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"I DIDN'T COME HERE TO DO HOUSEWORK"

Relocating "Swedish" practices and ideologies in the context of the global division of labour: the case of expatriate households in Singapore

Abstract

On the basis of 13 in-depth interviews with Swedish women and one month of ethnographic work in the Swedish community in Singapore in 2009, this article examines how Swedish women, travelling from Sweden to Singapore as "expatriate wives" in the wake of their Swedish husbands, navigate gendered and racialised transnational spaces of domestic work and negotiating their changed identities as both housewives and employers of live-in maids in the household. How do the women justify their current division of labour in the light of Swedish national ideologies of work and Swedish ideals of gender and class equality?

Keywords

Sweden • Singapore • transnational migration • domestic work • gender ideologies

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1 Introduction

Globalised divisions of domestic work have been identified as a key arena where contemporary gendered and racialised power relations are played out and exposed. Domestic work today constitutes a pivotal dimension of the global capitalist system and structured within a racialised global system. As Edna Bonacich, Sabrina Alimahomed and Jake B. Wilson (2008: 342) observe, "groups of workers are located within a hierarchically organized, racialized labor system that differentially exploits workers based upon their racialized and gendered location. Dominant racialized labor groups (mainly White/European workers) are in general afforded more privileges than subordinated racialized labor groups (workers of color), who face the denial of basic citizenship rights and higher degrees of exploitation and inferior working conditions." The global domestic work sector could be described as a chain of interdependence, where European migrants, arriving with certain forms of capital, come to depend on the cheap labour of racialised migrants from poorer regions to provide childcare and homemaking.

This article discusses the politics of domestic work from the perspective of Swedish women employers in Singapore, and focuses specifically on how their views are intertwined with Swedish national discourses and ideologies of gender and social equality, yet negotiated through transnational migration. This article is part of a comparative study on Swedish migrant women in the USA, Singapore and Spain, which explains why the focus of this article is directed at the women's narratives. This does not imply that Swedish men in these households should be located outside the hierarchical relationships taking place within this "contact zone", but mirrors the scope of a broader research project. It is certainly not only the women who have become employers of domestic workers, so called "live-in-maids", in Singapore as a result of transnational migration. Their positions were rather (commonly) part of men's working contracts in Singapore. However, as the women were pushed into the household sphere, they were the ones negotiating the day-to-day aspects of this new situation. By looking at Swedish women as both migrants and employers, this article analyses the multiple ways in which processes of globalisation, transnationalism and "the new division of labour" create cross-cutting structures particularly among migrant women (cf. Anderson 2001; Widding Isaksen *et al.* 2008).

For understandable reasons, the discussion about global divisions of domestic work has mainly targeted non-Western migrant women's exposure in the transnational workforce (George 2005; Lutz 2011; Parreñas 2000). Research has focused on gender and domestic care work from a transnational perspective in policies and in migration from the perspective of domestic workers (Anderson 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Lutz 2011; Parreñas 2000, 2001; Zimmerman *et al.* 2006). Fewer studies include the position of the employer in the analysis (Gavanas 2010, Lan 2006; Latvala 2009; cf. Palmer 1989;). This article contributes to the emerging field of research by exploring the repositioning of Swedish migrant women, travelling from Sweden to Singapore as "expatriate wives" or "trailing spouses" in the wake of their Swedish husbands.

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The experiences of Swedish migrant women in the role of employers make it possible to analyse how (racial and class) privilege interacts with gendered aspects of transnational migration. This article strives to look at these practices as examples of complex intersections between new forms of privilege in conjunction with increased gendered dependence and (former) national ideologies of gender equality and workers' rights in a particular transnational space. I am mainly concerned about three issues: (1) how Swedish women reconstruct their national identities and ideologies as expatriate wives in a transnational migratory context, (2) how values of gender equality and social equality are simultaneously attached to and abandoned in these national ideologies, and (3) how (new) divisions of labour in the household are justified in relation to (old) Swedish national ideologies of workers' rights, particularly in relation to those of gender and class equality, in a transnational space. These inquiries highlight practices and relations created through intersecting discourses of *difference* in transnational migration, and raise questions about *who* is expected to do what and how identities are (re-)constructed around the privilege of *not* having to do domestic work.

I argue that the women used different kinds of myths and strategies to negotiate differences between their gender *ideologies* and *practices* of labour division in their homes, moving from a professional status to the role of a (temporary) housewife. In this shift, this article is particularly concerned with the inter-relation between ideologies of gender and social equality and the practice of employing domestic workers as a kind of gender strategy in Singapore. The concept of gender strategy is borrowed from Arlie Hochschild (2003: 15), who defines it as "a plan of action through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the cultural notions of gender at play" – in order to maintain *gender ideologies* (of gender equality) when they are challenged. Gender strategies are inherently related to the complexity of women's positions as mothers and wives in expatriate households (a term that applied to skilled foreign workers) are being played out in a context of racialised and classed relations between different groups of migrant women.

I understand these gender ideologies as intersecting with Swedish national(istic) discourses of Sweden as the most gender equal country in the world that shape women's understandings of gender and social equality (cf. Sharp 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997). In line with previous research conducted by Anna Gavanas (2010), I argue that the Swedish notion of gender egalitarianism is formulated by Swedes as something unique and thereby it is central to the women's identities as employers (Kvist & Peterson 2010). In a comparison with Spanish and British employers, Gavanas found that Swedes were particularly preoccupied with "mythical Nordic *egalitarianism*" and used moral discourses to construct themselves as "good egalitarian" employers. Gavanas discusses these negotiations in terms of "privileged irresponsibility". These discourses are here seen as shaped in relation to the history of Swedish gender equality policy.

2 Negotiating "Swedish" ideologies and practices relating to gender (and) egalitarianism

For the women interviewed, gender egalitarianism was an important aspect of their identities and relationships. Certainly, gender equality is a core issue in Sweden, which historically has been supportive of a state-funded general public welfare system (Borchorst & Siim 2008). Since 1970s, gender equality has been a key feature of Swedish politics, and in international comparisons, Sweden has, along with other Scandinavian countries, been identified as exceptionally "woman-friendly" or "gender-equality-friendly" (Sainsbury 1996). Despite this, Sweden has also been criticised for leaving little space for themes related to violence or racism (Kabeer *et al.* 2008; Pred 2000; Pringle 2010). Even though Sweden has been ranked as one of the most gender-equal societies in international comparisons, women in Sweden are still expected to assume most of the responsibility for domestic labour (including cooking, cleaning, childcare, care of the elderly and the emotional labour that accompanies all this) in dual career families (Evertsson 2004; SOU 1998). Thus, an important context for the women in this study is that they have moved from a "dual career" situation, including what Hochschild (2003) refers to "a second shift" of unpaid labour, to a situation of having neither a professional career nor unpaid work.

Despite existing gender inequalities in both the home and the labour force in Sweden, a belief in gender equality remains central to Swedish national identity. This ideology constitutes a key factor in both left- and right-wing governmental discourses and subsequently in narratives of both Swedish femininity and masculinity (Egeberg Holmgren 2007). Among Swedish migrants, an egalitarian gender ideology remains central to their concept of Swedish femininity and masculinity. It can therefore be argued that Swedish women carry a distinct Swedish gender equality discourse with them across national contexts that must be negotiated when moving from one system of gender stratification to another (cf. Gavanas 2010).

I understand the women as *transmigrants*, in the sense that they maintained close contact with friends and family in Sweden, read Swedish newspapers, owned property there, etc. This meant that their Swedish identity was preserved in the Singaporean society, in that their "daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and [their] public identities are configured in relation to more than one nation-state" (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1995: 48). Their continuous and close contact with Sweden partly explained why they continued to embrace Swedish norms, including a gender-egalitarian ideology that their lifestyles contradicted.

3 Expatriate migrations

As feminist research shows, transnational migration constitutes a deeply gendered phenomenon that organises and (trans)forms the lives of women and men differently (Brah 1996; George 2005; Parreñas 2001). Women and men inhabit different social spaces and networks in migration, and their social (re-)locations are reconstructed in different national and regional contexts as well as in relation to the labour market, the household and the community (Bao 1998). Research into transnational expatriate migration has shown that not only gender but also race and class restructure white migrant women's positions in the new society. As Pauline Leonard (2008) observed in her research on British "trailing spouses" in postcolonial Hong Kong, expatriate migration tends to position (white) women in changed relationships of power with men in the household and in relation to the wider society. Leonard argues that this situation is negotiated through (British) national ideologies of gender, sexuality and race. On the basis of her research of expatriate wives in Beijing, Daniella Arieli (2007) argues that although these

women experience increased wealth and leisure time, they also relinquish their economic self-sufficiency, careers and communities instead of dedicate their time to family responsibilities. Such lifestyles and living conditions have been identified as highly similar in different expatriate groups, regardless of where they live (Cohen 1977).

Transnational expatriate migration is here viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon in which gender, class, race and sexuality tend to be intertwined in complex ways. By highlighting these intersections, this article discusses how asymmetries tied to social locations infringe on each other in complex ways for expatriate women. As expatriate wives, the Swedish women in Singapore were often pushed into the role of primary care-taker as mothers and wives, as a result of transnational migration, thus reinforcing gender inequality within the household. Thus, while playing prominent (gendered) roles in the workforce and (masculine) global economy, these migrant women also juggled with the various positions of wife, mother and members of racialised, cultural or national collectives. By looking at the ways in which women in Singapore negotiate gender and race/ethnic politics, this article provides an analysis of the interpretations and reworking of social positions and an understanding of how these women navigate those positions and their meanings through local, national and global discourses in transnational migration (Sassen 2000). As Anne-Meike Fechter (2010: 1279) argues, expatriate women may "become the embodiment of their exploitative nature, which problematises the tendency to conceptualise, for example, global capitalism as an inherently masculine enterprise. Recognising expatriate wives as postcolonial subjects also significantly broadens the concept, in the sense that they live in the context of imperial legacies which have been much less examined." Drawing on postcolonial feminist theories, I locate these women's current positions as transmigrants in a colonial history in which white women in the colonies were protected from danger and assigned notions of morality and motherhood. In this sense, I am reading Swedish women's migration in the legacy of the colonial project, while also highlighting the manifold ways in which the Nordic countries take part in postcolonial processes (Mulinari *et al.* 2009).

4 Negotiating national ideologies in transnational fieldwork

This research project is part of a larger research project initiated in 2006 to ethnographically explore the multi-sited constructions of national identity in Swedish women's migration to the USA, Spain and Singapore. A multi-sited ethnography "moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualised by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the "local" and the "global," the "lifeworld" and the "system"" (Marcus 1995: 95; cf. Amit 2000). This particular article is based on 13 in-depth interviews with Swedish women in combination with one month of ethnographic work in the Swedish community in Singapore in the spring of 2009. The interviews lasted between one to four hours and were recorded and later partly transcribed. I contacted the women through a network email list and encouraged voluntary informants to contact me. The informants are anonymous and any information that could reveal them to other women in the network, for example occupation or education, has been changed. Most of the women were expatriate wives. Only two of the women were "expats" themselves. The women were between 35 and 57 years of age and most interviews were conducted in their homes when their husbands were at work. There are currently about 1,700 Swedes living and working on temporary contracts, mainly with Swedish banks and companies established in Singapore.[1] Nine of the women interviewed had a university education and a career in Sweden. As a result of their relocation they had been repositioned in the role of housewives in Singapore and, as such, were economically dependent on their spouses.

The in-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted with women from the Swedish Women's Educational Association (SWEA), a global network for Swedish-speaking women. Drawing on ethnographic studies from one single network of women has its strengths and its weaknesses. SWEA probably constitutes the largest network of Swedish-speaking women abroad and is an accessible arena from which to study Swedish migrant women's lives, interactions, diversities and similarities. SWEA is widely known among migrating Swedes and recruits members from all age groups. I assume that the network is selective in that there is an over-representation of women who have become housewives, rather than middle-class working women and expatriates. Thus, my purpose is not to generalise from these women's lives, but to analyse how this particular group negotiates Swedish ideologies of gender equality in Singapore.

All the women except three had domestic workers. Two of these three were over 50 years of age and had no children living with them. One woman declared that her family had chosen not to have domestic worker any longer due to the many "difficulties" attached to this situation. None of the interviewees had had a (live-in) domestic worker in Sweden and said that they could not have imagined themselves in such a situation before their visit to Singapore. Three women had travelled the world as a result of their husbands' work and had experienced similar lifestyles before. In general, most of the Swedes, I met lived in apartments in "gated communities", in Singapore called private condominiums, with town houses, guards, pools and shops, along with other "expats", mostly from other (north-western) European countries, some from Australia and a few from other Asian countries. Five of the interviewees lived in larger houses in wealthy suburban areas, where they said they felt more "integrated" into Singaporean society.

When planning my fieldwork in Singapore, I wondered how best to approach the women's changed migrant lifestyles with foreign domestic workers in private condominiums. Could I talk about privileged habits and/or about them as privileged subjects? How should I approach the issue of gender equality? However, on my arrival in the field, the politics of "live-in-maids" turned out to be the first issue that the women wanted to share their thoughts about. In the Swedish community, I was introduced to "horror stories" about "maids" who had used their lady-shaves without permission (but left "black hair" in them) or had stolen towels from the house. Both women and men wanted to talk about how to handle these issues and how they should act as "good" employers. What was the right thing to do with "maids" who on the one hand were clearly in a vulnerable position as migrants in Singapore, but who on the other did not obey the rules that they as employers had set up? During my research, I also stayed in a household with a migrant domestic worker, which I assume gave rise to the sharing of experiences. In this article, I also draw from what I learned from living with and talking to the domestic worker in the household where I stayed.

The views that were presented may have been influenced by the fact that the research was conducted by a Swede – someone who embodies a national ideology of social and gender equality. The women who became housewives in Singapore often felt questioned by their Swedish families as well as relatives and told stories of how they were sometimes called "parasites" by their relatives due to their economic dependence. These divergences also turned the housewife position into a disputed theme for the women who had shifted from a dual-earner model in Sweden to a housewife contract in Singapore and elsewhere (Lundström & Twine 2011).

Analytically, my interest is not oriented towards the question of whether Swedes are "good employers" or not, but is rather focused on *how* they talk about their positions as Swedish employers in a global context of iniquity and how practices as well as ideologies are negotiated in relation to such a narrative. Their narratives mirror what Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1968) refer to *accounts of justifications*, where one *accepts* responsibility for a certain act but *denies* the eventual unethical qualities associated with it. Justifications function, according to Scott and Lyman (1968: 51), as "socially approved vocabularies" in order to neutralise an act or its consequences, in which the act in question (*e.g.* employing a migrant domestic worker) is claimed to be acceptable in that particular occasion (*e.g.* living in Singapore temporarily) permits or even requires such an act. While this article does not deal with the moral dimensions of employing a domestic worker as such, the women's narratives are analysed as accounts of how they juggle with the various ethical dimensions that have been shaped by discrepancies between their ideologies, strategies and practices.

5 Becoming employers

Although the use of domestic workers is still relatively rare in Sweden, most Swedish households choose to hire a migrant domestic worker when moving to Singapore. This was most overtly related to the widespread use of domestic workers in parts of Asia. As Aiwa Ong (2006:196) argues, "having a foreign maid in the household has become an entrenched entitlement of the middle and upper-middle classes throughout Southeast Asia." While all the interviewed Swedes said that they never imagined themselves hiring a "live-in-maid" when living in Sweden and their views about this issue changed when arriving to Singapore. Here, I was told, hiring a live-in-maid was not only common but also very practical. Erika, a 39-year-old expatriate, explained – "We said that we wouldn't have a maid. But now we have got used to it." Knowing that other Swedes had domestic workers often provided a moral space for the (Swedish) newcomers to employ a domestic worker in their homes.

This particular group did not belong to the high achieving, time-pressed and upper-middle-class group of women often referred to in the debate about domestic work. For the interviewees, the decision to hire a migrant domestic worker was related to their wish to release themselves from the caring needs of children or pets, or the intensified cleaning requirements in a tropical climate; needs that were juxtaposed with the increased freedom associated with having a domestic worker. Having a domestic worker provided the women with time for socialising, shopping and, in some cases, working. Employing a domestic worker also included the possibility of travelling in the region, which I identify as one of the principal activities when (re-)constructing a class position in the Swedish community in Singapore. Moreover, it provided a base from which to avoid negotiating household duties with their spouses. This may help to explain why the women described their husbands as very positive to the idea of having a domestic worker. It was a way for *them*, that is, the women, to be relieved of household work. However, the main justification was the normalised standard of having a migrant domestic worker in Singapore. At present there are some 210,000 foreign domestic workers in Singapore (a figure that is steadily rising, The Guardian 8 July 2011); three-quarters are from the Philippines, one-fifth from Indonesia and the rest mainly from Sri Lanka (Ong 2006; Yeoh 1999). This amounts to approximately one foreign domestic worker to every six households in Singapore (The Guardian 8 July 2011).

6 "I didn't come here to do housework twenty hours a week"

Since the Swedish women in Singapore had rarely migrated for work, their relocation meant that they actually had time for household duties. The choice to hire a migrant domestic worker was thus motivated by other reasons than time-pressure, such as having time for leisure, travel, etc. Employing a domestic worker entailed a quick shift – from being used to having a "dual career", often with a "second shift", to a sense of living out one's dream, namely a once-in-a-lifetime chance to radically change one's lifestyle for a period of time; including having more time for oneself, travelling around the world, being relieved from doing domestic work, etc.

For the Swedish women in Singapore, life with a "live-in-maid" could be filled with adventure, travel and developing new interests. Instead of spending time quarrelling about how domestic duties should be distributed in the family, a "live-in-maid" relieved these women of such daily problems. As Vendela, aged 39, one of the highly educated "expat wives" explained,

> We have no grandma to call. […] Here one has to clean a lot more than at home. […] I thought I would have a nice, interesting, developing life here, even though I wasn't able to work, maybe, because I did not expect that to work out. But I did not come here to do housework twenty hours a week. It was not what I wanted to get out of our time here so we have a maid.

Without having a grandmother around to help out, Vendela imagined herself taking (sole?) responsibility for the household work; something that could only be negotiated through an external agent. Division of work thus constitutes a context in which gender inequality is negotiated through a matrix of racial and class hierarchies by shuffling these responsibilities to a third party, excluding men from the domestic equation. Vendela is the one who is "liberated" from household work and the person in the family who "takes care of the maid", instructing her how to deal with things in the house, etc. "We are anxious to be good employers", she explained.

7 Justifying privilege through discourses of difference

Erika, who migrated with her husband and their two children, aged two and six years, told me that most "maids" were much better off in Swedish families. "They have even become a little spoiled compared to their former Chinese families", Erika said.

> I am really careful to ensure that my maid is happy. She doesn't work herself to death. And sure, I help her and cook some food. But not too much, because then there is competition in the kitchen […] it ends with me baking on Sundays when she has her day off.

However, Erika declared that "I couldn't stay one single night in the room where she lives", but when she saw it she said – "this looks like paradise". "We're all different", Erika added. The idea of (racial, ethnic and/or class) differences justifies the different conditions that are applied to the domestic workers.

Olivia, who has lived abroad in different countries for 21 years together with her husband, underlined that the maid in their house had very little to do:

> She does not actually have a lot to do here. That's the way it is, but maybe it's boring for her. But she has a small TV in her room. She has never complained so… She has a very, very tight relation with the dog. It's her little friend. And she has a sister who works for another Swedish family here, whom she has very good contact with. And they have their small social world around them. They live in their little world. Eh, so yes, well, everything she does is very slow. She is in no hurry either. She does not have a lot on her schedule.

The Swedish women often had domestic workers for cleaning purposes and for taking care of children in their absence. As in Olivia's case, the family dog also justified the use of a domestic worker.

Two dimensions seem to be of particular importance when trying to understand Swedish women's justification of the division of labour in relation to Swedish national ideologies of work and equality. One context of justification is related to the very construction of *difference* that locates domestic workers, as other(ed) migrant women, outside a normative frame of gender and social equality, upheld in this particular transnational "contact zone" (cf. Pratt 1992). Other migrant women were expected to have different needs for leisure, living conditions, intimate relations, etc. – *They are not like us*. Such stances were intimately intertwined with racialised discourses of migration as a context of explanation. Women from the Philippines and Indonesia had few other alternatives than to work as live-in-maids in Singapore, so from the point of view of expats, these women came to Singapore to clean their houses. The hierarchical relationship between Swedish migrant women and migrant domestic workers thus takes shape from the unequal preconditions between industrialised and developing countries in conjunction with the presence of transnational class divisions in the local Singaporean context, into which the Swedish and the Filipina women were integrated from very different positions.

In a context of gendered dependency and social inequality, national ideologies of work and equality were managed and understood in terms of ethnic and racial constructions, both in relation to other racialised women from the Philippines as well as Indonesia and in comparison with other employers. Scandinavian employers were singled out as better employers than the Chinese. Similar results have been identified in research on Finnish employers in Kenya, who tend to "regard themselves as very good employers" (Latvala 2009: 95).

The globalisation of social inequality thus tends to revoke previous (Swedish) views and conduct of labour practices. Facing transnational inequalities provoke a downward comparison in which other people's unjust behaviour legitimises one's own – *We are not as bad as other employers*. Comparisons of Chinese and Swedish employers seemed to dissolve previous national ideologies of equality and labour conditions. During the fieldwork, I spoke to several Swedes and some domestic workers about their working conditions and learning that domestic workers worked irregular hours from Monday to Saturday (regardless of the amount of work) for a salary of 450 SGD (about 2400 SEK) and only Sundays off, often with a double amount of work on Mondays. Regarding living conditions, domestic workers could eat and have a break in a small room behind the kitchen or elsewhere in the house. Thus, by drawing on Swedish labour history and comparing local practices, Swedish women saw themselves as more responsible than other employers. Despite their views on responsibility for employees, they did not regard themselves as having to live up to labour rights as practised in the Swedish context.

It should be pointed out that working conditions for foreign domestic workers, regarding responsibility for the employee, medical insurance, accommodation, etc., are prescribed in the Singaporean *Employment of Foreign Manpower Act*. Even so, the Swedish employers were able to provide better conditions (such as giving more than Sundays off) or pay a higher salary than the required level (which they in some cases said they did). In view of the collective working situation for domestic workers and live-in-maids around the world (including experiences of sexual abuse, violence, etc.), the International Labour Organization (ILO) has now called for an "increasing recognition, nationally and internationally, of the economic and social value of domestic work and of the need to improve domestic workers' living and working conditions".[3]

Thus, while distancing themselves from labour rights and conditions as they would have been formulated in the Swedish context, the Swedish women were able to align with national ideologies and discourses of being *relatively speaking* good employers compared with Chinese employers. For this they did not need to adjust to Swedish labour rights and conditions, but could rely on being better than other employers.[5]

8 "Swedish" ideologies and practices

The question of gender and social equality in relation to constructions of Swedishness and "Swedish" norms as well as values were crucial for Teresa, a woman in her forties, married to a Swede and living in Singapore for three years. When moving to Asia, Teresa was "so surprised" at how the Swedish employers treated "their" domestic workers. "I came from Sweden, where there is so much pressure on democracy, gender equality and antiracism and that everybody is equal", she exclaimed – "What is Swedish here? Nothing!"

> It is the woman who is the employer, not the man. It is the woman who is relieved from the pressure. Is it because it is more gender equal? No! The man continues to avoid taking responsibility. Another woman simply carries this burden. It is still a woman doing the job.

Teresa was also concerned about the unequal relations between "the female employer" and "the female maid". Teresa was disappointed by how Swedes acted and wanted to develop another way of treating domestic workers. She argued that one should not simply adjust to what things were like in Singapore. "I say, it is you who are right, the newly arrived who are shocked by what you see

[the treatment of migrant domestic workers, author's comment]", she explained. "It is us who have lived here too long, who have got used to it and who think it's alright who have lost something. I want that reaction to linger", she said. In her analysis, Teresa thought that it was possible to have a respectful relation with a domestic worker, although added that:

> I am very afraid sometimes and I am critical to what I see is happening. My view is that there are women here who have lost something, who have lost control, who scream at their maid. They have problems.

According to Teresa, Swedes were not "better" employers than others. Rather, she expresses a critical view on the discrepancy between the image of Sweden and the practices among Swedes in Singapore.

9 Gender equality as a site of struggle

While gender equality was described as an important aspect of the women's relations with their husbands, they did not associate their role as expatriate wives with gender equality. The women's privileges within the family unit reflected the contradictions and vulnerabilities that unemployed married women have to negotiate when they traded their "dual-income model" for an expatriate life in Singapore that is characterised by interdependency and a lack of economic autonomy in relation to both their spouses and their Swedish relatives.

Jenny, aged 45 and married with two children, has lived abroad in different Asian countries as a "trailing spouse" for almost nine years. She did not spend her days cleaning and taking care of the home. Rather, she was very active doing "out-door" activities: swimming, playing tennis, doing voluntary work, etc. Despite her active lifestyle, she described herself as a "bored housewife" in Singapore. Still, she was reluctant to think about going back to Sweden. She explained that she was: "scared to death of moving back. I am spoiled". These feelings had to be negotiated in relation to the Swedish ideals of gender equality:

> "We are totally unequal. There is no gender equality in this relation. He would probably not agree with that, because he thinks that he does lots of things. But 99.9% of what is done comes from me. Then he reacts. Then there is action. But would he do something on his own initiative? No."

"I have resigned", Jenny declared. Jenny and her husband have a domestic worker from the Philippines, and Jenny would not want it any other way. Nevertheless, as Jenny's story mirrors, the women could not entirely reconstruct their sense of gender equality despite having outsourced the domestic work that would otherwise have locked them into household duties and unpaid labour. Even though a migrant domestic worker did the domestic work, Jenny felt that she had to negotiate other areas with her husband. As indicated in the previous quote, he did not take the responsibility she expected him to take without her instructing him how or when to do it. Although Jenny could not see any other way out, she remained dissatisfied with the situation. While Jenny does not restore her sense of gender equality through the employment of a domestic worker, gender inequality may serve as a justification for employing a domestic worker if the alternative seems to be worse. Maintaining her ideology of gender egalitarianism thus justifies the employment of a domestic worker, despite the *feelings* of inequality in the family (cf. Hochschild 2003).

10 Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed some of the ways in which Swedish women in expatriate households in Singapore situate themselves in-between the (new) global division of domestic labour and (old) Swedish national ideologies of gender and social equality in a transnational migratory space. While domestic work has been a key issue in feminist analyses historically, contemporary processes of transnational migration and globalisation structure this type of labour in new and complex ways. This article analyses how different groups of migrants, that is, "expat wives" from Sweden and migrant domestic workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere come together as "mistresses" and "maids" in family households in Singapore. (cf. Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003). This article shows that in their position as expatriate wives, Swedish women choose to purchase the cheap labour of other women, often other migrant women, in order to negotiate gendered battles about domestic labour within their families. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003: 2) formulate it – "in the absence of help from a male partner", women are "turning over the care of their children [...] and homes to women from the Third World." This may also give them a sense of not being deprived their individuality.

I have argued that Swedish women use Swedish national ideologies of gender and social equality in order to distinguish themselves from "other" (mainly Chinese) employers and to reconstruct themselves as morally superior "good employers", while simultaneously defining "live-in-maids" as women with "different" needs and opportunities. The result of these negotiations was twofold. On the one hand the women could reconstruct their national identities and ideologies in a transnational space by holding on to Swedish values as well as moral ethics and on the other hand negotiate these principles in a (local and global) context of *difference* in which they appeared as "good enough" employers. In other words, they could take advantage of the outsourcing of domestic work, but with "higher moral standards" than other employers (whether they actually were better employers than others is not considered here). Although they attached certain ideological aspects of morality to their Swedish national identity, which they could retain as transmigrants, they could simultaneously detach the same values (and practices) from "real" labour rights. Some of the women, like Teresa, explicitly endeavoured to reformulate the relation of inequity inherited in domestic work – not by giving up the division of work between themselves and other migrant women, but by framing it differently.

In these circumstances, this article strives to explore some of the many transnationally migrating expressions of Swedish national identity. By looking at Swedes as migrants, it is possible to capture the multiple ways in which gendered and racialised processes of globalisation, transnationalisation and neo-colonialism create cross-cutting structures among migrants in general and migrant women in particular. For the Swedish women in this particular transnational space, the use of domestic workers was framed by the local Singaporean context and what "things are like here" in combination with the practices of the Swedish community in Singapore in general, that is, "everybody has one". In that, these practices were often described as (and experienced as) temporary,

they marked a limited period of the women's lives, but not necessarily of the domestic workers' lives, whose migration was differently framed. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2002: 11) formulate it, while "globalization of child care and housework bring the ambitious women of the world together", they do not come together "as allies struggling to achieve common goals", but rather "as mistress and maid, employer and employee."

It should be pointed out that the racial and class privileges enjoyed by Swedish "mistresses" in this particular transnational space were mediated through gendered and heterosexual forms of dependency, which for this group of Swedish women foregrounds the simultaneous production of white privilege and gender vulnerability (cf. Lundström & Twine 2011). The symbolic economy and racial hierarchies in which Swedish transmigrant women position themselves therefore tend to challenge their national ideals and beliefs in Swedish gender egalitarianism and at the same time privilege them (in a deeply gendered way) as economic dependents of middle- and upper-middle-class white men. Gender subordination thus complicates their status as white and wealthy. Yet, even though they had (temporarily) relinquished their own careers, the Swedish women were to some extent able to distance themselves from the economic-dependent housewife position and reclaim their sense of individuality and Swedish identity in a privileged position vis-à-vis other (non-European) migrant women, through what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) refers to "the racial division of paid reproductive labor". By detaching themselves from "dirty work", the Swedish women were able to present themselves as respectable women – as white (European) women have done throughout history – in both national and transnational contexts (Palmer 1989). Thus, when renegotiating (Swedish) ideologies of gender equality in a transnational expatriate "contact zone" of racial and class inequality, the Swedish migrant women chose to retain their social and racial privileges within the family sphere; not primarily as housewives but as "mistresses" with "maids". The limited time of migration and lack of integration into the Singaporean society further created a sense of "moral space" in which they as Swedes could formulate their own justifications and accept practices that at the time were not (yet?) justified in the Swedish society, but at the same time drawing from both Swedish national ideologies and ideas of Singaporean behaviour.

An interesting aspect is that the gender strategies that they used to maintain Swedish gender ideologies still left them feeling dissatisfied with their expatriate lifestyles. As the women's accounts show, outsourcing their household duties did not completely lead to them reclaiming a sense of gender equality. Yet, outsourcing domestic work made it possible to dissociate themselves from such gendered duties, and simultaneously disguise the continuous gendered division of household duties in their families, thereby endorsing their status as independent women: Women with aspirations other than cleaning their houses.

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Notes

1. Numbers according to the Swedish Embassy in Singapore.
2. While Scott and Lyman (1968) analyse the linguistic devices, I draw from their discussion about the social dimensions of these "techniques".
3. Cited form the ILO homepage – http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/lang--en/index.htm (accessed 17 June 2011).
4. An interesting paradox was that while Swedish employers were often described as unused to dealing with domestic workers, being too friendly etc.; Asian/Chinese employers who obviously were used to this situation were at the same time foregrounded as crueler than Swedish employers.

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