

Social Change in Asia

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Sex and Babies among Hong Kong FDWs

Loneliness, Freedom, and Desire

- FDWs face loneliness, worry, anxiety, and homesickness but chastity is expected of unmarried women in both the Philippines and Indonesia, and most want to be “good women”
- Most FDWs don’t engage in sexual activity, but some do: why?
- Free social atmosphere of Hong Kong and lack of social control? (lack of sanctions)
 - In Indonesia male family members police the chastity of women (fathers, brothers, husbands), but they are absent in Hong Kong?
 - Yet gossip networks are also powerful mechanisms of social control
- To express agency in their life (make their own life decisions)?

Good Women

- Most women want to be “good women” according to their culture
 - If Indonesia, this means a women would have an arranged marriage a a young age—so migrating delays marriage, or allows them to choose
 - Normatively women should be modest and only start relations when they are “in love” (whether married or not)
 - From the point of view of South Asian Muslim men, however, uncovered women are already immodest (even Muslim Indonesian ones) and thus available
- Stories depict men as aggressors
 - Constable interprets this as an expression of normative role behavior rather than necessarily factual depictions of each case
 - (anecdote of women covered at the mosque and then uncovered at the bar p127)
 - This shows female agency that contradicts normative behavioral norms

Men, women and sex

- Constable takes George's observation that Filipino and Indonesian women often mistake sex for love at face value, noting naïveté of young women p119, 127
 - (an alternative interpretation is that this is just the way women tell their stories in order to justify behavior that actually expresses agency)
- Yet Constable also concurs that tales of rape may be narrative conventions rather than reality
- Men are depicted as wanting sex with a variety of women with few commitments
 - Nikah marriage in a mosque at least makes the children legitimate, but men can already be married
 - Men complain that the women take children from them (especially boys), but women may have gotten pregnant precisely because motherhood is important to them
 - Even if women go home as single mothers a "failed marriage" is less stigmatizing than "single motherhood"

Public sociality

- On Sunday (day off) FDWs congregate in parks and other public spaces, and interested men talk and flirt with them
 - Also churches with English-language services, and fast food restaurants
 - Certain restaurants or bars are known as places that cater to men of certain ethnic groups
- Women are often introduced to men by coethnics who already have boyfriends

Terminology

- For Indonesians
 - Genitors (birth father) referred to as “fathers”
 - Husband = boyfriend? (says social worker)
 - Boyfriend = customer? (says social worker)
 - This is a relatively long-term gifting relationship, yet marriage can follow
- There is lore about how women bamboozle naïve young men, so who exercises agency may not be as gendered in real life as in the stories

Contraception

- Contraceptives are widely available over-the-counter in Hong Kong
- Indonesian *married women* have access to contraception
 - Government family planning programs
- Philippines government and church opposed to the sale or government subsidy to contraception
 - Filipinas are, in general, are less knowledgeable about contraceptives and may view them as immoral
 - Filipinas may be more confident to say no to boyfriends
- Women may convey trust in boyfriend by not using contraception (trust, hope, and intimacy)
 - “good girls [don’t use contraception and] get pregnant and are then seen as bad” p134
- African and South Asian men claimed to take responsibility for contraception, but then claim to sometimes get tricked

Abortion

- Both Filipino and Indonesian women oppose it on religious and moral grounds
 - It is illegal in both Indonesia and the Philippines (though Indonesia allows it in some instances)
- Abortions are legal in Hong Kong up to 24 weeks (6 months), but women need official approval
 - Condescending attitudes of providers is a deterrence
 - Many women resort to extralegal remedies
- Some men want children, most don't

Hong Kong Maternity Policy

- By law FDWs get maternity leave and cannot be fired
- Hong Kong law forbids discrimination based on pregnancy
 - Many pregnant workers are fired despite the law (usually the employer finds an excuse)
- Indonesian FDWs mostly get pregnancy tests before they leave, and agencies avoid placing pregnant workers
 - Some employers only hire older workers whose families are completed

Adoption

- Few Hong Kong FDW babies are given up for adoption
 - Indonesia encourages mothers to bring them back to Indonesia
- Fathers or husbands need to grant permission
 - Mixed race babies mostly adopted overseas
- Informal fosterage is common in the Philippines where divorce and contraception are both prohibited
- Informal fosterage is also common in Indonesia

Babies' positive function

- “babies can serve as an anchor, offering women (and sometimes couples) a sense of stability, opportunity and fulfillment amid the instability. Sex, intimacy, pregnancy, and babies offer the promise of family, belonging and rootedness.”
p153-4

Women's Citizenship and Belonging

- Citizenship privileges certain kinds of heteronormative family formations and excludes others
- Most privileged—legally married to a Hong Kong resident
 - Has right of abode as a dependent
- Legally employed
 - In exceptional cases their children get residence, but mostly they go home to the mother's country
- Temporary Short-term stay with visitor visa
- Asylum or torture claim
 - May get recognizance papers allowing them to stay and get care while case is adjudicated
- Least privileged—overstayers
 - undocumented stayers with no right to work

Strategic Marriage?

- Men seemed more knowledgeable about who could offer them residence and who could not (FDWs)
- Women often did not know the exact legal status of their boyfriends/husbands
 - Many women emphasized feelings and co-parenting as important criteria for their men
 - Daisy was as utilitarian as the men in assessing relationships, but she was unusual in this regard

Married to Permanent Resident

- Can be sponsored as dependent and obtain permanent residence in seven years
- If divorce within seven years, children may remain in Hong Kong, but the mother probably cannot (if she has no child she will definitely have to leave)

FDWs with valid visas

- If employer follows the law, they get maternity leave and can continue to work as long as they have FDW visas
 - Employers have no obligation to let the child live with the mother, but sometimes they do
 - Usually women take or send their babies home
- In exceptional cases married couples live in spacious quarters and their Hong Kong children are given visas corresponding to their parents'
 - Occasionally such a child might get permanent residency after 7 years

Immigration?

- FDWs, asylum seekers, and refugees are never “ordinarily resident” in Hong Kong, and thus ineligible for permanent residency
 - Judge Lam’s decision that they could apply for right of abode was vehemently opposed by pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong
 - Justice Cheung ruled they have right only to work, not to establish residency or bring families
- Immigration law prioritizes wealth and skill as criteria for immigration

Citizenship and Heteronormative Privilege

- Hongkongers opposed both mainland Chinese and FDWs from obtaining permanent residence through giving birth
 - Mainlanders—Hongkongers fear poor immigrants with a different history and mentality
 - However mainland children born in Hong Kong get the right of abode
 - FDWs—Hongkongers fear racial difference, poverty, and competition for resources
 - FDWs children have no rights unless the father is a permanent resident
 - (Do Hongkongers have a hierarchy of nations and ethnicities that are specters of comparison?)
- **Zone of exclusion**—no right to form families or choose where to live

What's heteronormative about privilege?

- Women who are married and dependent on Hong Kong men are the most privileged
 - Having children within such marriages gives the mother more security in cases of divorce
- Married couples who both live and work in Hong Kong can sometimes bring their children and establish families there
- These are the only ones who can have “family, belonging, and rootedness” in Hong Kong
 - Others will eventually have to leave with their children