

KALAMPAGAN SUNDAYS: NARRATIVES FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD WORK AMID POLITICAL AND PANDEMIC DURESS

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the author's experiences of conducting ethnographic fieldwork among Filipino migrant domestic worker (MDW) activists in Hong Kong during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21). It details the challenges confronted by MDWs as the pandemic intensified long-standing issues relating to migrant labor, including workers' rights and welfare, state exactions, and social discrimination, which have been at the center of campaigns by migrant advocacy groups in Hong Kong since the 1980s.

However, the exigencies brought about by the pandemic galvanized migrant worker organizations to innovate ways of sustaining movement-building in times of social distancing and to strongly articulate their demands on both the Hong Kong and Philippine governments during *kalampagan*. Literally meaning noise-making, *kalampagan* expresses the spirit of mass demonstration and public protest. Beyond discussing the rhetoric of political demonstrations, this essay details the practices of care work by

members of Filipino MDW activist groups. Such care work includes resource sharing, mutual aid, affective labor, public awareness campaigns, solidarity-building, and political mobilization in support of movements aiming to secure better conditions for work and for personal and collective well-being and empowerment. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, volunteering, and *pakikisama* or “with-ing,” the researcher came to explore and engage in a mode of political action that is often dismissed, if not demonized, in the mainstream. The first part of this essay analyzes MDW activism in the context of “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998) and “the politics of the governed” (Chatterjee 2004) in a time of intensified political and pandemic duress. The second part of the essay reflects on field work as a practice of feminist ethnography.

Keywords: labor activism, migrant workers, feminist ethnography, Hong Kong, COVID-19

ABSTRAK

Sinasalamin ng artikulong ito ang mga karanasan ng may-akda sa pagsasagawa ng etnograpihong pananaliksik at pagkilos ng mga Pilipinong aktibista na nagtatrabaho bilang mga migranteng domestic worker (MDW) sa Hong Kong sa kasagsagan ng pandemyang COVID-19 (2020-21). Idinedetalye nito ang mga hamong kinaharap ng mga MDW kaugnay ng mga isyu ng migranteng paggawa na may kinalaman sa mga karapatan at kapakanan ng mga manggagawa, mga singilin ng estado at diskriminasyon laban sa mga MDW mga matagal nang nasa sentro ng mga adbokasiya at pagkilos ng mga grupong nagsusulong ng interes ng mga Pilipinong migranteng manggagawa

sa Hong Kong, mula pa noong 1980s. Subalit ang mga kagyat na pangangailangan dulot ng pandemya ay nag-udyok sa mga organisasyon ng mga migranteng manggagawa na maging maparaan upang mapanatili ang kanilang kilusan sa panahon ng pagkahiwa-hiwalay. Pinaigting nila ang pagpapahayag ng kanilang mga hinaing at pangangailangan sa gobyerno ng Hong Kong pati ng Pilipinas sa pamamagitan ng pagsasagawa ng mga *kalampagan*. Ang “kalampagan” ay literal na nangangahulugang paggawa ng ingay sa kabila ng kawalang-pansin; ipinapahayag ng kalampagan ang diwa ng malawakang demonstrasyon at pampublikong protesta. Bukod sa pagsusuri ng retorika ng pulitikal na demonstrasyon, tinatalakay ng sanaysay na ito ang mga kasanayan ng pag-aaruga ng mga aktibistang MDW sa kanilang mga organisasyon, sa isa’t-isa, at sa iba pang mga migranteng manggagawa at kababaihan. Ilan lamang sa mga gawaing pag-aaruga ay ang bahaginan ng mga rekurso, pakikipagtulungan, pakikiramdam, kampanyang pagpapataas ng kaalaman, pakikipagkaisa, at pulitikal na mobilisasyon bilang suporta sa mga pagkilos para sa mas maayos na kalagayan sa trabaho, pati na rin sa mga personal at kolektibong kagalingan at pagsasakapangyarihan. Sa pamamagitan ng *participant observation*, impormal na interbyu, bolunterismo at pakikisama o “*with-ing*”, natuklasan at nakiisa ang mananaliksik sa porma ng pulitikal na pagkilos na kadalasang isinasantabi (kung hindi man pinagmumukhang masama) sa mainstream. Sinusuri ng unang bahagi ng sanaysay na ito ang aktibismo ng mga MDW sa konteksto ng “*long-distance nationalism*” (Anderson 1998) at “*politics of the governed*” (Chatterjee 2004) sa panahon ng krisis pampulitika at mapaminsalang pandemya. Ang ikalawang bahagi naman ng sanaysay

ay nagsisiyasat sa *field work* bilang praktis ng feministang etnograpiya.

Mga susing salita: aktibismo sa paggawa, migranteng manggagawa, feministang etnograpiya, Hong Kong, COVID-19

This article reflects on the author's experiences of conducting ethnographic fieldwork among Filipino migrant domestic worker (MDW) activists in Hong Kong during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21). It details the challenges confronted by MDWs as the pandemic intensified long-standing issues relating to migrant labor, including workers' rights and welfare, state exactions, and social discrimination, which have long been at the center of campaigns by migrant advocacy groups in Hong Kong. However, given the restrictions on embodied, face-to-face encounters, group gathering, and collective action that COVID-19 prevention and control measures necessitated, the pandemic not only exacerbated conditions of vulnerability and exploitation faced by an already precarious population, but also presented difficulties for mass organizing and mobilization. Organizations oriented toward the improvement of MDWs' welfare struggled to provide adequate support for migrant workers in the face of continuous contingencies and strained resources. Individual members of migrant organizations faced greater barriers to participation in organizational activities, thus challenging organizations to innovate ways of sustaining movement-building in times of social distancing. The exigencies brought about by the pandemic galvanized migrant workers to strongly articulate their demands on both the Hong Kong and Philippine governments during *kalampagan*. Literally meaning noise-making, *kalampagan*

expresses the spirit of mass demonstration and public protest. Beyond discussing the rhetoric of political demonstrations and their contexts, this essay details the practices of care work by members and affiliates of Filipino MDW activist groups. Such care work includes resource sharing, mutual aid, affective labor, public awareness campaigns, solidarity-building, and political mobilization in support of movements aiming to secure better conditions for work and for personal and collective wellbeing and empowerment. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, volunteering, and *pakikisama* or “with-ing,” the researcher came to explore and engage in a mode of political action that is often dismissed, if not demonized, in the mainstream. In the process, field work opened a space for exploring questions of subjectivity, positionality, relationality, intersectionality, and contextually embedded and embodied political activity. Thus, while the first part of the essay analyzes MDW activism in the context of “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998) and “the politics of the governed” (Chatterjee 2004) in a time of intensified political and pandemic duress, the second part of the essay attends to the affective and relational dimensions of migrant activism, and reflects on the very process of field work as a practice of feminist ethnography.

Migrant Labor Conditions and Political Society in Hong Kong

My initiation into the lives of Filipino migrant domestic worker (MDW) activists in Hong Kong began in June 2020, when I began attending their weekly *kalampagan* (noise barrage) in Chater Road, Central. Literally meaning noise-making, *kalampagan* expresses the spirit of mass demonstration and public protest, with its connotation of waking one who is asleep with a clanging. Such noise-making stood in stark contrast

to the past three months, which saw vastly reduced numbers of people congregating in Central on Sunday, the one day in the week that most MDWs in Hong Kong are able to enjoy as their legally protected day of rest. In March 2020, the Hong Kong government implemented strict social distancing measures and banned the gathering of more than four people, whether indoors or outdoors, emphasizing the need to “avoid the health risk of participating in social activities” (The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020). But as Hong Kong showed signs of recovering from the first wave of COVID-19 infections and relaxed restrictions on group gathering in June 2020, Filipino MDWs were able to spend their Sundays in Central again. Months of staying cooped up in their employers’ houses, forbidden from going out on their days off for fear of viral transmission, had left them hungering for not only the warmth of the company of their friends and comrades, but also the heat of political agitation and collective action.

As I walked to the protest site in Chater Road, I was struck by its raucous soundscape, so different from the quiet engendered by pandemic isolation, to which I had become accustomed. As I emerged from Exit K of Central MTR Station, I could hear people chattering, buying and selling, singing, dancing, calling one another. Lining the pavements between Prince’s Building (housing luxury brands like Cartier, Chanel, and Hermès) and Statue Square (fronting the majestic Court of Final Appeal) were cheap merchandise like plastic toys, soft drinks and street food, clothing, accessories, and various bric-à-brac heaped on sheets laid on the street. People, almost all of them women, were similarly huddled on cardboard and cloth sheets on the ground, selling or sharing home-cooked food, eating, drinking, napping, dancing, chatting, gambling, belting tunes with portable karaoke machines, talking with their loved

ones on video call, painting their fingernails, or buying underwear, earphones, or linen from Tagalog-speaking hawkers of mostly South Asian descent. These sounds of living and loitering merged and clashed with speeches of political agitation and singing, which made up the protest program.

Such polyphony and discordant imagery reminded me of my very first encounter with Filipino MDWs in Central on a Sunday, back in 2016, during a brief visit to Hong Kong. What I recall until now was the shock I felt at the workers' mass and their *liveness*, the bright colors, loud sounds, pungent smells, and flurry of activity that marked their presence, in stark contrast with not only the posh shoppers and cold glass-and-steel skyscrapers of Hong Kong's central business district, but also the images of dead, victimized, hidden, or otherwise silenced women domestic workers that I had grown up with. I was five years old when Flor Contemplacion was hanged in Singapore. In school, we were shown movies about her and other women like her. At home, my siblings and I had grown up being cared for by a series of helpers, and they always deferred to my mother, who preferred it when they did as they were instructed and then kept themselves out of the way.

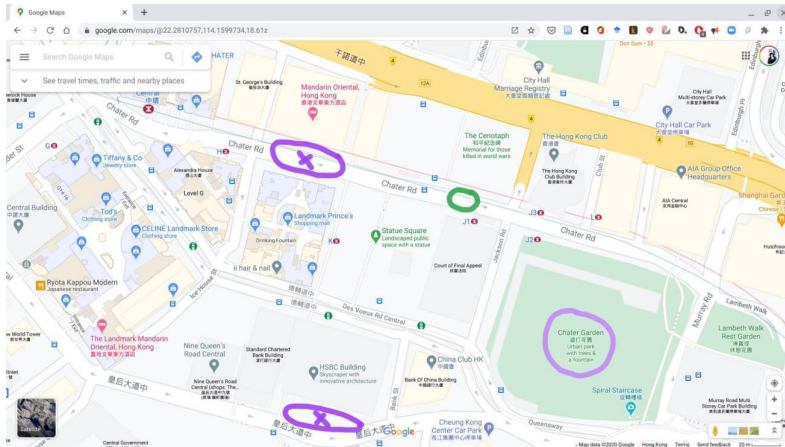


Fig. 1. The field site. The areas marked in purple are where the activists I joined regularly gathered. Chater Road is the primary site of the rallies I joined, but there were times when we held demonstrations at the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) in Admiralty.

On July 4, 2016, in Statue Square, booths and a stage were set up. That day, I learned, was the 31st anniversary celebration of the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK). UNIFIL-HK was founded in 1985, predating Migrante International, the first global alliance of Filipino migrant organizations, established in 1996 following worldwide campaigns by overseas Filipinos for justice for Flor Contemplacion (Migrante International 2021). Since then, numerous migrant organizations have allied under the banner of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK to raise local awareness about social issues faced by migrant Filipinos in Hong Kong and their families back in the Philippines. The 2016 anniversary celebration foregrounded the “People’s Agenda for Change,” outlining the need to develop the Philippines’ domestic economy through agrarian reform, national industrialization, and the protection of workers’ economic rights, so that Filipinos would no longer be pushed out of the country to make a living. This document was collectively drafted by the representatives of over 150 organizations allied with UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK, and was

addressed to the newly installed administration under President Rodrigo Duterte as much as to other MDWs. The celebration emphasized that the gains of the social movements of migrants in Hong Kong, especially the expansion of workers' rights, did not come "like manna from heaven" (said Dolores Balladares, chairperson of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK) but were the products of more than three decades of political organizing and lobbying with both the Philippine and Hong Kong governments. Like any struggle, Balladares said, it needed the energy of the workers' solidarity to exert pressure on the Philippine government to make good on its mandate not only to protect the rights and welfare of OFWs, but also to build conditions that would end the trend of "forced" labor migration that was institutionalized by the (older) Marcos regime.

The program featured folk and contemporary dances, singing, even a taekwondo exhibition–demonstrations that showcased the skills and artistry of the performers beyond their designated identity of "domestic worker." Yet the cheerful performances were undercut by a darker current. A contemporary dance performance by members of the feminist organization GABRIELA-HK dramatized the pains of forced migration and labor exploitation, including physical and sexual violence against domestic helpers. There was an a cappella performance of songs about how migrant workers were forced to serve the very institutions that oppressed them, but that their duty was not to simply bear the suffering (like what they were often told in church) but to change the societal conditions that perpetuated it. In media representations, it is often abusive bosses who are singularly demonized, but the problems that UNIFIL-MIGRANTE-HK emphasized were more systemic, from the labor placement agencies that the Hong Kong and Philippine governments continue to allow to operate despite unscrupulous and predatory

practices, to the lack of regulated working hours and clear standards for suitable living quarters for domestic workers (Yeung 2020).

Now, in 2020, the struggles and concerns faced by MDWs remained much the same, though aggravated by political and pandemic duress. A 2021 survey conducted by the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW Limited) detailed the financial and social impacts of the pandemic on MDWs. Foremost were increased monthly expenses, particularly on food, personal protective equipment (PPE), and toiletries. Such pandemic-related expenses, ranging from 100–1,000 Hong Kong Dollars (640–6,400 Philippine Pesos) per month, were not addressed by commensurate increases to monthly wages (MFMW 2022).¹ In addition to increased spending on personal necessities, the majority of MDWs surveyed by MFMW also reported increased monthly remittances to support family members who fell ill or lost their jobs, and to pay for additional costs for their children’s education in the context of digitally-mediated distance learning during the pandemic.

Compounding their financial difficulties were the harms caused by the pandemic to MDWs’ mental and physical wellbeing. MDWs reported increased anxiety and depression due to the isolation caused by pandemic restrictions on travel and group gatherings, including not only outings on rest days with friends, but also church attendance and visits to their families in the Philippines (MFMW 2022). Even when restrictions

¹ Between September 2019 and September 2022, the Minimum Allowable Wage (MAW) for MDWs increased by only around 2 percent, from HK\$4,630 to HK\$4,730 per month. MDWs are already the lowest wage earners in Hong Kong, especially considering that they have no fixed working hours. The MAW is much lower than the Statutory Minimum Wage (SMW) for all other types of workers, who were entitled to a minimum wage of HK\$37.5 per hour or around HK\$6,600 per month (computing 44 hours of work per week) in 2019.

on group gatherings were relaxed, sometimes their employers disallowed MDWs from leaving the house on Sundays, fearing that MDWs would become transmitters of disease. This is a practice that MDWs criticized as a form of stigmatization, for while it is true that crowding is inevitable when MDWs congregate in Central on Sundays, the same thing can be said of any public space in urban centers in high-density Hong Kong. Additionally, many public facilities and food and entertainment establishments remained closed or reduced their capacity to conform to social distancing guidelines, while workplaces and educational institutions shifted to work-from-home arrangements and remote learning. This added to the workloads of MDWs. Such additional work included tutoring or accomplishing homework for their children's employers, and entertaining, cooking for, and cleaning up after an endless stream of invited houseguests. One of my interlocutors² reported that her employers often made her stay up until 2 a.m. to wash the dishes after their guests had left, even when she had to wake up at 6 a.m. to accomplish chores before preparing her employer's children for their online classes. Another interlocutor complained about being required by her employer to shower and immediately hand-wash the clothes she wore outdoors every time she left the house to buy groceries, even on cold winter days. Such increased work loads, working hours, viral exposure, and social discrimination added to their stress. It was evident that the migrant care workers of Hong Kong society were themselves in sore need of care. But who was to provide them succor?

² I use the word "interlocutor" to reflect the dialogic nature of ethnographic field work, as well as the conversational mode of most of my interactions with MDWs. While I did conduct a few semi-structured interviews with key members of MDW organizations, in which I was the one asking the questions (specifically in relation to my research on *Dutertismo*) while they gave responses, for the most part I learned about the everyday life and organizing practices of MDWs through informal conversations at the members' *tambayan* (gathering and hang-out spot), in the course of carrying out organizational tasks alongside them, and at social gatherings like birthday and *despedida* (farewell) parties.

Along the road between The Cenotaph and the Mandarin Oriental, tarpaulins in bold colors were unfurled on the ground or strung along sidewalk railings. On these tarpaulins were written myriad social demands addressed to the Philippine government: scrap mandatory PhilHealth insurance membership and other state exactions! Junk the "Terror Bill"! Stop the killings! Oust Duterte! In front of these tarpaulins were activists holding microphones, rehearsing call-and-response chants and protest songs, distributing placards and leaflets with lyrics, preparing the sound system, and holding up the flags of the various activist organizations affiliated with UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK. Many of the women present were wearing "campaign shirts" in red and violet and green, with slogans like "Serve The People," "*Trabaho sa Pinas, Hindi sa Labas*" (Work in the Philippines, Not Outside), "*Makibaka! Wag Matakot!*" (Join the Fight! Fear Not!), and "A Migrant Woman's Place Is In The Struggle!"



Fig. 2. Migrants' political campaigns spanning a range of issues, from state exactions to Indigenous People's rights, to livelihood, to pandemic aid. Chater Road, Central, July 26, 2020. Photo by author.



Fig. 3. Protest with social distancing in Chater Road, Central, July 26, 2020. Photo by author.

I scanned the crowd for familiar faces—those whom I'd watched speaking in *Talakayang Migrante* or “Migrant Talks,” which is a regular webinar series streamed on Facebook Live, usually on Thursdays at 10 p.m., as many MDWs begin to wind down from their daily labors. These webinars, produced by MDWs for fellow MDWs, discuss issues relevant to migrant workers, including current sectoral campaigns, workers’ rights and labor legislation, tips for cultivating financial, mental, and physical wellbeing, navigating employment relations and work conditions, community news, national issues such as jeepney modernization, and ideological issues such as gender equality and indigenous peoples’ struggle. The first *Talakayang Migrante* discusses just wages, and was livestream-recorded on August 30, 2018 (*Migrante - Hong Kong*). The webinar series only became a regular weekly feature of the *Migrante - Hong Kong* Facebook page since local conditions - namely the

2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests, otherwise known as the Anti-Extradition-Law-Amendment-Bill (ELAB) movement - and then the onset of the pandemic restricted opportunities for in-person educational discussions. Aside from webinars, UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK also organized online film screenings, cultural performances, orientations, and other organizational events including weekly *kalampanan* through Zoom or Facebook whenever shifting pandemic regulations made it difficult for members to meet in person or gather en masse.



Fig. 4. Hybrid demonstration in Chater Road, Central, July 26, 2020. Part of the in-person protest program is a program on Zoom, convening representatives of progressive migrant Filipino organizations based in different countries. Photo by author.

I asked around for my contact, Leah,³ a labor leader, the friend of a friend of a friend, and somebody pointed me to her. After introductions, she told me to stick around after the protest program for an interview with her and another labor leader, the chairperson of the Filipino Migrant Workers' Union (FMWU). Meanwhile, she said, I could observe the demonstration and take photos. It seemed that many of the activists already knew that I was going to be there to conduct participant observation and interviews. The day before, Leah had already asked me to send her a brief of my research, as well as my interview questions, which she circulated among other activists across various organizations affiliated with UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK. I would come to learn the importance of my presence there being known to and sanctioned by the activist network: in Hong Kong, as in the Philippines, political dissidents and critics of various ideological stripes left of center are "red-tagged" by Philippine government agents or Duterte supporters as "communists," "criminals," and "terrorists," labeled enemies of the state, and their organizations, names, photos, and videos circulated in offline and online spaces, rendering them vulnerable to surveillance, doxxing, or trolling. In the Philippines, prominent environmental, labor, and human rights activists are often threatened, arrested, or killed. In Hong Kong, they were subject to insults and petty harassment from pro-Duterte factions, online and offline.

Adding to these tensions caused by homeland politics, MDW activists in Hong Kong also faced greater restrictions to public assembly and protest actions since the passage of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020 in response to the 2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests (Hogan 2024). Criminalizing activities that may

³ Not her real name. All names without an accompanying surname (e.g. Leah, Jonah, Thelma, Alex, etc.) in this text are pseudonyms, given to protect my interlocutors' anonymity and privacy.

be considered secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign or external elements to threaten national security, the NSL has been criticized for the threats it poses to freedom of speech, and its potential weaponization against dissenting and critical voices (BBC 2024). The NSL, in addition to the onset of the pandemic, contributed to stifling the 2019–2020 Hong Kong Protests. While the law focuses on offenses that may undermine the authority of China’s central government and security in Hong Kong, it has also caused migrant activists to be more careful in demonstrations, especially when it came to local political issues. The 2019–2020 Hong Kong Protests also had damaging effects on their own organizing activities, because they could not flock to Central and other places while locals also protested there. Even before the pandemic, many of their members had fallen away from the organizations because of the widespread disruptions to business-as-usual caused by the locals’ protests.

Indeed, the NSL has become an important constraint on cross-sectoral alliance-building for migrant worker activists. The precarious position of MDWs in Hong Kong society means that they have to be more careful about their activities and involvement in local issues and movements, lest they be arrested or dismissed from work. They could not, for example, openly support Hong Kongers’ calls for universal suffrage and sovereignty, or participate in the local protests that rocked the city for the most part of 2019 and early 2020 for fear of getting into trouble. While MDW organizations frequently draw on the framework of universal human rights to advance migrant workers’ rights (Sim 2003), they hesitate to publicly express solidarity with the pro-democracy movements by local Hong Kongers, instead preferring to focus on sectoral interests whenever they addressed protests and

demands to the local Hong Kong government. Because most of their demands and criticisms are addressed to the Philippine state, the Hong Kong government is lenient with their political expression. However, if they had started openly criticizing the NSL, for example, that would be a different story.⁴

In the periphery of the protest circle in Chater Road, dancing, karaoke singing, drinking, gambling, and chattering proceeded apace. Every now and then, police carrying banners and loudspeakers blasting government COVID-19 advisories (in Cantonese, English, and Tagalog) would walk by to ensure that the people in the crowd were maintaining social distance or else face a fixed fine of HK\$2,000 or about ₱13,000. Members of the activist groups, megaphones in hand, did the same, walking around and conveying the advisories in Tagalog for their fellow MDWs, many of whom disregarded social distancing rules when there were no police officers around. Although the protest circle had no more than thirty people that day, in conformity with current restrictions on mass gathering, they used no less than four speakers and numerous microphones: their messages and speeches and songs had to be heard over the din of the motley crowd, and clearly recorded by multiple mobile phones live-streaming the demonstration on Facebook for organizational members and social media followers who could not physically participate in the protest. *The people around us may not look like they're listening, but maybe they are*, the activists would later tell me in Tagalog. *We try to be as loud and visible as possible, so that they might hear.* The protest program concluded with a two-minute

⁴ That said, the transnational civic space created by migrant activism presents an opportunity for local Hong Kongers to articulate similar democratic demands while rhetorically tying such demands to the discourse of solidarity with migrant workers. While discussing the implications of the NSL for transnational solidarity-building and protest tactics is beyond the scope of this paper, this is an area that could be explored by further research.

kalampagan. The speakers enjoined the crowd to make noise to register their dissent against state repression and exploitation, and we started shouting slogans and *panawagan* (demands) at the top of our lungs, banging metal pots and pans, vigorously shaking plastic bottles filled with pebbles and coins, striking drums and gongs and metal sheets, drowning out all other ambient noise.

The issues that the labor leaders spoke about on that day were issues we would continue to speak about in the following months of my engagement with them. These included the plight of Filipino migrant workers and their families in the time of COVID-19, extortionate forms of state exaction including Overseas Employment Certificates (OECs) and mandatory contributions to the Philippine government's National Health Insurance Program, the dangers of the Anti-Terrorism Bill, the War on Drugs, human rights violations including and the extrajudicial killing of the poor, indigenous people, and activists, the ouster of President Duterte. MDW activists consistently fight for rights and better working conditions that would benefit MDWs as a class of workers in Hong Kong. However, these sectoral interests in their political discourse are not divorced from other concerns: local Hong Kong-based issues such as racism and class-based discrimination, national Philippine-related issues such as government policies, corruption, and state violence, and regional and global issues, such as human rights and international workers' solidarity amidst neocolonial and neoliberal labor regimes that feminize and devalue reproductive work (Constable 2007; Parreñas 2000).

The overlapping of sectoral, local, national, regional, and global issues in MDW activism in Hong Kong demonstrates that while many of the members and affiliates of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK, particularly expressly militant feminist organizations like GABRIELA-HK, embrace a feminist identity, their feminist activism

never centers the singular issue of gender. Rather, they understand their gendered experiences as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong through an intersectional lens, connecting these experiences to other facets of their identity, primarily their class, nationality, and migrant status, but also their ethnolinguistic identity and the risks they face as activists and live-in domestic workers. Their understanding of class and gender oppression is also distinctly transnational, as they recognize forms of exclusion and discrimination that they experience as migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and as OFWs whose identity is not only racialized but gendered, as seen in the global branding of Filipinas as “supermaids” (Guevarra 2014, 130-131), if not nurses, sex workers, or mail-order brides (Constable 2006).



Fig. 5. Activist groups reiterate their right to social aid and rest, as increased time spent by family members within the home during the pandemic also increased the work loads and working hours of domestic workers. November 1, 2020. Photo by author.



Fig. 6. Migrants Pride demonstration in Central, where the issue of gender discrimination is tied to other issues that MDWs face in Hong Kong: classist and racist discrimination, inequality, vulnerability, and overwork, exacerbated by pandemic conditions. November 22, 2020. Photo by author.

Although some of their demands, particularly relating to labor conditions and social discrimination, are addressed to the Hong Kong government, most of their demands are addressed to the Philippine state, as well as to fellow migrant Filipinos and sympathetic locals, who might be provoked into joining the struggle to initiate reforms in their home and host countries. Hong Kong in this regard functions as a relatively safe space for the articulation of political demands and dissent by migrant populations critiquing the politics of their home country—a function that Hong Kong has served since the nineteenth century for long-distance nationalists and political dissidents from various places in the region who have come to the formerly British-ruled territory

for safe haven. Indeed, many of the activists I spoke with said that it was in Hong Kong—not in Singapore or the United Kingdom or the Middle East, where some of them had worked before—that they became politicized. One reason is the established network of labor unions, activist organizations, NGOs, academics, and media practitioners in Hong Kong, which grew along with the rise of short-term labor migration to Hong Kong, particularly in the MDW sector (Sim 2003). For this reason as well, social movements by migrant worker groups in Hong Kong frequently get coverage in Hong Kong, Philippine, and international news outlets, thus exerting pressure on both Hong Kong and Philippine governments, raising public awareness, and supporting similar movements around the world.

Another reason for the politicization of MDWs in Hong Kong could be the density of the spaces migrant workers had to share, the commonality of their experiences and “everyday” and “life-times” (Highmore 2010) as domestic workers,⁵ and their simultaneous distance from and proximity to the home country. Such factors kept sectoral and political issues at the forefront of their consciousness. As one of my interlocutors remarked, in Europe or North America, the lives of Filipino migrant workers can be relatively comfortable, but in Hong Kong, “*Ramdam mo ang hirap*” (You feel the hardship).

⁵ Most MDWs have the same day off work (Sunday), and congregate in a designated vehicular traffic-free area in Central, Hong Kong Island on that day. This makes it easier for MDWs to organize and mobilize for political demands, unlike in other destination countries like Singapore or Gulf states, which have greater restrictions on public assembly, especially for domestic workers. Even when the right to assembly and political expression in Hong Kong was restricted by the passage of the National Security Law (NSL), migrant workers are able to hold public demonstrations and rallies, since they are not seen as a threat to China’s sovereignty. It is the activism of local Hong Kongers that is more constrained under the NSL.

"Lahat tayo nagkukuskos ng kubeta dito!" (We all have to scrub toilets here!) one of the activists shouted to the surrounding crowd that, at first glance, seemed indifferent to the protest event that afternoon. This expression was something I would hear often from the activists in relation to the recognition that though migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong may be differentiated by their ethnolinguistic, religious, and political identifications, age, educational level, and professional qualifications, and length and variety of overseas employment, as domestic workers in Hong Kong they shared the same sectoral challenges and cultural experiences. Many of them, for example, have had to deal with predatory employment agencies, apathy or disdain from the Philippine Consulate and Overseas Labor offices in Hong Kong, discrimination at home and in the host country, and gendered expectations with regard to family roles, contributing to the difficulties of long-distance relationships and parenting. Many of them have had to come to terms with becoming maids despite holding college degrees in return for thrice the wages they might earn as professionals in the Philippines.

"When my employers found out that I was a teacher in the Philippines, they asked me, why did I come to work as a helper in Hong Kong?"⁶ said Leah, who proceeded to explain how she barely made the minimum wage as a primary school teacher in a provincial municipality, how she had wanted to ensure a bright future for her daughter ("my princess") but could not because she and her husband, a tricycle driver, always struggled to make ends meet. It was difficult for her to get promoted at work because as a full-time public teacher and mother, she could not afford the time and money needed to pursue graduate education. *"Sino ba'ng may gustong maging utusan?"* (Who would want

⁶ We spoke mostly in Filipino, or a mix of Filipino and English. Sentences fully in English are already translated.

to be a servant?) she said, acknowledging the devalued nature of reproductive work, be it waged or unwaged. "I decided to work here for the higher salary."⁷

Rina, another of my interlocutors, chimed in with an account of how other MDWs chide her and her comrades for their activism: their fellow MDWs tell the activists, "*Bakit kayo nagrarily? Problema yan sa Pilipinas. Bakit niyo dinadala rito? Bakit niyo dinadala rito ang mga basura? Mga basura! Nagkakalat na naman kayo dito. Yung mga problema sa Pilipinas dinadala niyo rito sa Hong Kong!*" (Why do you hold rallies here? Those are problems in the Philippines. Why are you taking them here? Why are you bringing the trash here? You trash bags! You're littering here again. The problems in the Philippines, you're taking to Hong Kong!) Rina added, They call us "*mga baliw, mga salot*" (crazies, pests) and "*pangit*" (ugly); They say, "*Para kayong tanga*" (You're like fools). Rina retorts,

Ano lang yan eh, hindi ba kayo Pilipino? Saan ba nakatira ang pamilya mo, hindi ba sa Pilipinas? Saan mo pinapadala ang sahod mo? ... Saan ka uuwi? Di ba sa Pilipinas? ... So bakit mo ilalayo ang isyu sa Pilipinas sa isyu ng migrante? Eh sa puno't dulo, kaya naman tayo lumalabas dahil sa problema sa Pilipinas. Dahil wala tayong mapasukan na trabaho. Ang daming college graduate dito. Madaming nurses, teachers. Ako, Fine Arts!

(But the thing is, aren't you also Filipinos? Where do your families live, don't they live in the Philippines? Where do you send your wages? ... Where will you come home? Isn't it the Philippines? ... So

⁷ Interview with the author, June 21, 2020.

why would you separate the social issues in the Philippines from the issues faced by migrant workers? When you come down to it, the reason we go abroad is because of problems in the Philippines. Because we can't get jobs there. There are so many college graduates here. So many nurses, teachers. Me, I'm a Fine Arts graduate!)⁸

Rina's remark speaks volumes about issues usually tackled in the rich literature on the Philippine state's labor export program, which began in the 1970s, during the Marcos dictatorship. In May 1974, Marcos signed Presidential Decree 442 (Labor Code), creating state agencies (e.g. the Overseas Employment Development Board, the National Seamen Board, and the Office of Emigrant Affairs) specifically to facilitate the employment of Filipino workers abroad. The OEDB, for example, was mandated "to undertake ... a systematic program for overseas employment of Filipino workers ... through a comprehensive market promotion and development program," securing "the best possible terms and conditions of employment of Filipino contract workers on a government-to-government basis" and recruiting and placing "workers for overseas employment on a government arrangement" (Republic of the Philippines 1974). The law also includes a ban on direct hiring, mandating that all overseas contracts be brokered and authorized by the Department of Labor and Employment, and requires overseas Filipino contract workers to remit a portion of their foreign exchange earnings to their families and other dependents in the Philippines. The law thus formalizes the role of the state in brokering overseas employment for its citizens, and then ensuring that these overseas workers, emphatically constructed as *Filipino* citizens wherever in the world they may go, continue to fulfill the state-imposed obligation to

⁸ Interview with the author, June 21, 2020.

send dollars home, to support not only the needs and wants of migrant workers' families, but also the state's vision of export-oriented, debt-driven, foreign-capital-dependent "development." This notion of "migration for development" has been characterized by IBON International and Migrante (2009) as a "myth," for while migration "is doubtless effective in temporarily reducing poverty of particular households while remittances are received ... there is little reason to believe that it is able to make a dent on structural and systemic poverty" (2).

The state's program of providing global capitalist engines with cheap, mobile, flexible, contingent, and skilled labor able to deliver "world-class" service at Third World prices was initially conceived as a temporary solution to political-economic crises. At the time of the Marcos dictatorship, the state required dollar remittances to help offset trade deficits, finance ballooning public debt, and maintain social stability in the face of worsening poverty, unemployment, depressed wages, and crony capitalism and corruption siphoning funds from state coffers (de Dios et al 2021). However, through successive administrations that continued to promote this policy as a means of alleviating or foreclosing domestic crises (including communist insurgency), labor export has become a seemingly permanent feature of Philippine political economy and culture. With it have come legitimating official discourses that herald overseas workers as "*bagong bayani*" or the new heroes of the nation, and construct their departure as heroic sacrifice in the name of family and country (Rodriguez 2002). Such rhetoric of the heroism of workers whose lives are structurally rendered disposable was eerily echoed during the height of the pandemic (Sales 2021). While the government touted the significance of "essential workers" in healthcare, food, transportation, sales, and sanitation services, it failed to give them sufficient support in terms of material aid like PPE,

and health and safety measures. It is worth noting that healthcare, like domestic work, is a highly feminized sector, with women accounting for 75% of the workers in the industry (Gender in Humanitarian Action 2020).

It is this discourse of legitimation for the exploitation of Filipino workers within the country and abroad that militant leftist organizations like Migrante call attention to and contest. Time and again, I have heard my interlocutors use terms like *"taga-kuskos ng kubeta"* (toilet scrubbers), *"utusan"* (servant, literally "one who takes orders"), and *"gatasang baka"* (milking cow) to describe their relationships with their work, their employers (usually called *"amo"* or "master"), and the Philippine state, respectively. The image of toilet-scrubbing to portray the shared experiences of MDWs as a sector evokes intimate but unwanted dirty and degrading labor. It is also a symbol of the downward social mobility of many migrant workers, many of whom had a professional education, or had worked more esteemed jobs in the Philippines before migrating to Hong Kong for economic reasons. The common usage of *"utusan"* and *"amo"* to denote employee-employer relations in the specific context of domestic work (but also in other forms of contractual labor in service industries) bring to the fore the huge power differential between the two parties, the manifold dependencies of the migrant worker on their employer, and the vulnerabilities and potential for abuse that such a situation creates, especially in a place like Hong Kong, which requires domestic workers to live in their employers' abode and harness their everyday-times to their employers' shifting schedules, living arrangements, moods, and demands. The image of the Philippine government treating migrant workers as "milking cows" is an admonishment of not only the state's commodification of its own citizens, but also its failure (or reluctance) to generate sufficient employment, ensure a living wage for all, and

provide welfare services, effectively forcing Filipinos to leave their families and seek employment abroad to survive—even in the midst of a global pandemic, which saw record numbers of medical professionals leaving the Philippines for greater pay overseas (Reuters 2021).

Such failure to promote the economic rights of its citizens manifests not only domestically, but also transnationally. The Philippine state may extend limited citizenship rights (such as legal assistance and absentee voting) to overseas Filipinos through a vast network of Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLOs) in numerous destination countries all around the world, but as the sociologist Robyn M. Rodriguez argues, these agencies function more to enforce the obligations the state claims over its diasporic populations:

the state disciplines workers as particular kinds of citizens: citizens who pay their taxes [and] send their remittances to their families in the Philippines.... Ultimately, the state disciplines its citizens, who are ... the state's most profitable export ... to secure an income for the government's coffers and to discipline flexible laborers for the global economy. ... [But] in terms of economic rights, it makes limited interventions on behalf of workers. (Rodriguez 2002, 349)

The states of both sending and destination countries tend to treat migrant workers more as "populations" subject to transnational governmentality in the service of the interests of national elites and globalized capital, than as citizens invested with inherent rights and entitlements. This situation is captured by slogans often chanted by migrant Filipino activists in Central or in front of the Philippine Consulate General in Admiralty: "*Serbisyo, Hindi Negosyo*" (Service, Not Business")

and “Scrap, Not Suspension” (of state exactions, such as mandatory membership in privatized health insurance that may only be claimed in the Philippines). Such protest language that centers the onerous and exploitative nature of “state exactions,” the “labor export program,” and “forced migration” thus serve as counter-discourses to the efforts of the Philippine state to discipline its transnational populations under the signs of nationalism and development. These counter-discourses consistently foreground how the state’s labor export program not only separates families and exposes migrant workers to precarious working and living conditions in other countries; it also allows the consumption-driven Philippine economy to withstand crises, even as unemployment, informality, precarity, and depressed wages persist in domestic labor markets, especially in the context of pandemic-exacerbated economic recession.

In this light, it is not surprising that OFWs, especially migrant domestic workers, are invested in the politics of the homeland, because in many cases, they are unable to gain citizenship in their destination countries, where they are employed on a contractual basis. Unlike the diasporic Filipino *Balikbayan* (the dual citizen who resides and works in another country and returns to the homeland for occasional vacations), the migrant Filipino domestic worker in Hong Kong has no right of abode in the city, has no path to citizenship, and must leave Hong Kong once their contract is terminated; the standard contract is two years. They are also largely unable to integrate with the local population. The insecurity of their belonging to Hong Kong society because of their class, ethnolinguistic, and cultural otherness, as well as their lack of the right of abode in this territory, has meant that even though many of them had lived in Hong Kong for twenty or thirty years, have grown old there, and now feel distant from their relatives and communities in the

Philippines, the only “home” that they have and would have to return to is the Philippines. This is captured by the term “for good,” which they use whenever plans for the future come up, or whenever somebody flies back to the home country. “Are you going back there for a visit?” they ask. “Or are you going back there for good?” Many of those who had thought that they would spend just one or two contract terms in Hong Kong, and then go back home “for good” have been in Hong Kong for over a decade. Their precarious and marginal position in Hong Kong society and their negotiations with the Philippine state, combined with their reliance on social media to maintain ties with their families in the Philippines, mark their significance in relation to what Benedict Anderson (1998) called “long-distance nationalism” in the digital age. A huge part of what animates their participation in nationalist projects and the politics of the homeland is the overarching awareness that whether they return sooner or later, their futures are tied up with the Philippine nation-state.

This is the context of the oppositional politics practiced by migrant worker activists in Hong Kong. As Partha Chatterjee (2004) argued, “political society” arose as a consequence of governmental systems in “most of the world,” systems that exclude from its ambit “populations” that exist in conditions of informality and have limited access to public goods and services. Unlike “civil society,” which negotiates with the state within a legal arena, “political society,” which exists in a gray zone outside legality, mobilizes to collectively bargain or contend with the state in order to secure resources for the dispossessed and underprivileged. This “politics of the governed” is founded on shared experiences of marginalization and precarity as a counterpoint to often elitist liberal discourses and their assumptions of equal rights and equal knowledge of and access to those rights.

Learning to be Migrante: Subjectivity, Positionality, and Relationality in Political Activity

My initial aim for conducting ethnographic field work was to augment the gaps in my perspective on contemporary Philippine politics through more grounded and participatory research, especially with regard to “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998) and “the politics of the governed” (Chatterjee 2004). At the time, I was conducting my Ph.D. research on the discourses of liberal democracy and populism in relation to the rise of Duterteism, whose discourse circulated not only in the Philippines, but also globally (Reynaldo 2021). When I began field research in June 2020, I thought that I would go to Central for a few Sundays to observe political demonstrations and conduct qualitative interviews. I ended up going to Central for over a year until I left Hong Kong in August 2021 to participate in protests, educational discussions, outreach and welfare programs, and other organizational activities. I usually went there for two to four Sundays a month and stayed from mid-morning or noon until dusk, unless prohibited from doing so because of the government’s implementation of stricter protocols on social distancing, exposure to COVID-positive individuals, heavy rain, illness, or exhaustion. In that time, I joined two organizations: one, composed mostly of MDWs, focused on migrant women’s rights and welfare; the other, composed of advanced students and professionals in Hong Kong, focused on solidarity-building across various sectors and classes to promote human rights in the Philippines. Both organizations are affiliated with UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK and aligned with broader formations that espouse militant leftist ideology and politics.

For these organizations, I have written, copy edited, or translated statements, letters, press releases, reports, brochures, and programs; designed flyers, certificates, and protest materials; taken photos and videos to document events; procured and printed forms for filing labor complaints at the Philippine Overseas Labor Office in Hong Kong (POLO HK) and gone to POLO to accompany and assist complainants; attended educational discussions and film screenings and webinars on national, regional, and international political situations, migrant labor, and workers' rights; helped plan for and played emcee at events; gave speeches at rallies; conducted informative propaganda; helped provide migrant welfare services, like distributing face masks and sanitizers and doing blood pressure checks; made videos for political campaigns; created social media content; brought food for sharing with the group; gone to farewell and birthday dinner parties in the street (and did not dance); carried protest materials to the organization's rented storage facility; sold charity raffle tickets; and provided impromptu counseling. In carrying out these tasks alongside my interlocutors, I quickly came to see that Sundays are far from being rest days for migrant activists. Rather, Sunday is often the busiest day of their week, especially when there is always a *kababayan* who needs help.

As I came to engage more with the members and activities of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE, I desired my ethnographic engagement with MDWs to be not merely extractive, but to contribute to their campaigns for just conditions of working and living in Hong Kong, keeping in mind that "supporting the struggle of people whose lives are marked and marred by structural inequalities" is a central concern of feminist thinking and research (Davis and Craven 2023, 8). The processes of *pakikisama* or "with-ing" and *pakikiisa* or uniting with MDWs in their struggles and working

to effectively collaborate with them in carrying out various organizational activities pushed me to confront questions of subjectivity, positionality, and relationality in both political participation and research. In particular, I struggled to negotiate my ambiguous position as an “outsider within” (Zavella 1993, 56). Although I shared many political beliefs, cultural practices, and social realities with my interlocutors as I, too, was a woman, a feminist, and a Filipina, I was embedded in different material and professional contexts. My social location as a Ph.D. scholar in Hong Kong and a professor in the Philippines made me sensitive to not only questions of power and hierarchy in the research encounter, but also made me acknowledge the ideological and practical limits to my participation in MDWs’ political campaigns. For example, one of my interlocutors, Ate Thelma, guided me through the process of learning about migrant issues and activism within the political and ideological frames espoused by the organization. During our educational discussions (EDs), she would sometimes tell me that she felt intimidated and insecure when she spoke with me. She said that she was unsure if she was equipped to teach me, given that in terms of formal education, I was supposedly more educated than she is. But my formal education is very different from the kind of education her life experiences have afforded her, as an older indigenous woman, a single mother, a migrant domestic worker, and a labor organizer. These differences, while sometimes causing moments of hesitation, awkwardness, shame, and disagreement, could also be generative. In the space of dialogue between us, I was able to better interrogate my own standpoint, assumptions, and knowledge, and reflect on how these influenced my political beliefs and activity.

When my interlocutors among the migrant activists asked me for how long I had been living in Hong Kong, and I replied that I had been there for over

three years, they were surprised and asked, What took you so long to come to us? Didn't you know about our struggles here? I said, I did know. I did not say, But I didn't go for the same reason that I am usually the only non-MDW sitting and chatting and eating with them on the pavement behind the HSBC Building, or in the middle of Chater Road, or in the pedestrian bridges around Tamar Park. I said, I was very busy with research and seminars and conferences and teaching duties these past few years. I did not say, My privileged position as a non-local scholar with guaranteed funding from the Hong Kong government means that as a matter of bare necessity, I did not have to participate in the social movements of migrants here.

A senior member of the organization I was immersed in, a genderqueer lesbian whom I would call Alex, told me that though I was welcome to join their activities as part of my research, it might be more meaningful and beneficial for me and for them if I joined their struggles not just as a curious and sympathetic observer looking in, but as someone who learns to see from the inside by owning and embodying the position of "migrant" and "activist"—that is, a position that is at once vulnerable and agential. Among all my relationships with the members of the organizations, my relationship with Alex was perhaps the most challenging. While the other members just let me participate at my leisure,⁹ since they knew that I joined them as a researcher, Alex considered with gravity the implications of my involvement. They consistently reminded me of the difference and the privileges afforded by my subject position, and consequently the effort I must undertake to bridge that difference and attempt to inhabit their point of view, or at least to approximate it, to see things, so to speak, from

⁹ In Tagalog, we call this *saling-kitkit*, or one who joins a game but has no real stakes in the play, and thus is included in a limited and contingent sense, in the spur of the moment and according to immediate needs and circumstances.

their place on cardboard mats on the ground. "You must learn to be a migrant" was their favorite phrase to say to me. "*Masanay ka sa init, sa pagod,*" (Get used to the heat, to exhaustion), they would tell me over the phone while they washed the dishes or cooked dinner and I sat on my desk trying to write. "*Huwag ka magtago*" (Don't hide), they would tell me when they noticed me observing their activities more than actively participating in them. Another time: "You know the theory and the history, you have read the books. What does it matter? Now you have to practice. And struggle alongside the masses."

What does it mean to be a "migrant activist," especially in times of heightened precarity? How does such political consciousness emerge, and how is it organized?

When I first expressed interest in joining the mobilizations of Filipino activists in Hong Kong, it was Ate Jona who made sure that I followed through. For a few weeks after I first attended a protest in Central, Ate Jona would text me every day. "*How are you doing, Ading?*¹⁰ *Don't sleep too late. Are you going down to Central this Sunday? We have a Talakayang Migrante this Thursday, you should watch it if you have time.*" Or, after a demonstration, "*Have you gotten home safely? Always take care.*" At first I felt discomfited by these regular check-ins, and then I got used to them. Later, when the members of UNIFIL-MIGRANTE HK and GABRIELA-HK started teaching me how to approach and talk to MDWs, they would tell me how important it was to make people feel that I had them in mind, that they were seen, and that they were significant, especially when their everyday lives in Hong Kong were already marked with marginalization. As one of my interlocutors said, "You don't want to make

¹⁰ Ilocano for "sister," commonly used instead of the Tagalog "Ate," because demographically, Ilocanos comprise the highest percentage of MDWs in Hong Kong.

them feel like you're just talking to them so that they would attend our weekly demonstrations. You want to make them feel that you care about them, even when it's not a Sunday. You always have to consider what they might *feel*."

Within the organizations, ties akin to family also develop, as expressed in the terms of affection and practices of care with which members treat each other. Aside from the word *kasama* (akin to "comrade" or "companion"), familial terms like *nanay* (mother) or *ate/manang/ading* (sister), if not *ganda* ("beautiful") are also often used by members to refer to one another. Aside from discussions about history, politics, and migrant issues, members of organizations also make it a point to check in with each other regularly and share what else is going on in their lives. The practices of *pagbubukas* and *pagpapaabot* (literally, "to open [up]" and "to reach [out]," respectively), through which members talk about concerns that may affect their participation in activities and completion of organizational tasks, are de rigueur. If information or explanations are not readily offered, a member who seems to be struggling is outright asked what the matter is. When an explanation is given, the rest of the group is updated about the matter, and advice or assistance extended to the member concerned if necessary. The point of this practice is collective responsibility for one another, for the benefit of each and the entire group. When a member is ailing or tired or prohibited from leaving the employer's house, other members step up to pick up the slack, so that organizational aims are not derailed. In this way, the labor of *pakikialam*, in its senses of caring, curiosity, knowing, and intervention, becomes a praxis.

Aside from affective forms of organizational labor, migrant activist groups also center *pagtulong* or the provision of concrete help and assistance to

other MDWs in their activities. As discussed in the introduction of this paper, the pandemic increased workloads, working hours, and financial and health-related stresses for MDWs, without commensurate compensation or adequate rest. Many MDWs were also terminated on the grounds of illness, in violation of the Employment Ordinance. As such, labor organizations, in cooperation with NGOs like Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW) and Bethune House, periodically conducted outreach activities involving the provision of legal advice, health services, and shelter. Walking around Central to distribute face masks, hand sanitizers, and information kits containing leaflets about current COVID regulations and migrant labor rights, members facilitated educational discussions about common employment concerns, such as annual and sick leaves, termination, long service benefits, severance pay, and other entitlements, so that fellow MDWs can be better guided in asserting their rights. Such activities belie the common stereotype of activism as only a politics of protest; the activism of MDWs in Hong Kong show that at its heart, activism is a politics of communal support, of relationality and care, and that the work it involves extends far beyond weekly noise barrages.



Fig. 7. Migrants Caring Center. November 8, 2020. Photo by author.

The practices of *pakikiisa*, *pakikisama*, *pagbubukas*, *pagpapaabot*, *pakikialam*, and *pagtulong* of course, are not without conflict or tension. As in any organization, members have varying levels of commitment, willingness, and capability to care and take action. When not everyone in the group manages to fulfill their responsibilities, organizational labor is often unevenly distributed. Sometimes, leaders complain about members shirking their tasks and making excuses about being in contact with a COVID patient or not being given permission by their employers to leave the house on their day off, when actually, they used that day for leisurely activities. Despite this, members persist in the work of collective empowerment and service to the community in the belief that commitment to and participation in the work of activism depends on one's *kakayanan* or "capacity." *Kakayanan* is understood in both pragmatic and ideological terms as material and energetic resources, and political consciousness and sense of justice. As Alex said when I asked them about what motivated them to be an activist, "*Hindi ko matanggap na wala akong magawa para tumulong.*" (I could not accept that I was helpless to help.)

Such attention to feeling and the wellbeing of the whole human person, and the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging to one another demonstrate the feminist ethics of care and responsibility that characterize the organizing style of my interlocutors (Lindemann 2019). Such a style is made more important by the particular challenges that MDWs face. Tadiar observed that "the political potential domestic helpers bear as a group" derived from the "disruption of older support systems and the creation of new ones" (Tadiar 1997, 171). Uprooted from their social support networks, receiving barely any assistance from overseas Philippine government agencies, largely excluded from local Hong Kong society and affluent

spaces of consumption, and congregating en masse in designated public areas on Sundays, many MDWs are, perforce, driven to seek community and assistance from pre-established groups. Many of the MDWs in the organizations I am immersed in said that they joined the movement because they themselves had received assistance from these organizations, for example in reclaiming illegal fees charged by agencies, seeking shelter upon being summarily terminated, or dealing with employers who withhold wages, confiscate passports, force them to clean other people's shops or homes, or otherwise break the terms of their contract. In turn, they also wished to serve their fellow migrants in the community, as this heightened their awareness of their own agency and gave them a sense of fulfillment and significance. In this way, activism for my interlocutors is not only an imperative for survival under oppressive regimes, but also a process of emancipatory self-transformation and an expression of hope for the future. I wished to approach ethnographic research in a similar spirit. As Sim (2003, 485) writes, "research produces not just a reflection of the world as is. Rather, research is a performative practice that produces knowledge on which the world to come is shaped."

Conclusion

In beginning ethnographic field work, I meant to ask my interlocutors about their political practices, their thoughts and feelings about Duterte, and how the rise of Duterteismo affected their relationships or political views. In doing so, I wished to augment the gaps in my perspective and analysis of contemporary Philippine populist politics through more grounded and participatory research. As time went on, I realized that these questions were of lesser significance to my interlocutors than the everyday work of "*pagpapalawak at pagpapalakas ng ating hanay*" (broadening and

strengthening our collective formation) in order to more effectively fight for their rights.

The first and greater part of this essay discussed the challenges to community organizing, mobilization, and other fundamental activities of migrant activism caused by the pandemic and local political conditions. It detailed some of the strategies adopted by migrant activists, such as shifting to online modes of organizing and protest and focusing on the immediate welfare needs of MDWs to respond to these challenges. It also contextualized the political demands articulated by MDW activists within the frames of the Philippines' labor export policy, the long-distance nationalism of OFWs that rose with it, and the marginalization of MDWs in Hong Kong.

In doing fieldwork, I have tried to learn what it means to live as a migrant—not just “migrant” in the sense of somebody who has crossed transnational borders, but the experience of precarity and dislocation that that movement entails, especially for one whose upward economic mobility is gained at the expense of downward social mobility. Dialectical engagement and active participation in my interlocutors' organizing strategies engendered a process of learning and unlearning and unpacking the contexts of the subject-formation and political activity of my research participants as well as my own. Thus, the second part of this essay delved into the relational and affective dimensions of migrant organizing, and reflected on my own positionality as a researcher engaged in feminist ethnography.

My examination of a marginal population—marginal in both Hong Kong and the Philippines—contributes to understanding spaces for intervening in politics-as-usual, by presenting a site of possibility for negotiating power in the shared struggle to create

structures for more livable lives. Such an accounting becomes particularly significant in the context of crisis, which manifests both destructive and creative potential. What can and should be built, as institutions and accustomed practices fall apart? Answering this question demands a consideration of the conditions and practices that enable the many to sustainably participate in collective political action. In this regard, there is much to be learnt from the activism of migrant domestic workers, who refuse to be constructed as merely victims of structural inequalities, and instead carve for themselves, through sustained organizational care work and collective political action, spaces for exercising agency.

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