Abstract

This thesis explores the production of Bangladeshi domestic workers' legal status in Hong Kong. Bangladeshi domestic workers started entering Hong Kong in 2013 and they were expected to gradually become one of the major national groups of domestic workers. But within the first two years, 50 to 60% of them left formal employment. In the migration industry, that phenomenon was referred to as the “runaway crisis”. While the runaway crisis took place between 2013 and 2015, some Bangladeshi domestic workers still run away. I would like to reflect upon the migration experiences of Bangladeshi women recruited by two employment agencies and one small association of employment agencies and identify forces impacting their decision-making over their legal status. In doing that, I build upon feminist geography of domestic work and migration studies, Foucault’s work on governmentality and Ahmed’s affective economies which I extend by elaborating on her understanding of lovelability with which I engage to argue for a performative view of legality. The main methodology of the research is feminist ethnography where data were collected during 2-year long field work in Bangladeshi training centers and Hong Kong agencies. The research suggests that domestic workers' legal status is produced in a multi-layered process which includes social structures and power dynamics and affects in migration industry institutions.
Table of Contents:

List of Abbreviations ......................................................................................................................... 1

List of Tables .................................................................................................................................... 2

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 3

1.1. Researching legal status of Bangladeshi domestic workers ................................................... 3

1.2. Research aims and objectives .............................................................................................. 5

1.4. Structure of the thesis ............................................................................................................ 6

1.5. Summary ............................................................................................................................... 7

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework ........................................................................................ 7

2.1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 7

2.2. Structural factors and production of legal status ................................................................. 9

2.3. Migration industry and governmentality ............................................................................... 11

2.4. Affective economies ............................................................................................................. 14

2.5. Conceptual approach ........................................................................................................... 21

2.6. Summary ................................................................................................................................... 22

3. Project design process and methodology ..................................................................................... 22

3.1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 22

3.3. Research design ........................................................................................................................ 25

3.3.1. Multi-sited ethnography ..................................................................................................... 27

3.3.2. Comparative institutional design ....................................................................................... 29

3.3.3. Entering the field ................................................................................................................ 31

3.3.4. Choosing respondents ........................................................................................................ 34

3.3.5. Interviews .......................................................................................................................... 37

3.3.6. Participant observations ..................................................................................................... 41

3.3.7. Feminist approach and grounded theory .......................................................................... 42

3.3.8. Language ............................................................................................................................ 43

3.4. Positionality and ethics in feminist research ......................................................................... 43

3.4.1. Positionality ......................................................................................................................... 44

3.4.2. Ethics of care ....................................................................................................................... 46

4. Mapping experiences of Bangladeshi women travelling to Hong Kong for domestic work ...... 51

4.1. Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 51

4.2. Bangladeshi migrant domestic workers ................................................................................ 52

4.2.1. Sociodemographic characteristics of researched Bangladeshi domestic workers ............. 53

4.2.2. Runaways and the runaway crisis ..................................................................................... 57

4.3 Accounting for socioeconomic sources of vulnerability .......................................................... 60

4.3.1 Domestic workers as exploited labour ................................................................................. 61

4.3.2 Family contexts and vulnerability ....................................................................................... 62

4.3.3. Relationships with employers in Hong Kong .................................................................... 67
7.5. Praxis ................................................................................................................................ 147

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 149