaporean citizen or permanent resident, became pregnant, or absconded, the security deposit would be forfeited. Following 2010, these rules were relaxed somewhat so that now the employer only remains liable for S\$2,500 in the instance that their domestic worker runs away.

Given these regulations, it is not surprising that many employers have taken great interest in their domestic workers' movements and activities, based on the concern that their employee may do something that would cause them to forfeit their bond. In the context of Singapore, the complex dynamic between employer and employees has the potential to become heightened, given the high degree of regulation over domestic workers that has typically existed (Yeoh and Huang 1998; Platt, forthcoming). This is so much so, that the implementation of the 2013 day-off policy has been met with reluctance and apprehension from some employers. This policy, which recommends a weekly day off for all FDWs, was

put forward by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) in March 2012. As well as recognising it as a basic labour right, MOM noted that a regular day off provides FDWs ‘an important mental and emotional break from work’ (MOM 2012). As recommended in the policy directive, all FDWs who sign a new contract, or renew their current contract on or after January 1 2013, are entitled to a weekly day off. In addition, employers are also given the option to provide their domestic workers with monetary compensation of around S\$15-20 in lieu of a day off, which is roughly equivalent to a day’s wage for a FDW, provided the FDW herself is in agreement with this arrangement.

The *Strait Times*, Singapore’s most widely read daily newspaper, reports that the reluctance to allow the domestic helpers to go on off-days arises from a ‘fear that the maid will get up to no good on her day-off’, and that this will compromise the security bonds paid for by the employers (Oon 2013; Seow 2014). In addition, some reports reveal how the live-in domestic work set-up has constrained migrants from building social communities outside the work/home space. It has been reported that an FDW spends an average of 14 hours of work per day (this is in contrast with employees protected by the Employment Act, where it is illegal to be made to work more than 12 hours per day according to the Ministry of Manpower), and that only approximately one third of domestic helpers enjoy a weekly rest day despite the government’s recent day off policy (Seow 2014). This point is consistent with findings from our survey, where around one third (30 per cent) of women had a weekly day off, just over one third (39 per cent) had a fortnightly or monthly day off, and the remaining one third (31 per cent) had no regular day off. It is important to note that our survey was conducted in 2012, prior to the day off policy implementation. However, Seow’s (2014) article suggests that not much has changed in the domestic work sphere when it comes to giving a day-off, as both FDWs and employers may be interested in the compensation in-lieu, albeit for different reasons.

This precarious and, in most cases, constraining nature and location of domestic work in Singapore tends to further exacerbate the feeling of isolation and loneliness these migrants may experience. It can be said that domestic workers experience double isolation, as they are not only separated from their left-behind loved ones geographically, but they are also confronted with constraints in integrating in their new community. It is in this fairly rigid workplace context that domestic worker’s access to ICT, especially in the forms of mobile telephony and the internet, has become of interest (Thompson 2009; Lin and Sun 2010; Thomas and Lim 2010; Chib, Wilkin and Ranjini 2013; Chib *et al.* 2014). These studies have noted the use of mobile phones and the internet as facilitating a range of identities for domestic workers, including that of transnational mother and family member (Lin and Sun 2010; Thomas and Lim 2010; Chib *et al.* 2014;), as subversive and resistant against the circumscribed nature of their lives (Ueno 2009; Lin and Sun 2010) as well as fostering social networks and a sense of well-being in Singapore (Thompson 2009; Thomas and Lim 2010). The research findings in this paper expand upon these findings by providing an insight into contemporary ICT use amongst domestic workers, which is rapidly changing due to the wider availability of low-cost devices and the increasing ease of internet access. It adds to this literature by highlighting how ICT use amongst Indonesian domestic workers allows these women to negotiate the distance that their migration creates, both in a physical and emotional sense. The use of ICT, including devices and social media apps such as Facebook, Viber and Whatsapp, allows women a presence both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Therefore, as previous studies have shown, the use of ICT assists women to more readily express a multi-

faceted identity with regards to roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends and employees. This, we argue, has significant implications for women's experiences of migration in terms of providing them with greater avenues for social support.

### Domestic Workers and Access to ICT in the Singaporean Context

Despite Singapore's ascent as a telecommunications hub, access to mobile phones and communication technologies has often been marked by inequality. Thompson (2009) notes how the diffusion of such technologies in the Singaporean context has historically been marked by class-based marginalisation. Citing newspaper reports from the *Strait Times* from 1989 to 1990s, he outlines 'foreign worker's exclusion from the realm of mobile phone use' (Thompson 2009: 365) due to the exorbitant prices of devices and the mobile phone subscriptions that were too steep for low-waged workers. During this period, technologies such as mobile phones were more targeted to the business and professional elites. However, as stiff market competition has further driven down the cost of communication technology devices and has enhanced the availability of affordable pre-paid and post-paid mobile phone schemes, low-income migrant workers are now able to own their own communication technologies. Thompson notes that at present, the 'terrain of mobile telecommunications has shifted and foreign domestic workers [have become] a focus of attention as potential customers for the telecoms' (Thompson 2009: 366).

Currently, there are three key players in Singapore offering mobile telephony plans to the public. Most domestic workers tend to have pre-paid phone plans, allowing them to access both voice and internet services, which can be topped up by purchasing relatively small amounts of credit. For example, a SIM card and starter pre-paid mobile kit can be purchased for as low as S\$5. The majority of domestic workers use pre-paid plans as the conditions surrounding post-paid telephone plans means that customers have to commit to a minimum payment period of two years. In order to obtain such a contract it is necessary to meet several documentary and income requirements. These requirements typically preclude domestic workers from signing such contracts, although in some cases employers do access such subscriptions on the domestic workers' behalf.

As many have noted (see for example Graham 1998; Warf 2008), the internet and the infrastructure that it requires has been unequally distributed on a global level, dominated by developed nations, which in part are dependent upon such technology to contribute to capitalist economies. It must be said that although Singapore's continuous development of its telecommunications infrastructure has already bolstered its reputation as an ICT powerhouse, it still exemplifies the 'highly uneven geography of contemporary cities' (Graham 1998: 177). One must note that despite the advancement in access for low-income foreign workers, the acquisition and use of ICTs are still entrenched in political and socio-economic inequalities. This reminds us of Graham's (1998: 176) observations that the effects of new technologies are always 'socially contingent' and that 'they are enrolled in complex social and spatial power relations and struggles and the ways in which some groups, areas and interests may benefit from the effects of new technologies, while others actually lose out'.

This notion of access to new technologies being socially contingent has interesting implications for the ways in which domestic workers engage with ICTs and the virtual spaces

they can access. On the one hand, domestic workers are inserted into a nation that has one of the world's best developed infrastructures in terms of new technologies. Beyond this, domestic workers are more likely to be employed in the households of the middle-class, for whom access to such new technologies is largely unfettered. Yet on the other hand, their status as domestic worker, and the position they are accorded by the Singaporean state, means that unlike other higher-paid foreigner workers, or Singaporeans, they are not entitled the same access to contracts and subsidised mobile handsets by telephone providers. Therefore, exploring the ICT use of domestic workers and the implications these women's engagement with virtual space has upon social relations provides an interesting perspective, and one that further complicates ideas about how ICT access is mediated by the social sphere.

### ICTs: Changing the Experience of Migration?

Scholars who have focused on new media technologies and transnational migration have analysed how the advancement in these technologies have markedly changed the experience of migration and fostered social relationships through distance. The ubiquity of the internet, mobile phones and smart phones, social media applications and other new media technologies, has allowed for the bridging of the temporal and spatial gap brought about by migration (Parreñas 2005; Uy-Tioco 2007; Thompson 2009; Cabanes and Acedera 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012).

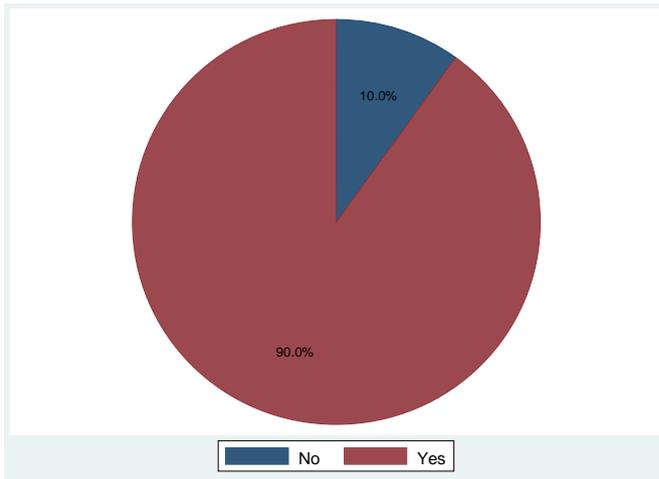
Despite the possibilities afforded by these new media technologies, they are not without limits. Ducey (2010: 22) reminds us that technologies are 'vehicles of inequalities', whereby social inequalities are still imprinted in technologies, and can further social divides. The notion that ICT can contribute to and perpetuate social inequalities reflects what Massey (1991; 1994; 2005) calls 'power geometry'. According to Massey, power geometry is a system where agency is constrained or enabled depending on the individual's position in the power hierarchy. In spite of the advancement of technologies, the increased availability of connectivity, and the affordability of technologies, it has been argued that the inequalities and divides present in transnational communication decades ago still persist today, if in a reconstituted manner. Mahler and Pessar (2001) note how the transnational communication between migrant husbands and left-behind wives can reify gender hierarchies since wives do not have the financial resources to initiate communication. In a similar vein, Parreñas (2005) reveals how the accessibility and availability of media communication technologies have further hampered female migrants' ability to reconstitute their roles as breadwinners, as these technologies further entrench them to patriarchy via transnational mothering. Meanwhile, Madianou and Miller (2012), in their study of new media technologies, highlight the persistent divides brought about by unevenness of access, buying power, and media literacy. These studies indicate how technology and its use is mutually contingent upon the social realities in which migrants find themselves.

It is from this perspective that we seek to understand FDWs' ICT use and the implications this has for social relations, particularly as it relates to the power-relations that work to circumscribe domestic workers' migration experiences in the form of employer-employee dynamic and state-based regulations. In doing so we draw upon questionnaire surveys (n=201) and in-depth interviews (n=38) of FDWs residing in Singapore. The bulk of data was collected over a 5 month period from October 2012 to February 2013, with some additional

in-depth qualitative interviews conducted between November 2013 and January 2014. This paper mainly relies upon the qualitative interviews whereby women elaborated how they used ICT in Singapore and the meaning it took in their lives here. The majority of the women we interviewed had been in Singapore for more than five years (n= 33), although this was unintentional. We had sampled from the pool of existing respondents (n=201) in such a way as to elicit perspectives from FDWs of different family backgrounds (i.e. marital status and number of dependents) and work experiences (number of contract terms in Singapore and whether the domestic worker has a day-off). By virtue of a face-to-face interview, we could only meet up with people who were willing to participate in a follow-up interview and could meet up (at a location of their convenience). These locations varied depending on respondent preference, which included places near their workplaces (e.g. coffee shops, parks), places of interests that they frequent (e.g. the mosque, NGOs where they attend courses, shopping malls) as well as their workplaces (i.e. employer's house, if they did not have a day off but were able to participate in the interview after seeking the employer's permission). In all cases, we ensured that we were able to conduct the interview in private and not within earshot of people that the respondents were acquainted with (e.g. employers, friends). Having a majority of women who had been in Singapore for more than five years ensured that they had accumulated enough experience about the use of ICT, partly because many of them did not have access to mobile phones for the first two years. For some women we interviewed it was not their first migration episode to Singapore, with a number (n=7) having entered Singapore previously. Drawing upon women's experiences, which for some spanned several decades, we are able to gain perspectives on how changes within ICT have impacted on their stay in Singapore and how this in turn has shaped their experience as FDWs.

### FDWs and ICT use in Singapore

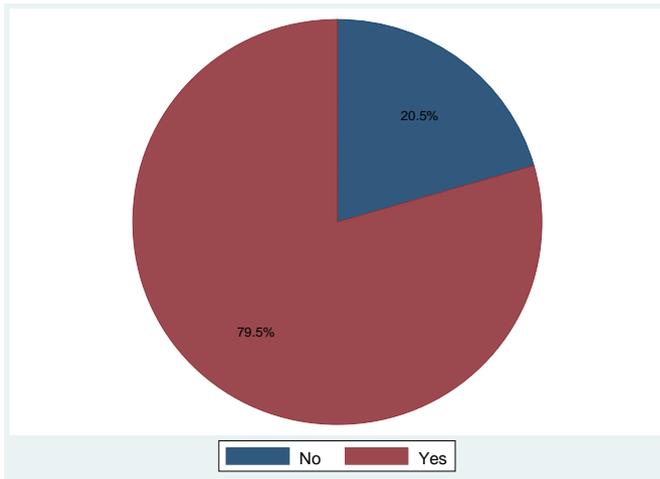
From our survey of 201 women we found that the overwhelming majority of women (90 per cent or n=181) had their own phone while working as a FDW in Singapore (see Figure 1). For these women, having a mobile phone was integral to maintaining communication with family and friends from their home communities in Indonesia. There was an overwhelming importance attached to the mobile phone for maintaining family ties. Access to regular communication through the mobile phone was deemed a necessity for most women who took part in the interviews. Eighty per cent of our respondents rely on SMS and regular phone calls to make contact with their family and friends in Indonesia (see Figure 2). Regular access to a phone meant that nearly all women also made the effort to use voice services to communicate with their families (see Figure 3), even though it was the more costly option. As noted by one correspondent named Reni: 'I prefer to hear their voice. I feel like at home...not far [away]...I am in Singapore but feel like in Indonesia'.



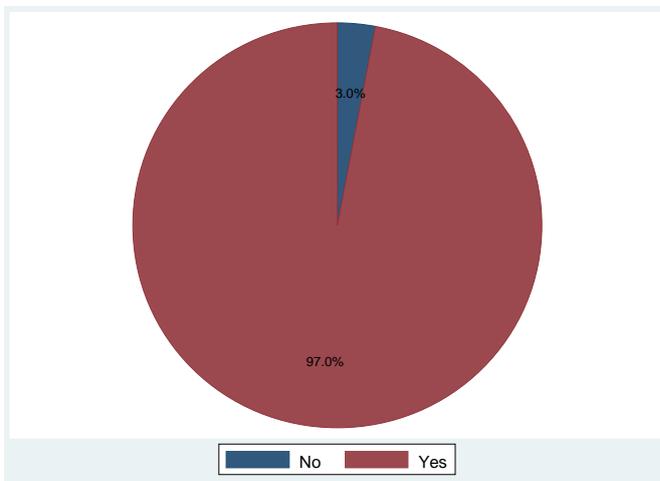
**Figure 1: Percentage of FDWs who has access to their own mobile phone (n=201)**

Notably, mobile phone use was a significant factor in allowing women without a day off to maintain contact with family and friends. Of our survey respondents, around one third (n=63) did not have access to a day off. Encouragingly, around two thirds (n=46) of these women without a day off reported that they owned a mobile phone and thus maintained regular contact with family and friends. When it came to contact with family, all of the 46 women with a mobile phone maintained contact through voice calls, and two thirds (n=36) through SMS.

Women reported a similar pattern when communicating friends in Singapore. Nearly all women (41 out of 46) maintained lines of contact with friends in Singapore via SMS, whilst 39 women maintained contact through voice calls. Social media platforms, in particular Facebook, were also instrumental in allowing women to maintain contact. Over half (n=25) of FDWs without a day off who had access to a mobile phone also used Facebook to contact friends in Indonesia, and approximately one third (n=15) used Facebook to contact friends in Singapore. As we show in later sections, ICT use, including access to the internet, gives women the opportunity to connect to a range of information that they otherwise wouldn't have access to. Therefore, as the majority of women without a day off were able to maintain contact with friends and family, there was greater opportunity for these women to maintain a sense of connection, thus potential reducing feelings of isolation during their migration.

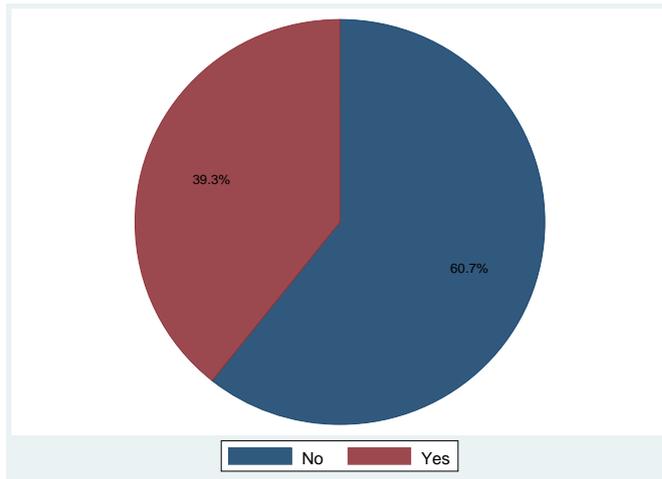


**Figure 2: Percentage of FDWs who use mobile phone to SMS family (n=200)**



**Figure 3: Percentage of FDWs who use their mobile phone for calling family in Indonesia (n=201)**

At the time of the survey in late 2012 most women (over 60 per cent) did not have regular access to the internet (see Figure 4). Our interviews, which were conducted in two rounds, the first in late 2012 and the second in late 2013/early 2014, pointed to a growing use of smart phones, and to a lesser extent tablets and lap tops, amongst respondents. This was especially the case in the second round of interviews conducted around one year after the initial survey. FDWs increasing access to ICT devices as reported in the interviews, many of which have internet capability, likely reflects the recent influx of relatively low-costs smart phones into the Asian market.



**Figure 4: Percentage of FDWs who has access to the internet (n=201)**

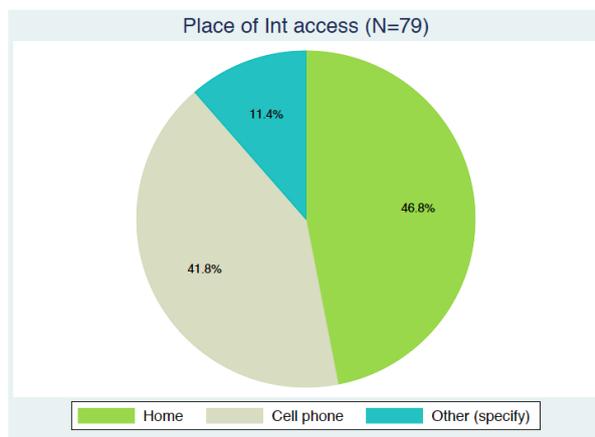
For women who had been in Singapore for over a decade their relationship with technology transformed significantly during this time. Where once they would write letters, or use phone cards from public phones to call home, the mobile phone has now become ubiquitous and is seen by many women as a basic entitlement of domestic workers. This was articulated by Raniah who has been in Singapore for 14 years. When she recalled her early days in Singapore she notes that in the past ‘I didn’t even know who to call. My kids didn’t have a HP [hand phone]. I only wrote letters to them... [But] nowadays, in this era, we have to communicate with our families, our children’.

These lines of communication with family and friends are not only important for maintaining relationships but are also seen as integral for preserving one’s mental health, especially given the often isolated nature of work for FDWs in Singapore. As Maesarah, a domestic worker who has been in Singapore for over a decade, notes ‘...if the employer don't let you use the phone, a lot of them very stressed, because the work is very hard, very tiring. Some really thinking [of] their family, how I miss to talk to them. They cannot do anything, only cry’.

#### ***Access to ICT: Managing ‘Multiple Selves’***

Rosita is a woman in her early thirties who is married with a son. She has been working in Singapore since 2007 and during this time has had two employers. During her first employment contract, which lasted two years, she seldom was able to communicate with her family and was only able to send letters to her son. At the end of her first contract she returned home to Indonesia. After a short while she came back to Singapore to continue working as a FDW for a new employer. At the time of her interview in 2012, she had been with her new employer for three years and had two regular days off per month. Like a number of other domestic workers we spoke to, Rosita had her own mobile phone. Her phone was purchased for her by her employer, who also allows her to access the internet at home by providing her with the password for the household Wi-Fi connection. Rosita is one of 37 respondents who have been able to access the internet at home (see Figure 5). Therefore Rosita mainly buys top up credit just to allow her to make voice calls. From this top up she gets 250 minutes of free talk time to communicate with her family. Beyond this she also uses a range of social media apps, including Viber, WhatsApp, as well as Facebook.

When she is at home she tends to use WhatsApp to communicate with her family, as this platform allows her to send messages for free, unlike traditional SMS messages through mobile network providers. As Rosita states, the cost efficiency of apps such as WhatsApp makes her happy as ‘now I can communicate with my family as I like’. While there was no indication from Rosita’s interview regarding the extent of her cost savings, we estimate – based on other respondents’ expenditure patterns on top up credits – that Rosita’s access to the home Wi-Fi network would save her approximately S\$10 to S\$20 a month, as she need not buy additional top up credit for internet usage. The fact that social media platforms can reduce the costs of communication was an important factor for many of the women we interviewed, although access is often contingent upon employers, who in many cases control the means by which women can use social media.



**Figure 5: Percentage of respondents with Internet access at different places**

Rosita notes the difference communication has meant to domestic workers in general. Not only has it allowed them to communicate and transcend the transnational divide that their work overseas creates, but it also allows an outlet for transnational mothering. For example, technology provides women the ability to check if their child is doing homework. The ubiquity of a social media platform such as Facebook is also important for Rosita. While the use of other social media apps may be limited to bigger cities, according to Rosita ‘In the village there is Facebook’. Given its widespread use, especially among younger family members in Indonesia, Rosita counts Facebook as a key way in which she stays in touch with her child. Rosita says her employer is happy for her to use Facebook. She stresses that she only uses it once her work is finished: ‘[it makes me feel] happy. It’s not hard to communicate with my child. If I miss them I can SMS, Facebook, I feel happy and in high spirits’.

Rosita points to ICT affording women a more multifaceted identity during their migration experience in Singapore. While ICT access has not altered their identities per se, it has allowed for a more multi-dimensional expression of their selves. ICT use has created an environment whereby migrant women can have instantaneous communication with family and friends. As a result, this much more readily allows domestic workers to straddle the transnational divide that their migration creates and allows a presence both ‘here’ and ‘there’. While assuming the role of migrant worker, migrant women like Rosita are also able to perform their mothering role simultaneously through the use of ICT despite being

physically away from their children. For example, ICT allows Rosita to check in on her son's progress via Facebook and telephone. This is consistent with other studies of mobile phone use amongst FDWs in Singapore. For example Chib *et al.* (2014: 74) note that these women as 'transnational mothers utilize...mobile phones actively as a tool to renegotiate and redefine identities and relationships that created fissures in their sense of self'.

### ***Negotiating Access to ICTs: Issues of Trust, Limits and Surveillance***

Despite the widespread nature of mobile phone usage amongst FDWs in Singapore, not all employers are willing to provide access to mobile phone immediately. A number of the women we spoke to noted how they were only able to obtain a mobile phone after one or two years of service with an employer. Much like a day off, which is often perceived to be a privilege earned after establishing trust with an employee, accessing a mobile phone is to an extent embedded in the power relations between employee and employer. In many ways, negotiating access to ICTs is but a new iteration of problems experienced by FDWs in earlier years. For instance, telecommunications as a site of struggle between employers and FDWs has been documented in earlier work on domestic workers in Singapore (Huang and Yeoh 1996).

The fact that ICT use is ensconced within employee-employer power relations was made clear by Hera. At the time of our fieldwork she was single and in her mid-20s. She first arrived in Singapore in 2008 and has worked with the same employer since. She told us that when she first arrived her employer gave her a book that spelled out a number of rules that she must abide by when working in Singapore. According to the rule book she could not talk to her friends, wear a skirt, or own a mobile phone. So for the first two years of her stay in Singapore she didn't have her own phone. However, during this time her employer allowed her to use their mobile phone, so that she could stay in regular contact with her family in Indonesia. However, after this initial two year period, Hera now has her own mobile phone, through which she can connect to the internet using the household Wi-Fi connection, which her employer has shared with her.

As Massey (2005: 95) reminds us, spaces, including virtual spaces which FDWs access through ICT are always 'the product of social relations' and the negotiations over these spaces are 'always ongoing'. While the use of ICT promotes new ways for FDWs to express their identities, we argue that the issue of access itself is always socially contingent. As both Hera and Rosita have shown, there is an increasing willingness of employers to provide their domestic workers with access to both communication devices and home networks. Coinciding with this access is a growing expectation that employers and their domestic workers will be in frequent contact during the day. For instance Ira, a woman in her 40s who has worked with a Singaporean family for a number of years, from time-to-time sends photo updates of her charges to her employers on platforms such as WhatsApp. However there is to an extent a conditional element that underpins this access. For example in Rosita's case, despite her employer's willingness to provide her a mobile phone and Wi-Fi, Rosita is unclear whether the phone that has been given to her is actually hers to keep after she finishes with her current employer: 'I am allowed to use it, but I don't own it...[so] I don't know if I can take it home [to Indonesia] or not'. While it is fair for an employer to give a phone to the employee for use only during the period of employment (and take it back after), some employers have blurred this employer-employee boundary by giving their domestic workers mobile phones and laptops as gifts. We contrast Rosita's unclear

ownership of the mobile phone to Novi and Rohana, who were provided with mobile device from their employers. Novi, a divorcee in her mid-30s, has been working for one employer for the past 14 years. Her employer treats her like 'family', insofar that they provide her with 'everything' that she needs and wants, ranging from basic necessities like shampoo, clothes and shoes to mobile devices. During her second and fourth year of employment, she was given a mobile phone and a laptop respectively. Rohana, a single woman in her early 30s, had bought a tablet on her own which cost S\$170. She recalled telling her boss about the purchase and requesting for the house Wi-Fi password: 'My boss said they wanted to buy it for me, so they paid me back that S\$170. They gave me the Wi-Fi password so I do not have to spend money on phone credit'. A clearer example of employer control over access occurred in the case of Desi, a single woman in her mid-30s who has been in Singapore for over a decade, a period during which she has worked for five different employers in total. While she eventually acquired a phone after working with her first employer for four years, she had restrictions placed on its use in that her employer takes the phone from her at 11pm in the evening. While Desi is not clear on her employers' reasons, she assumes it is to ensure that she gets adequate rest to be able to perform her duties throughout the day.

The position of the room that is typically allocated to the domestic worker may have implications for her access to the internet as well. As the room is often removed from the main living quarters, there may not be adequate signal strength to allow for a decent connection. Siti is one of the respondents who is able to access the home Wi-Fi network. However, she has to 'stay in the living room' when she wants to use the Internet, 'because when [she goes] back to [her] room, the Internet is off' as 'the signal is not so good'. She added that she "mostly use[s] the Internet [in] the day, from 8 o'clock [in the morning] to...9 o'clock [in the evening]". Although her employer did not state specifically when she can/cannot use her phone or the Internet, the fact that Siti stated such specific timings raises the possibility that she thinks she should not be 'seen' by her employers in the living room too late into the night as she should be resting.

While domestic workers are not totally reliant upon employers to access internet, as they can independently buy credit for data, this is an additional cost and limits the amount of data they can use. Therefore their access to the internet is intimately woven into the complex dynamics that exist between employer and employee. In this context, domestic workers are expected to know how to put the appropriate limits on their usage to ensure that their use of technology does not interfere with their ability to undertake their jobs.

The importance of knowing one's own limits when it comes to ICT came through in a number of the interviews. Yani is a 42 year old divorcee who is supporting her son through university and has been living and working in Singapore since 2001. During this time she has had four different employers. For her, having a mobile phone has become an integral part of her everyday life in Singapore. ICT has now become commonplace for Yani to the point where she communicates with her parents every day for a couple of minutes at a time. Similarly, she also checks in on her son every day. However, she said that her relationship with her employer has had a significant bearing on her sense of entitlement to use communications technology. Regarding her first employer she said she was so scared that 'it was impossible to use a HP [hand phone]'. With her second employer, for whom she worked for eight years, she didn't 'dare to ask for a phone' during the first year. It was after working with them for two years that she finally got her first phone. However, now Yani believes that her current employers are happy with her daily use of communication to her family:

Yes, they are okay. I know the limitation[s], I know when is the working hours and when is the time to rest. When I am eating or resting, I will call. Or at night...When I work, I will work, finish everything and then I take my break, and call. I am not like other people...For me, I follow the rules. When I work, I will focus on working.

We contrast Yani to Hera's friend who does not have a mobile phone of her own. As we understand from Hera, her friend relies on her employer's phone to make calls back home. However, she sometimes secretly (*curi curi*) makes her way to a public phone to call home. Hera had questioned her friend on her reasons for sneaking off to make phone calls since she had access through her employer's phone, to which her friend replied, 'if always call, no good right', as she perceives her employer does not like her to call back home so frequently. Like Yani, Hera's friend also knows her own limits when it comes to ICT usage. In her case, she imposes self-restrictions on the frequency of requesting from her employer to call home in order to maintain a good impression with her employer.

### ***ICT Use and Social Empowerment and Other Benefits***

Hera's case, once she gained regular access to ICT, exemplifies that ways in which ICT use can create a sense of social empowerment for FDWs and provide them with a way to link to information on a global platform. Not only do Facebook and other social media apps provide migrant women with the ability to sustain friendships with others who have also gone overseas to work as FDWs, they also get a sense of the issues that other domestic workers in Singapore face on a day-to-day basis. Through the internet access Hera is afforded, she also takes advantage of free social media apps such as Viber, Line and Facebook, which allows her to contact her friends who are living in Hong Kong and Taiwan (also working as FDWs) free of cost. In addition to maintaining transnational friendships, access to technology has also provided her with information about the situation of FDWs in Singapore:

... [I] know more about life here... [About] Indonesian maids or the problems they have. They always upload stuff on Facebook. I'm a member of their group so I know... So we know if there is a story on TV or in the newspaper, later on a friend will upload it [to Facebook].

According to Hera, this sharing of information and stories about Indonesian FDWs is not only limited to those who are already working in Singapore. Even those who are planning to come over to work can become members of this group and access the information that is shared on this site.

In addition, with increased access to ICT, some women, like Desi, have noted that domestic workers can use social media such as Facebook to try to find 'expat' employers whom they perceive may provide them with better employment conditions. While there is this widespread perception among domestic workers that it is possible to find 'better' employers through the Internet, none of the women interviewed had actually tapped on their access to ICT to do so.

Yani's story from the previous section highlights some important points regarding the ways in which ICT use plays out in the lives of domestic workers and the benefits it can also offer them. Yani is clear about the limits she places on her use and knows 'when it is time to work and time to rest', taking opportunities to call when she is on break or has finished everything for the day. For her, ICT use is clearly etched out and circumscribes her day with

'on' and 'off' time, thus demarcating work from leisure time. She stated that in her spare time she uses the Internet at home for

...reading news. Sometimes I search for food recipes. If I want to cook something, I will look for the recipes. Sometimes I read Indonesian news, or Indonesian entertainment. I use internet for a lot of purposes, for fb [FaceBook], Twitter, Whatsapp, etc.

Thus ICT allows Yani opportunities beyond the physical realm of the place of employment and etch out a multifaceted fluid identity for herself. Yani can simultaneously pursue leisure activities such as reading the news, or logging onto Facebook, as well as searching for recipes online, which lends itself to her job within the household.

## Conclusions

The stories of the foreign domestic workers in this paper point to opportunities afforded to them by ICT and how this has shaped their identities. Many of these women have been away from home for prolonged periods of a decade or more, a time during which there have been major shifts in technology in terms of its penetration within Singaporean society. The prominence of devices such as smart phones, computers and tablets provide domestic workers with a range of options for not just communicating with family and friends but transforming their access to information and entertainment whilst remaining within the physical space of the employer's home.

Beyond this, ICT use has also worked to provide a site for renegotiation of the embedded power-relations that exists between employers and employees. This renegotiation is especially pertinent if we consider that previous negotiations were often over the use of the home phone which was located in a communal space (Huang and Yeoh 1996). In the contemporary context, domestic workers not only have access to mobile devices but also to social media applications, which allow for more fluid and flexible methods of communication with friends and family. This increased access is undoubtedly changing the ways in which the employer-employee relationship is configured. A recent article in *The Straits Times* (Tan 2014) entitled 'Dealing with a new generation of maids' points to shifting expectations among domestic workers, including their perceptions regarding internet access. The article quotes employment agents who say that when it comes to internet access, some FDWs are willing to trade their day off entitlement in exchange for access to the household Wi-Fi passwords.

Thus while the shifting terrain points to new expressions of domestic workers' identities, we contend that in many ways the socially contingent nature of their access to ICT underpins the negotiations that take place between domestic workers and their employers. These negotiations are deeply embedded within the politics of space of the employers' home. Furthermore, it is ultimately the employer who controls access, whether it is through confiscation of the phone at a certain hour or by changing a password.

This reflection upon the socially contingent nature of many domestic workers access to the internet and ICT in general is not to dispute the opportunities and benefits such access can

provide. Rather, we seek to provide a more complicated perspective on how ICT access can influence the everyday practices of FDWs in Singapore. Furthermore, we draw attention to the fact that the new transnational spaces that ICT use can provide domestic workers is, as we have noted throughout this paper, political in that it is embedded within power-relations. It is important to point out that these power relations are not always hegemonic, or unidirectional. Domestic workers, through their engagement with ICT, too can shape these relations. Thus as Massey (2005) suggests, the use of ICT within the household has reconfigured the physical and social space in which FDWs (and employers) inhabit. As such, given that place is 'an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories' (Massey 2005: 151), ICT can indeed work as a mediating factor to shape new contours to the constellation of trajectories amongst domestic workers in Singapore.

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