

The making(s) of a domestic worker

Posted on November 10, 2015 November 10, 2015 by Migration/ARI

Months of preparation have led to this moment — when Indonesian domestic workers meet a Singaporean agent for the first time, in the hopes of gaining a job in the Lion City.

by Kellynn Wee

"She's shaking!" says the Indonesian recruitment agent, as we wait for the young woman standing before us to stammer a halting response.

"Am I so frightening?" says Shirley Ng jokingly, prompting giggles from the group of about forty women seated cross-legged on the floor behind the unfortunate interviewee. "Why you so nervous nervous? Slowly, calm down."

"I used to work in Saudi, ma'am," the woman finally manages to say, and we settle in for the rest of Shirley's interview.



(https://arimoop.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/img_0450.jpg)

A group of women who are candidates to work as domestic workers wait to be interviewed.

We are in Jakarta, Indonesia, where Shirley, a Singaporean employment agent from Orange Employment Agency, has offered to host Charmian and I for a day as she visits training centers in Indonesia to select workers she thinks she can market to employers in Singapore.

It has taken us a halting two hours to reach our destination. In Jakarta, the word *macet* — meaning 'traffic jam' — is a surefire way of striking up an instant connection with any one of its denizens, and we are getting accustomed to mincing along in the dusty heat as motorcycles buzz past us like whirring wasps.

We are in an area that Shirley says is populated by training centers which prepare Indonesian women for jobs abroad as domestic workers, at destinations such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore.

It is at these training centers that women spend up to three months picking up a new language, accumulating the know-how of domestic chores, learning how to feed a baby, and practicing, on each other, the best way to roll an elderly patient on to a

hospital bed.



(https://arimoop.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/img_0427.jpg)

Many training centers have set-ups similar to this — rooms that contain several beds, toilets, living room sets or child cribs, to train women to perform household chores in homes which may use different appliances or have different domestic configurations.

Some employment agents from Singapore make visits to these training centers in order to interview and choose workers that they would like to match employers to. Some may already have specific employers' requirements in mind when selecting workers, while others are keeping an eye out for "quality" young women (as many an agent puts it) to add to their pool of candidates.

Shirley visits Indonesia almost every two weeks to make these selections. She will interview each worker personally — a process she considers crucial to the success of her business, which hinges on her ability to match a suitable worker to a suitable employer — and then collect their 'bio-data' (a candidate's resume, detailing her experience, abilities, and personal details) to show to her clients.



(https://arimoop.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/shirley_interviewing.png)

Here, Shirley is intently interviewing workers in a mixture of Bahasa and English.

An engaging, sharply charismatic woman who steps easily over potholes in high heels, she is now commanding the attention of a group of women who are getting ready to leave for years to work as domestic workers.

Women are being called, one by one, to introduce themselves and talk about their employment history.

Many of them are wearing badges on their chest that indicate their name, birthday, intended destination, height, weight, and age — an assemblage of the 'bio' and their 'data'.

Shirley first calls on women who have had work experience in Singapore, and makes careful notes as she talks to them. She told us on the car ride there that appearances matter to clients, often more than experience: she knows that she knows she will have trouble convincing employers to select women who are too short (Shirley often chooses workers who are above 148 cm), too old (that is, above 35 years old), too dark-skinned, too frail, or who may appear less than pleasant-looking.

"It's quite sad, but that's the reality," she says. "*Ah mas* ('grandmas') prefer good-looking girls, for example. If they get angry, they soften faster when the worker is pretty."

Women who are short, frail-looking or with "baby-faced" features may convey a lack of competence in being able to perform their duties independently. Based on their appearance, employers may perceive that they are unable to handle the rigour of household chores — such as hanging out laundry in high-rise apartments, carrying heavy bags, and reaching for items in high shelves.



(https://arimoop.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/img_0466.jpg)

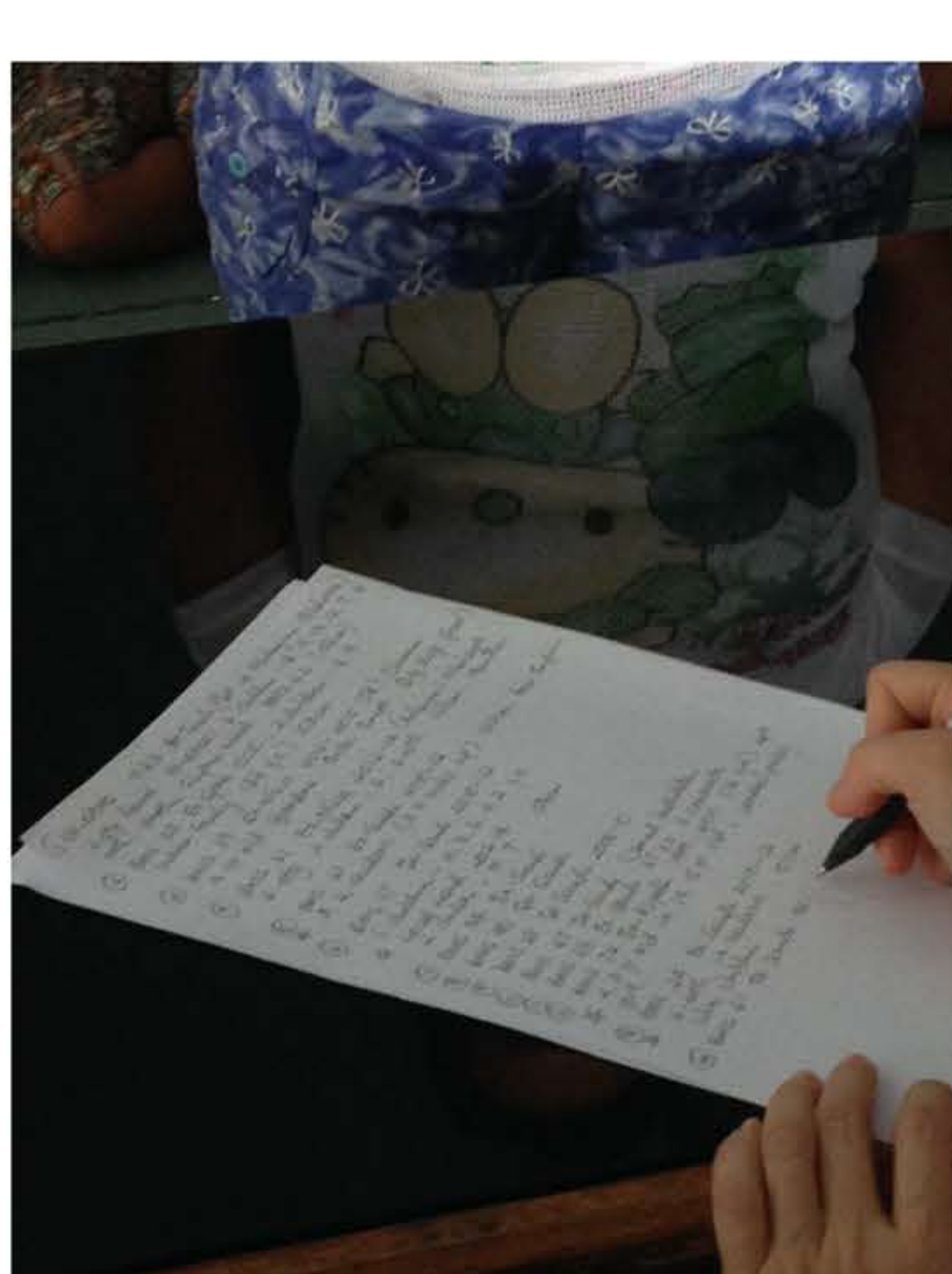
For many of these women, their physical characteristics may be the 'make or break' reason why they are chosen to be 'marketed' in destination countries.

Many employers express that choosing a domestic worker is a matter of *heng sui* — 'luck' — as they know little about the women whom they will invite into their homes for a two-year contract. Agents help to bridge this gap by offering advice, conveying a worker's previous work background, or, like Shirley, by interviewing them in person every few weeks.

Throughout these interviews, Shirley is trying to grasp a sense of the worker's employment history and the texture of her day-to-day life at her previous job. She asks the candidate about the scope of her duties, the size of the house in which she worked, if she took care of children, pets, or elderly people, what she cooked, and what her employers were like. She sometimes asks questions in English to gauge a worker's linguistic ability.

A woman who worked with Indian expatriates in Singapore speaks English with a tinge of an Indian accent. Another woman tells us about how she worked in a house in Bukit Timah with a Malay family.

A 24-year-old woman with short hair tucked behind her ears calmly reveals that, yes, she has had experience working in the Middle East: for two years, she cleaned twelve bathrooms, eleven bedrooms, and took care of nine children. She also cooked for the household of eleven. (We are all duly amazed. Shirley's darting pen puts a star next to her name, and her bio-data will be brought to Singapore to be shown to potential employers.)



(https://arimoop.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/img_0471.jpg)

Shirley makes notes about every worker that she speaks to.

The selection criteria, however, goes beyond numbers: while centimetres, age, and years worked play a part — many 'unsuitable' workers are kindly, but decisively, given only a brief interview — there is also a particular quality that Shirley is searching for.

It is something that Charmian and I found that we were also able to identify, after a while, putting our heads together to guess whether Shirley will star a worker's name or not.

As Shirley says, the training of a worker is superficial; what she is looking for is the right "attitude".

It is the possession of a set of connected characteristics: confidence, calm, responsiveness, and maturity, manifested in the way a woman may answer a question, her body language, or the way she makes eye contact. Because of this, sometimes Shirley will choose women who run contrary to her initial set of criteria.

Shirley often describes the women she chooses as "bright-eyed" — engaged somehow, or capable.



(https://arimoop.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/img_0486.jpg)

Shirley snaps photographs of the women whose 'bio-datas' she will market to employers in Singapore. Photographs are important, as they often form a striking first impression on employers and may strongly influence whether employers will select a worker or not. Shirley is concerned that the photos attached to their bio-datas may not be well-taken. To mitigate this, she takes extra photos of the women she has selected.

In an industry, a woman's body (the way she dresses, carries herself, or performs embodied tasks) is inextricable from the labour that she performs and the initial impression she will make on her employer. This may be why agents place so much value on being able to meet workers face-to-face, and why both employers and agents connect bodily comportments and presentations of self to particular inferences about how well a worker will fare in her new job.

So much leverage on this moment of encounter.

While many women navigate the interview deftly, some are tongue-tied, and lean towards the brink of nervous tears — even as Shirley tries to put them at ease.

Shirley also says that candidates who are able to hold their own in an interview with her are more likely to be able to brave the admonitions of an employer.

An hour passes, and Shirley has made her choice of ten women whose bio-datas she will bring home. The training center will agree to hold these women 'exclusive' to Shirley for two weeks — meaning that they will not 'sell' the workers to any other agent from Singapore, leaving Shirley to risk 'losing' a worker after she has made her selection. After that, the bio-data will go on the 'open market': still accessible to Shirley, but now without guarantee of availability.

Shirley asks the selected workers to take photos against a blank wall so that she can show them to potential employers. Then she thanks the group, and they disperse for lunch, and so do we — ducking back into the heat. The rest of the women must continue to wait, hopefully to be chosen by another agent, so that they can move forward on their migration trajectories.