MOBILIZING MORALITY: MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORK IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

PUBLIC LECTURE
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Abstract
In the United Arab Emirates, migrant domestic workers are technically unfree workers whose legal status ties them to an employer-sponsor whose permission they must secure in order to transfer jobs. In the absence of labor protection and regulation, how does this state of unfreedom shape labor conditions? This talk addresses this question through an examination of the labor experiences of migrant domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates. Based on interviews with 85 Filipino domestic workers in Dubai, this talk shows how the unfreedom of domestic workers and their absence of labor protection has resulted not necessarily in uniform abuse. Instead, we see the emergence of a diversity of experiences. Labor standards for domestic workers in Dubai fall into three categories of a) dehumanization; b) infantilization; c) recognition. This talk describes and explains this diversity, arguing that unfreedom cannot be simply reduced to "human trafficking" or "structural violence" for the reason that it is a morally mediated experience. How domestic workers accordingly try to mobilize morality so as to reduce the likelihood of their abuse is discussed.

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Rhacel Salazar Parreñas is Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California. She has done research on the experiences of migrant workers from the Philippines and has also examined the constitution of gender in women’s migration. She as also discussed construction of migrant workers as “unfree laborers” in her recent work. Her current project is mainly focussed on the experiences of migrant domestic workers in Dubai and Singapore.

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