

## **Asian Family Conference**

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**Dr Nirmala Purushotam, NUS speaking to Chan Kah Mei**

#### **Inserting the Maid**

Foreign domestic help or “maids” as they are called are a common sight in Singapore and emerging economies like Hong Kong and Taiwan. Currently there are more than 100,000 foreign domestic workers in Singapore, coming from approved source countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.

These domestic workers have become an indispensable part of our families, by helping out with household chores and caring for our children or elderly sick. More accurately they often relieve Singaporean women for the workplace.

The need for maids has come about with the increased demand for women in the workforce. While more women go out to work, they are still expected to take care of the home. Dr Nirmala Purushotam from the National University of Singapore conducted a study of the insertion of maids into Singapore families. Though families everywhere are affected by the global capitalism, the institution of the maid, she says is only available to certain groups.

“I don’t think it’s specific to certain classes but what are peculiar to certain classes are the resources available to handle the various demands and in that respect, the foreign domestic maid in a Singapore is a middle-class resource. It’s not a resource really open to everyone; not everyone can afford it. “

Now you would think – domestic help, servants and maids have always been around. So what is new?

“In those families, when maids entered the home, they came as supplementary helpers to women who were already there, full-time. They didn’t come to occupy a position in the family with respect to the fact that the women is absent from the home. While you’ve employed women to do the work for you, you’re there, present supervising and your presence is very much part of the equation. But in today’s home, when the foreign domestic maid comes to the Singapore home today, the reason she is sought as a resource is precisely because the women is absent from the home. To a large extent. Not always and not only but there is a significant aspect of the foreign domestic maid.”

She is not however implying that having a maid is wrong. But that one should be more aware of the social consequence of having one.

“In a way you allow the management of home and career to take place more smoothly Without the institution of the foreign domestic maid, a lot of us, including myself are not going to find it

easy to make time for career and work for civil society possible. We can expand our time by shifting certain responsibilities shifting certain kinds of chores to another person, I'm not denying that but in making that shift, there is a danger of a certain kind of politics that are being generated."

The politics of housework is one. Homemaking will become further demeaned.

Well the most critical aspect of it is that it has further marginalised qualities, activities, and spheres, which are already not given due consideration given the focus on economics. What's happened is that there is a further invisibility of, further demeaning of certain kinds of work because the status of domestic workers is not a high status in fact it is generally seen as a low paying, low status job. So work associated with the home gets further demeaned. With more of society depending on maids, policies to help unburden the load of juggling work and career – like childcare, maternity leave and flexi-time at work.

"Additionally the pressures that women faced having to juggling career and work often in other countries when you don't have the foreign domestic worker in the equation, it has fuelled a women's revolution, it has made women speak up and demand certain rights and demand recognition for what they do at home."

Join me again next week as we continue to explore effects of inserting the maid into the family.  
I'm Chan Kah Mei.