

Can the Subaltern Resist?

A Collaborative Work with The Six Female Spa Therapists

A Discussion about Patriarchal Capitalism in Indonesia's Labor Migration System

by

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ABSTRACT

The increasing job opportunities abroad as spa therapists attract significant numbers of young Indonesian women. Although the placement process is conducted by licensed recruitment agents and supervised by government officials, migrant workers might be at high risk of experiencing work exploitation and physical or sexual abuse. To investigate the phenomenon of documented, yet still vulnerable, female migrant workers, this research conducts interviews with several former spa therapists who were working in Malaysia and some civil servants. This study highlights that individual or personal resistances could be a collective political struggles. Specifically, this research connects individual experiences with the bigger picture of social, economic, and political condition, which, together, constitutes a gender-based labor migration system. To do this, the research employs qualitative-interpretive research methods through discourse analysis and in-depth and open-ended interviews. It also employs an intersectional feminist approach to data analysis to reveal how Indonesian female migrant workers are marginalized and oppressed and the power dynamics at play.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	viii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Background Story.....	1
Research Question.....	3
Methodology	5
Using Feminist Approach: Reflexivity and Positionality.....	8
Arguments and Findings	13
Overview of the Thesis Project.....	15
2 HOW THEY MET THE TRAFFICKER.....	18
The Narratives of Participants	18
Juxtaposing Past to Understand Present	24
3 HOW ALL THE PROMISES GOT BROKEN	30
The Narratives of Participants	30
Bringing Back the Memories: Can We Undo This?.....	40
4 HOW THE SUBALTERN RESIST.....	48
Solidarity for the Oppressed	49
Resistance.....	51
Does this Mean the Subaltern Won?	60
Resistance under the Veil of Acquiescence.....	66

CHAPTER	Page
5 SEEING THEM THROUGH BUREAUCRATIC LENSES	75
Getting out from The Cage: A Brief Story After They're Home.....	76
Imagining A Transformative Culture in Bureaucratic Systems.....	78
Imagined Gender Equality in Bureaucratic Systems.....	80
Human Trafficking, Bureaucracy and the Question of Democracy.....	85
6 CONCLUSION	92
REFERENCES	96

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Top Job Positions of Indonesian Female Migrant Workers in the Formal Sector, January-December 2020	44

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background Story

Around December 2019, one of my colleagues chatted from WhatsApp saying, “I need someone to talk to, do you have time?” I had been in the United States to continue my education for four months. I scheduled some options for me and her to video call according to the time difference of US-Indonesia. The first thing she said when we finally connected: “I am confused, sad, and powerless.” She then shared a complex case about the repatriation of seven female migrant workers working in Malaysia. We are both public servants working for an Indonesian institution that exists to protect migrant workers. When this Malaysia-Indonesia repatriation case happened, she was under the department assigned to investigate the case.

On November 21, the Consulate General of The Republic of Indonesia in Johor Bahru (KJRI JB) sent a bureaucratic letter regarding the return of 13 female migrant workers from their work placement in Malaysia. According to the employment contract, they were working as spa therapists under a legally registered company. Based on the investigation and the interviews by officials, there were some work violations and allegation of human trafficking activities related to the case. They were forced to perform commercial-related sexual activities under the guise of reflexology or massage in a beauty and spa parlor/salon.

According to data from BP2MI (Badan Nasional Perlindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia), Indonesian migrant workers’ placement throughout 2019 reached 277,491 people, and almost seventy percent of them (192,173 workers) were women, working

either in informal “domestic” jobs or in formal sectors (BP2MI, 2020). There is an assumption that working in the formal sector is safer for women than being domestic workers living full-time in their employers’ homes. Due to the stated mission of protecting its nationals, the Indonesian government pushes recruitment agencies to provide more opportunities in the formal sector for women. However, the spa therapist case in this study brings forward some important issues that open a wider discussion about the assumed state constitutional protection of documented migrant workers in the formal sector.

These documented female migrant workers who signed an employment contract to be spa therapists, turned out to be trafficked as sexual-related workers in Malaysia. A contradiction, then, came out: not all female migrant workers could enjoy assurance of proper protection, even though their status is documented or legal. Moreover, amidst the process of seeking justice, the now-former spa therapists could not find proper support or action from institutional bodies which design to protect them. The case could not be continued due to a sudden termination regarding some administrative reasons. Those 13 female migrant workers received insurance coverage for the claims regarding sexual harassment, but there were no sanctions for the private employment agency until now.

During the video call with my colleague, I realized that I have a strong desire to call attention to more people to recognize how important this case is. Indonesia’s government has promoted working abroad as one of many solutions to the high unemployment in our vast labor force. In the name of inclusion, labor migration is also used as a symbol of women’s empowerment. However, the global labor migration system also complicitly exclude women from gaining a full constitutional protection either as

workers or as citizens. Exploring this tension, I use *exclusionary inclusion* as a tool to make obvious how an egalitarian, democratic state can exercise and perpetuate discriminatory practices towards its own members or citizens (Behl, 2019). From such unfair and imbalanced power relations, this research explores the vulnerability and agency of Indonesian female migrant workers amid the unequal gender-based labor migration system and within the bureaucratic system in play.

In order to investigate how exclusionary-inclusion is highlighted in the experiences of female migrant workers, this thesis employs a two-pronged investigation: First, I will investigate the migrant workers, and then the bureaucrats. Rather than viewing labor migration in the single perspective of migrant workers, I investigate a more robust analyses by placing the daily experiences of public servants in the dialogue. Placing each group-based experience (migrant workers and bureaucrats) provides distinctive angles in advancing explanations about the complex nature of human trafficking and about the *exclusionary inclusion*¹ that is experienced by women in Indonesia's democracy.

Research Question

This research aims to explore new approaches to understand the dynamics of labor migration in Indonesia by using the feminist lens throughout the research process. I offer a set of discussion regarding the contradictions of labor migration, political resistance, and democracy. First, I will focus on the role of colonialism in shaping the current

¹ See the work of Behl, 2019 (Gendered Citizenship)

patriarchal capitalism in Indonesia's labor migration system. Related to this topic are questions regarding the capitalist mechanism which discriminate women in the global labor market. Second, I take particular interest on how stigmatization towards domestic work or caregiving entrenches the sexist-oppressive culture towards women. From the discussion of discrimination towards women in the labor force in terms of domestic jobs, I want to make a transition to the discussion of opportunities of female Indonesian migrant workers in the formal sector.

There have been numerous studies highlighting the precarious conditions among Indonesian female migrant workers. Most of them concern domestic (informal) migrant workers— those who are migrating through illegal channels or are undocumented migrants (Asis, 2004; Hsia, 2009). However, there is still relatively little attention given to the problem of female migrant worker vulnerability, even though these workers are “legal” and working in formal sectors. This leads to the first question addressed in this study: Is Indonesia's government's objective to enforce opportunities in the formal sector sufficient for guaranteeing full inclusion? In other words, does working in formal sectors guarantee that female migrant workers will have a more dignified and decent job?

Furthermore, I add another layer of the discrimination towards women conducted by mainstream media. Dissenting the ongoing narratives of seeing women as powerless and obedient, I highlight that the six human trafficking victims in this study are also fighters. This resistance leads another important question: What should I, as a researcher, do to construct a more just narrative for these six former spa therapists? By using this research question as a starting point, I intend to have a better understanding of how power relations in the institutional level construct and entrench the gender-based labor migration

system in Indonesia. I propose to investigate the individual experiences of some former female spa therapists who became victims of gender-based violence, in order to identify and analyze every complexity that may highlight the abusive, however “legitimate,” labor migration system.

However, with all respect to the everyday resistance performed by the subaltern, Abu-Lughod (1990) reminds scholar to not romanticize the act of resistance. She further encourages us to use resistance as a diagnostic of power exercised by multiple oppressive cultures and actors (p. 42). Under this wisdom, I also bring another key issue in this research to criticize how democratic Indonesia crushes its democracy by using its institutional bodies. Related to this theme, I review the conflict of interest between the government institutions and corporations that have constructed an unfair labor migration system and shaped the precarious labor conditions against migrant workers in low wage sectors (Piper, 2015). In order to unravel this issue, the thesis addresses the following set of questions: What is the interplay between masculine domination and labor migration system in Indonesia? How do the intersecting capitalism and bureaucratic (yet political) system in the state bodies help us understand the gendered injustice ingrained in the current labor migration system?

Methodology

a. For generating data

I fully acknowledge that my small number of participants, sources of evidence, and motivation to be sensitive and reflective in multiple sociopolitical realities in the fieldwork do not meet the standard of quantitative tradition. Hence, I use the qualitative fashion and break it down into two phases. First, I select discourse analysis to explore

labor migrations dynamics in neo-liberal and post-colonial countries, especially Indonesia. By bringing the lived experience of female migrant workers, I will question whether such legal protection can guarantee its promise to meet the rights of migrant workers, especially those who are female and working in low wage sectors. In order to meet the objective, I acknowledge that I require supporting literature in the study of globalization, gendered-based migration, and capitalism (see the works from: Bouta et al., 2004; Dunaway, 2001; Mies, 1988).

The second phase is accomplished by using qualitative- interpretivist tradition to explore every invisible and inaudible structural injustice in the gender-based labor migration system. In my research plan, the qualitative method in data-generating ranges from “observing, with whatever degree of participating; interviewing in a conversational mode; and the close reading of topic-relevant documents” (Yanow, 2006, p.405). In the huge transition of social interaction during the uncertain time of COVID-19, I conducted my observations and interviews of the six spa therapists (Praba, Ratna, Suci, Inka, Gita, and Adit)² via Zoom. Besides Ratna (41 years old), all the other five participants are still in their early twenties and unmarried. Ratna is an elementary school graduate, Gita is a junior high school graduate, and the remaining four of them (Praba, Suci, Inka, and Adit) are high school graduates. Praba and Ratna worked as spa therapists in the massage parlor for eight months, Suci worked for six months, Inka and Gita worked for 3 months, and Adit had only worked a week. In terms of sexual related massage (*urut batin*³), three

² All of names are pseudonym. They already experienced pain, shame, and injustices. Writing their stories with pseudonym is a way for me, as the researcher, to respect them and avoid giving another psychological pain.

³ It will be further explained in chapter 1.

of participants (Praba, Inka, Adit) reported that they were exempt from providing *urut batin* services. I also use my access as a government employee to interview some colleagues from several provinces which serve as placement hotspots for the migrant workers. One of the strengths of this research design is an opportunity to connect “micro” individual perspectives and experiences with a broader “macro” phenomenon in the study of power by using the element of everydayness. Moreover, I conduct the research in a systematic and specific way by combining in-depth and open-ended interviews.

Even though the main purpose to connect with the six former spa therapists is for my thesis project, I am committed to building a continuous engagement with them. The collaboration of intellectual and political engagement between me, as the researcher, and the six participants will not end, even after the completion of my thesis. Richa Nagar’s (2006) collaborative work with *Sangtin* writers has really motivated me to disrupt the rigid gap between researchers and the research participants. Nagar argues, “The mutual understanding and trust emerging from these in-depth discussions gave our collaboration a force that enabled us to collectively determine every aspect of this project, from the big and small expenses to each word that appears in this book” (p. 8). In order to materialize the objective of conducting a collaborative work, I have promised to them to translate this research into *Bahasa* (Indonesian language) and made sure again that I have captured their voices respectfully and accurately. My current simple goal is to provide an alternative for their process of healing through writing. I want to let my participants know that their resistance and solidarity are powerful, beautiful, and need to be recognized.

b. For analyzing data

As per my research objective, I am proposing a more thorough and insightful understanding about complexities of Indonesia's labor migration and the intersections of injustices experienced by migrant workers. In order to achieve this, I use the feminist approach of reflexivity and positionality throughout the research process in order to develop rigorous and systematic analysis based on my fieldwork. By using the feminist approach, I reveal what structures of power domination structures are embedded in a range of sociopolitical practices and how they influence the labor migration system in Indonesia. In the process of analyzing all of the data and arranging the report, I will employ Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's (2012) technique of abductive logic of inquiry (p.27). By this approach, researchers use selected theories to maintain systematicity, but still have to be aware of every serendipity and sudden change when they encounter the contradiction between theories and what really happens in the field. The abductive technique aligns with feminist scholars who perform ongoing self-reflexivity by "develop[ing] analytic tools that interrogate accepted beliefs, challenge shared assumptions, [and] interrogate faulty arguments, and reframe research questions (Behl, 2017, p. 584). Moreover, this abductive technique provides me with a foundation to better understand the plural social realities in Indonesia's labor migration system and to respond to every relevant situation in the research process.

Using Feminist Approach: Reflexivity and Positionality

I am a civil servant who provides direct services to Indonesian migrant workers. Everytime I listened to female migrant workers' stories between my time in providing

paperwork services for them, I was captivated by their courage, unselfishness, and dreams. By knowing their lived experiences, I felt like I entered and became part of their stories. Those stories could shake me up and overwhelm me with pleasant or unpleasant feelings, depending on the sense of their experiences. I could say that I feel connected with their feelings, but I also acknowledged that I will always be the person who see them from the outside. No matter how I try to empathize, I will not understand their true feelings because I am not the one who is living those experiences. As a researcher who wants to write their stories, I question myself: Could I write the experiences of marginalized communities without misinterpreting their stories (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 27)? Will my privileges create errors in the analysis due to my internalized biases (Behl, 2017, p. 581)? Being cognizant that my privilege will influence in narrating issues related to the community, I will use the feminist principles as a guideline throughout my analytic process.

Being considerate with the researched community has been always an important ethical element for feminist Western scholars who focus on third world subjects (Nagar & Geiger, 2007, p. 267). Feminist scholars are acutely aware of dilemmas that, from a historical perspective, scientific products are not coming from a neutral or apolitical arena (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 117). For example, anthropologists extracted information about natives in the Southern hemisphere for the benefits of colonial power. In order to stop the “legacy,” feminist scholars encourage researchers to consider their identities, positionality and reflexivity throughout their research process (Nagar & Geiger, 2007, p. 267).

Before explaining about my reflexivity and positionality in this research, I want to speak briefly about revealing identities. In the interpretivist tradition, sharing the identities of researchers is not a gesture of narcissism, but instead, it is an attitude of respecting researched communities that they are working with (Pachirat, 2018, p. 105). In the way of writing and collaborating work with women in rural areas in India, Richa Nagar in *Playing with Fire* (2006) shows a high level of thoughtfulness that researchers need to be careful concerning their identities. She considered that her privilege as a western scholar with a high-middle class background will likely open potential blind spots when she wrote the struggles of female workers from poor-lower caste identities. Reflecting on my work with the six former spa therapists, I remind myself that the embodiment of my identities might bring some sense of “universal” logic which might lead to misunderstanding their experiences.

Being a Fulbright grantee is the main reason why I could gain the privilege to continue my study in the U.S. Before I got this scholarship, meeting and interacting with Indonesian migrant workers had been a part of my daily activity. Working as a civil servant for five years prior to coming to the United States, I felt privileged to have a job that allowed me to grow professionally and personally. Especially for female migrant workers, my companionship with them reminded me of my single mother who had to leave me to seek a job in Jakarta after the sudden death of my father. The majority of female migrant workers are also mothers who have left their hometowns in order to give their families a better life and to pay for their children’s educations. I could not separate that my job and personal situation enhance my political and emotional engagement to the Indonesian female migrant worker communities. During the writing of this thesis, my

status is a migrant with student visa, but I am also still registered as an Indonesian government employee. After the completion of my study in the U.S., I will go back to my home institution.

My journey as a student and a migrant dramatically changed my perspective on how I see things, especially the social world around me. Even though my institution could be a learning space, I cannot deny that working in a hierarchical, bureaucratic environment has conditioned me to do fixed, top-bottom activities on a daily basis. Crossing the border to be a student has pushed me to engage in an active debate and discussion which challenge every given assumption. Especially in my program, Social Justice and Human Rights studies, I tremendously learn how every individual has intellectual and political responsibilities to demand a more just social environment favoring marginalized communities. Furthermore, being a migrant gives me a benefit to see my country in an outsider position. This liminality sharpens my critiques and imaginaries with attention to the contradictions and complexities regarding first world-third world perspectives (Behl, 2017, p. 582).

Although my hybridity can be a useful tool for creating critical concerns and questions, I still have to think in an ethical way to use the voices of my participants properly. In feminist research discourse, reflexivity is a “stated ethics in acknowledging and emphasizing that knowledge production is always based on and shaped by unequal relations of power” (Desai, Bouchard, & Detournay, 2010, p. 60). According to Nagar and Geiger (2007), by using reflexivity, researchers realize that their identities and Northern-logics education intersects with the process of neocolonialism. That is why we need to always interrogate our pre-existing knowledge. The authors further explained, “it

is critical to ask what borders we cross [and] whose interests" (p. 271). The guide of reflexivity reveals a decolonial energy that good research about underprivileged communities is not only to write about them from the perspective of a researcher, but it also needs to create dialogic, collaborative, and constitutive findings with the researched community. In doing this research with the six former spa therapists, my self-reflexivity also invokes my ability to understand that minor, local issues that they experience is the product of a bigger transnational/global predicament.

Besides reflexivity and the identity of researcher, we must recognize the positionality of "the 'fields' that our 'research subjects' inhabit" (Nagar and Geiger, 2007, p. 273). According Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012, p. 67), we have to see our research participants as entities who have a certain worldview due to their demographic and geographic elements. The quality of research depends on how researchers respect the elements of diversity and implicit power dynamics around the "fieldwork" (Pachirat, 2018, p. 115). Addressing positionality in my own research requires me to consider the contrasting position between me and the participants. My identities as a bureaucrat, a scholar, or unmarried woman might affect how they situate themselves in responding to my questions. The imbalance of power, characteristics, and backgrounds could make participants accept me, or avoid me. Finally, engaging feminist research principles (identity, reflexivity, and positionality) embolden my objective to respect my participants as partners in creating transformative discussion. Using this collaborative and dialogic process, means I never stop critically questioning my arguments and findings. I will not appropriate their stories for my own interest. Our work is for mutual benefit to fight against the status quo and build a solidarity of people's struggles.

Arguments and Findings

Throughout this thesis project, I offer a set of discussions regarding the contradictions of democracy, migration, and gendered resistance. In order to develop every argument, I place women's voices and resistances in order to demand a new way of narrating people's struggles. There has been a lot of research depicting the suffering of migrants due to their status (Lenard, 2014), vulnerable job characteristics (Milkman, 2011), or their experience in facing sexual and physical abuse from their employers (Andrevski & Lyneham, 2014). I hope to enrich the discussion by expanding on innovative notions of migrant workers' agency, resilience, and reflections on the structural injustice that they have faced. By interviewing some Indonesian public servants, I can grasp a holistic understanding on how the power dynamics within the Indonesian institutional level eschews established constitutional law and universal consensus in protecting human rights and/or labor rights. Moreover, by using narratives in the interpretive tradition, I will take action to make the women's pain more obvious in order to gain empathy from the readers. The lucidity of their stories became a calling for me to continue their resistance. I have hope that it will give the same impression to my prospective readers and touch the core of their humanity to make them realize that human trafficking is intolerable, and we need to stop it together.

In the feminist approach, researchers are guided to be critical in the varied intersectionalities which lead particular groups to live under oppression. I acknowledge that to conduct research about oppressed communities means that I have to understand who is benefited from this oppression. This critical way will guide me to a broader context on how these privileged groups maintain oppression and why very few people

problematize this. At the end of research, I hope to contribute an important, but still underrepresented, discussion in the scholarship of social justice in Indonesia. I deliver multiple conception and conundrums ranging from historical, social, political, and economic forces that construct unequal labor migration system, especially regarding South-to-South migration pattern.

By conducting this research, I am eager to ascend a force of change in Indonesia's labor migration system. I classify four communities as my target for the dissemination of this research: the institution where I work at along with the migrant workers' community, civil society organization, and epistemic communities. If I can borrow the term "Research as an Act of Betrayal" (Islam, 2000) by Naheed Islam who revealed racism inside her community, I might do the same thing. I want to disrupt embedded power hierarchies in Indonesian governmental bodies as a whole and start to problematize corporate inclination performed by state in central or local levels. For migrant workers, this research could be an encouragement to increase the need to unionize and become a significant part of the country's democratic climate.

Another important thing is how this research could bridge the gap between theory and activism, so all parties related (activists in the field, scholars, and policy makers) can build solidarity to condemn marginalization and oppression towards migrant workers, especially for those who work in low wage sectors. Regarding anonymity and confidentiality, I will respect every decision of my participants if they choose to be anonymous in the research report. I also hide location, the names of my colleagues, the name of recruitment private agencies, and any other actors who are involved.

Overview of the Thesis Project

I developed a chronological frame-up as a navigational tool to explain the current Indonesia's gender labor migration system. Bringing the core element of intersectionality, I cover board range of lived experiences of research participants and connect them to multiple intersecting power relations. Chapter 1 provides an important argument about how globalization renders the unequal experiences of women from third world countries. By bringing the historical perspective, I describe the connection between colonialism and capitalism in perpetuating discrimination towards women, especially in the perspective of labor system. Inspired by the work of writing as a resistance for female Latin American and Caribbean (de Hernandez, 2003), I find that conveying my anger and pain through a poem is a positive channel to express my position in resisting every colonialist and capitalist attitude.

Building upon chapter's historical review of labor systems, chapter 2 challenges the clear division between formal and informal labor in the contemporary era. Here, the thesis draws from the lived experiences of female migrants to reveal the injustices of their exclusionary inclusion. The discussion constitutes an important dimension to understand the contemporary job's type which heavily connect to the gender/sex division. In the research about female spa therapists, the discrimination towards women in the labor force leads to sexualization and the sexual commodification of spa therapy job.

Chapter 3 draws from the lived experiences of the six spa therapists in this study to advance a more empowering understanding of their agency. I emphasize their beautiful solidarity, agency, and resistance. I draw on the subaltern (Said, 1988; Spivak, 1988) and the *weapons of the weak* (Scott, 1985) approaches to understand the women's resistance.

Chapter 4 transitions the focus to forming a critical dialog between me and the civil servants that I interviewed.

Taken together, Chapters 2, 3 and 4, employs Behl's (2019) *exclusionary inclusion* theoretical framework to build a heterogeneous perspective to describe gender inequality and undemocratic practices in state bodies. Embedding the voices of public servants who conduct direct services towards migrant workers is very significant in this study. The contribution of voices by both migrant workers and bureaucrats informs the understanding that their lives are interconnected and influence one another in very unique, or asymmetrical, way. By using dual analysis, I bring a range of social actors to offer a critical understanding on the perpetual male dominated ideology in our daily political and intellectual struggles. Besides that, the dual analytical approach helps me to develop a paradoxical phenomenon: state and formal bodies can campaign democracy and destroy it at the same time (Behl, 2019).

Additionally, while Chapter 2 is historically-focused, every chapter of the thesis contributes to bringing historical perspective to understanding the current social issues. For chapter 1, I grapple with the question why a country with a vast labor force (and rich with mineral and natural resources) like Indonesia needs to promote labor migration as a remedy for the high rates of unemployment. It raises my attention to trace back how colonialism and the emergence of capitalism shaped the face of feminization of Indonesian labor migration system. For the next chapter, I make sense the inherent "body job" reputation of spa therapy by discussing the history of body massage treatment in ancient Roman times. In chapter 3, I center the importance of highlighting women's resistance by using Spivak's (1988) argument in explaining how male dominated

ideology negated women's voices in Indian's struggles for independence from British rule. For the last chapter, I reflect on the origin of "apolitical" and masculine culture within Indonesia's governmental bodies in the era of Soeharto regime and connect the discussion to the current Indonesia's bureaucratic culture. I decide to embed the historical perspective in every analysis because I believe that understanding the foundation of every assumed belief and system could cultivate transformative perspectives and practices. This is an important element to cancel the "rotten" culture and start to demand a social change for a more just social world.

CHAPTER 2

HOW THEY MET THE TRAFFICKER

Praba

Praba (female, 24 years old, unmarried) was only two years old when her father left her, her mother, and her sister. As her father was the breadwinner, her mother suddenly bore the burden and had to work in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. Her mother left Praba and her sister under the guardianship of their grandparents in a region located at the southern part of Sumatera Island. When she was eighteen years old and graduated from high school, she went to Jakarta to seek a job. It had been her dream to be independent and able to help her mother in earning money. When she shared the story with me about how important her mother was in her life, her eyes were gleaming. Praba can never forget how strong her mother was to work in any job to keep food on the table for the children. Praba's mother never stayed in a certain job for a long time. Before COVID-19, Praba's mother worked in a cafeteria. She is unemployed right now due to the staff reduction during the pandemic crisis.

She was not sure precisely when she started to think about being a migrant worker as a career option for her. In the beginning of 2019, she was still working in a low-paying job in a ubiquitous Indonesian retail convenience store in Jakarta when suddenly she had thought about working in Taiwan as a domestic worker. She was motivated after she found out that some of her high school friends were working there. Inspired by the love

of her mother and her family, she tried to contact Mam Santi who is popular as a migrant worker sponsor⁴ in her neighborhood.

“I went back home to meet Mam Santi and talked about my intention to work in Taiwan. She said that she would like to help me, and she added that I need to go to a place in Jakarta to have a medical examination.” Praba went to Jakarta in a health clinic which has permission from the Indonesian Ministry of Health to perform a medical examination for prospective Indonesian migrant workers. She needed to pass all the medical tests and get a “fit to work” license before she could continue other processes. Praba was continuing her commitment to work abroad even though her mother showed a little opposition to her decision. She said: “I could not see my mother doing random-rough jobs anymore. She is not young anymore and she needs rest. I want to build a house for her, so we do not need to pay monthly rent for a room anymore.” While waiting for the result of the medical exam, she built a friendship with another prospective female migrant worker recruited by Mam Santi. Her name is Ratna.

Ratna

Ratna (female, 41 years old, married) was eager to work as domestic migrant worker in Taiwan, especially after being trapped in debt to pay her daughter’s medical bills resulting from a long-term illness. Before all her savings ran out to cover her daughter’s health treatment, Ratna’s family was financially stable from her income running a mini grocery store. Her family also earned income from her husband’s small

⁴ a widely used term to refer person whose job is recruiting people who seek opportunities to work abroad. A sponsor generally performs the recruitment in village/local level)

motorbike repair shop run out of their house. She said, “I borrowed money by pawning of our rice paddy field and I also went to loan sharks. I did everything I could for my daughter’s medication until we didn’t have much left. I had a very high hope that I could pay all of my debt and all the accumulated interests if I became a migrant worker.”

In around January 2019, Ratna left her house in a country side of Sumatera island to go to a migrant workers’ recruitment agency (P3MI) in Jakarta. She filled out the registration form, turned in the required document⁵, and got the medical examination. After she passed the examination, the agency said that there was something wrong with her family documentation. They introduced her to Mam Santi who was the agency’s sponsor and would help her to fix the problem. That was the first time Ratna and Praba met. The three of them went back to Sumatera island to proceed with other required documents.

While waiting for all documents to be completed, Ratna stayed in Mam Santi’s house for several days considering the time efficiency for the long commute from her house in Tulang Bawang to Mam Santi’s office. During her stay, Mam Santi convinced her to change her purpose from working in Taiwan to Malaysia: “As a spa therapist in Malaysia, you will work as a formal worker and there is not much of a difference in monthly salary between working in Malaysia and in Taiwan. If you choose to go to Taiwan, there is a long wait for processing in BLK (training center) and there might be another long wait to find the matched employer. You want to work as soon as possible to pay all the debts, don’t you?” Ratna began to consider her proposal.

⁵ To be a lawful or documented migrant worker, someone needs to possess and show documentation required in his/her registration. The required documents include national identity card (KTP), family card (KK), birth certificate, a certificate of the completion of the last education, etc.

Mam Santi insisted that the massage parlor was safe because she also would send her niece there. Finally, Ratna withdrew her application to go to Taiwan and submitted a new one to Malaysia. Mam Santi also pushed Praba to change her decision to go to Malaysia. Mam Santi was restless. She knew that Ratna and Praba had developed a strong friendship, even like a mother-daughter connection, after they both met in Jakarta. Mam Santi successfully changed their minds. Compared to the other four spa therapists in this chronicle, Praba and Ratna were the first to go to Malaysia.

Inka & Gita

Under a different circumstance, Inka (female, 21 years old, unmarried) and Gita (female, 21 years old, unmarried) knew about the spa therapist opportunity from Risa, Mam Santi's niece. The three of them had known each other for quite a long time. Inka saw Risa's status in her social media about her current job in a beauty and body care salon in Malaysia. She then tried to contact Risa to ask for more information. By chat, Risa told her that she was very comfortable with the job, working only eight hours in a day and getting overtime pay. Risa's offer was really tempting for Inka. Inka had just graduated high school and felt a responsibility to help her parents. Inka commented: "My dad is a farmer, and my mother is selling snacks in a traditional market nearby our house. Sometimes our crops could not meet our daily needs and we could not depend on the money from selling snacks. I have an aunt who is a migrant worker, and I do not mind being one also. Risa's offer opened the door for me to be independent and help my parents."

Everyone has their own story, and so does Gita. Gita remembers how the desire to be a migrant worker was ignited by the freedom and financial achievement shown by numerous young women working abroad in her neighborhood. Gita, who is just a junior high school graduate, imagined that she could elevate her parents' honor and prosperity by the monthly remittances that she would send if she could be a migrant worker. She said, "I was really sick in my second year of high school, so I did not finish it. I knew that there were limited job options for a school dropout like me. When Risa said that her work was not strenuous and she got well-paid, I felt excited. I wanted to go there as well." However, Gita remembered that Risa gave her a "subtle" hint when they both were on video call. "Risa said to me that her job was not without challenge. But they [the people who work there] do not have 'to go all the way.' At that time, I really did not know what she meant." Not long after Inka and Gita were taken by Risa's persuasion, they both visited Mam Santi to ask for more information on how to be migrant workers.

Suci

Scheduling the interview with Suci (female, 19 years old, unmarried) was quite an effort. She needed to find the right time and place so she could share her story without her parents noticing. Nobody in her family knows about the sexual exploitation that she suffered from when she was working in Malaysia. With her genuine smile and paddy field scenery as the background, she said, "This is the safest place for me outside my parents' sight. I hope the internet connection here will be stable." While sitting in a hut surrounded by rice paddy field, she then shared the story of how she ended up being a spa therapist in Malaysia.

Among these six migrant workers, Suci was the only one who did not originate from the same area with other five spa therapists in this study. After she graduated from high school, she brought all of her important documents and went to a city in the southern part of Sumatera for seeking a job. During the waiting time to get a call back from any companies that she applied to, she visited Mam Santi who is still considered a distant relative from her grandmother's family line. Mam Santi convinced her to become a migrant worker, just like her mother several years ago. "At first, I felt that I did not want to go abroad. I just committed to wear the hijab recently and Mam Santi said that I need to uncover my head if I take that 'beauty salon' job in Malaysia." Facing an ethical dilemma, Suci took Mam Santi's offer because she was tired of waiting to get employed. The burden of being the eldest of her two other siblings and a strong will to help her parents made her more determined to work soon.

Adit

Around September 2019, Adit (female, 22 years old, unmarried) accompanied her aunt, who was interested in being a migrant worker, to Mam Santi's house. After Mam Santi explained domestic work in several countries to Adit's aunt, suddenly Mam Santi set the target to Adit. Mam Santi shared a high-quality job offer in a beauty and body care salon in Malaysia. Adit vividly recalled all of Mam Santi's promises about the job: good salary, thoughtful employer, one day off every week, the provision of all basic necessities, and free accommodation for the workers. Adit admitted that she was not in urgent financial need when she compared her position to the other former spa therapists in this study. "I love wearing makeup and want to have experience in the beauty and skin

care line. Furthermore, I am still young, and I do not want to get married in this foreseeable future. So when Mam Santi explained the job opportunity and my parents gave me permission to take the chance, why not?” She still could not believe that Mam Santi would be very heartless in selling out her and the other friends that she met in the massage parlor. “She [Mam Santi] is very good at talking. She is confident, firm, and very convincing. No wonder many women get trapped in her trafficking chain.”

Juxtaposing Past to Understand Present

Writing and re-reading transcripts from the stories of these six former spa therapists always makes me feel overwhelmed by their emotional journeys. Their stories are not unique. As a public servant who interacts with numerous migrant workers and their families, I have noticed that the most pervasive reason for women to work abroad is financial difficulty. We as Indonesians often accept the notion of “this is what happens when you are citizens from the developing country.” Nevertheless, we never think deeper to question: why could this happen to a country ranked the fourth most populous country in the world with a population of 270 million people (Statistics Indonesia, 2021)? How could some countries be very rich, while some others get left behind? How could we explain this global migration and the impact to both sending and receiving migrant countries?

As a scholar in social justice and human rights studies, I acknowledge that there is no simple answer for explaining the complexities of social inequalities, especially in Indonesia. The country’s centuries-long history of colonization and 32-years of dictatorial regime makes it even more difficult to simplify the discussion. From the very

beginning, I set my objective of this research as not to describe all the related social complexities. I set the research boundary in the emphasis on how the “macro” picture of the global labor movement, from developing to more developed countries, created a huge impact on the individuals at the micro level. In doing so, I will explore the collective stories of some former migrant workers in this research. Then, I will connect their experience of marginalization, discrimination, and poverty to make sense of how the knowledge of male-dominated ideology impacts daily practices.

In Gita’s remarks about how she aspired to become a successful female migrant worker just like her neighbors, we can see that working abroad could be a tool of empowerment for women. Challenging the male domination culture, female migrant workers could gain financial independence, control the use of their salary, become the breadwinner of the family, and even become involved in labor rights’ struggles in their placement countries (Rahman & Fee, 2009; Lam & Yeoh, 2018; Allmark & Wahyudi, 2016). However, the perspective from the history of global migration for women is quite different. During the process of Westernization to create a colonial society in the East Indies (or Pre-East Indies, we may call the region as Indonesia right now), the Dutch colonialists used female indigenous servants to do domestic service (Locher-Scholten, 1994, p. 23). When the colonizers and their families went on vacation to their hometown in the Netherlands, they also brought along the indigenous housemaids (*babu*). According to Locher-Scholten (1994, p. 39), in order to maintain the ideology of the colonial state,

male colonists cast *babu* in the subaltern⁶ role, even though European women also contributed to create such domination.

This brief historical perspective about putting females in the lowest level of the power hierarchy seems to have happened so long ago. It should be an ancient tragedy that we would not see in the modern era anymore. However, even though colonialism in Indonesia ended when the country claimed its independence in 1945, the systemic residue endures. Postcolonial scholars argued that the legacy of colonialism, which goes hand in hand with male domination ideology, is still very much alive, albeit in different languages such as capitalism, imperialism, and neo-liberalism (see the work: Browdy de Hernandez, 2003).

In order to make sense of this notion, I will explain the development of contemporary labor migration in Indonesia. Unfortunately, I could not explore much regarding this discourse in the Soeharto regime (1966-1998) due to the very limited availability of literature. After the 1965 tragedy which killed six army generals and was followed by the massacre of half a million members and sympathizers of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), labor movements and unions were barely allowed (Farid, 2005, p. 12). Being assumed to bring leftist ideology, the conversation related to workers' alliances or labor discourse, either in local or international scope, was not developed in that era (Ford, 2006). However, we still can lay an important foundation on how the Western ideology indoctrinated the post-colonial countries to treat females differently, even under the assumed rhetoric of inclusive democracy (Behl, 2019, p. 19).

⁶ It will be further explained in Chapter III

Looking now at the formation of Indonesia's economic and political landscape, it is important to point out that the United States was heavily involved in the eradication of communist ideology in the beginning of Soeharto era. Military aid played a prominent role in American foreign policy towards Indonesia. The United States also promoted the capitalist system in the forms of investment, foreign aid, and loans (Farid, 2005, p. 12; Scott, 1985, 246; Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2001). According to Marut (2008, p. 57), the World Bank, as the dominant global institution that gives financial aid and loans, has consistently pushed Indonesia to implement privatization and liberalization programs, especially after the 1998 economic crisis. The impacts of the financial crisis and the World Bank's recommendations were huge. Indonesia's government began to promote globalization of labor as the remedy for increased unemployment rate and the sudden collapse of the country's political and economic condition (Firdausy, 2006, p. 139).

Another important topic in the conversations with the six former migrant workers was the discrimination towards women to have wider job alternatives. As they recalled, the job offers provided by the recruitment agency or Mam Santi, only qualified them for domestic work or other low wage positions like spa therapists. Researcher Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, p. 281), studies this phenomenon and argues: "the labor-market segmentation created and bolstered by patriarchy meant that their [women] options for work were extremely restricted, and they had to accept very low and uncertain wages." This gender-based labor system is pervasive, and people normalize it over generations. Kandiyoti (1988) further explains that when women have the space to work outside the households in the modern era, the normative and cultural order prevent them from having

more empowering options (p. 282). However, even though that capitalist mechanism constructs the marginalization of women in the labor market, do all women experience it in the same way? Apparently, they do not.

Parreñas (2000, p. 563-564) expresses the main concern about the international division of labor in her study about Filipino domestic workers, which shows a social abyss between women from first world and third world countries. Experiencing the fast-growing economic development and needing more people in the labor force, wealthy countries encourage females, including married women and mothers, to work in the public sector. As a result, the condition creates a question: who is going to take care of the domestic jobs that have always been the burden of wives or mothers? This void creates the high demand for privileged “professional” career women to hire “low-skilled” women of color from poorer countries to do the caretaking or the housecleaning. Situating this condition within the colonization history when white female colonialists used their race, wealth, and class privilege to entrench the patriarchal culture, it is clear that structural hierarchy still continues today.

As I reread the collective memories from the six participants, I become aware of how the acute poverty and limited opportunities that they experienced are linked with the macro picture of social, economic, and political conditions. Being reflexively moved by Parreñas’ findings on how male dominated ideology influences our society in a very complex way, I will use intersectionality from the feminist scholars as the critical approach. According to Collins (2019, p.48), using intersectionality as a guide allows us to map out the dimensions of power relations which create social inequalities. It will help us to critically identify not only one system of power, for example gender, but also other

interdependent identities which connect one to another such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, age, etc. From this guidance, I will argue that the influence of capitalism in the global labor migration system manifests differently towards women. Moreover, by being reflexive with the past to understand the present, we know that colonialism is not only a part of our history; we are still living with the legacy.

After you (Western colonialists) took all of the wealth away until there was not much left, we (the former colonial-newborn countries) finally got independence. We suddenly needed to fix all the mess that you had left and got crippled with unimaginable debt bondage. The debt that we needed to pay if we want to get freedom from you. The debt that we could finally pay all back after decades, which makes you way richer, even amid the fact that your colonial era has ended. Here we are, still poor. You label us “developing” countries as a persuasion that we could be as developed as you if we work harder with your logic. Foolishly, we followed the game, and it means we need to jump down a rabbit hole of infinite loans for the sake of catching up with your “development” standards. These six human trafficking victims are only a few from an uncountable number of souls who become sacrificial offerings in following your universal economic guideline.

CHAPTER 3

HOW ALL THE PROMISES GOT BROKEN

When our conversation on what they had experienced in Malaysia began, no one could forget about the pain that they had to bear until today, even though they had tried to erase their memories of the experience. In the beginning of my commitment to shape this thesis project, my objective was to illuminate their brave, everyday resistance against domination, especially towards their abusive employer. Too little awareness about such female defiance emboldened my strong reaction to raise their powerful voices from invisibility. However, in order to make sense of their daily, ordinary gestures and consider them as resistance, I have to open their pain and wounds to be more visible.

We will never understand the physical or emotional scars that the oppressed may endure due to their marginality. I know that my own privilege will hinder me from understanding the pain that these six human trafficking victims might have. From the first time I heard that my targeted participants were being sexually exploited by the employer, I felt sad. However, after I connected with them and listened to the stories, sad became an underrated word to express my feelings. I felt angry, confused, and ashamed by the arrogance of both non-state and state actors who were involved in creating the precarious labor migration system towards women. In this chapter, I do not want to sentimentalize the sorrow of my participants. My primary goal is to ignite the anger of you, my readers, and to open an avenue in the further discussion on what we should do to stop patriarchal capitalism towards women's labor.

Praba

Between February and March 2019, Praba, Ratna, and Risa (Mam Santi's niece) made it a point to complete all the required documents to get status as procedural or documented migrant workers. Three of them started the journey to go to Malaysia from Batam Island. Mam Santi and her husband accompanied three of them on a journey from their region to Batam. After they reached Batam, they still needed to wait around another month before they finally could cross the Indonesia-Malaysia sea border with a ferry. They stayed in a shelter owned by a private recruitment agency which had a sort of partnership with Mam Santi. I refer to the agency as "agency X". In the shelter, they met a prospective migrant worker, Indah, who also would work in the same massage parlor with them. As Praba recalled, she had an unforgettable first impression about Indah. Indah just delivered a baby two months ago, and she needed to leave the newborn right away to work abroad. She was still recovering from c-section stitches around her belly.

During the first two weeks of their stay in Batam, there was no information about when they could go to Malaysia, until one day agency X told them to prepare for another medical checkup. Not long after that, they attended the pre-departure orientation program in Batam. From the document preparedness, four of them already possessed legality to be migrant workers and they could go to Malaysia shortly thereafter. However, due to an administrative problem in Ratna's marriage certificate, Ratna had to stay a few days more in Batam. Praba, Risa, and Indah went to Malaysia first without Ratna.

This is when several strange things started to happen. In the Batam harbor, agency X told Praba, Risa, and Indah to lie in front of officials at the immigration checkpoint. They needed to pretend that they went to Malaysia as tourists, not migrant workers. From

my perspective, this is unusual because they were all documented, and they could show all the required documents if officials wanted to check them. Nevertheless, all the migrant workers (except Ratna who still needed to stay in Batam) finally reached Malaysia safely, even though they were struggling with motion sickness during the two-hour long ocean journey inside the ferry.

In the departure terminal, their employers waited to pick them up. During the interview, Praba addressed them with “Big Boss” for the father and “Little Boss” for the son. They are Malaysian with Chinese ethnicity and ran the massage parlor business in Johor Bahru for eleven years. Praba could not verify how old they were, but she estimated that Nathan, the little boss, was around 35 years old. When Praba, Risa, and Indah finally arrived in a new place that they would call their new “home,” they met three other female Indonesian migrant workers. A female worker, named Nina, said that she had already worked for four years, and the other two workers had worked for two months. Nina then asked, “How much do you know about this job?” Praba answered, “Like everyone who works for salon in Indonesia, right? All the works about beauty and body care such as hair spa, facial massage, traditional *lulur* scrub massage, and other things.” Nina then silenced Praba by saying that all they heard about the work from Mam Santi was not the whole truth. Almost all the clients were males, and facial massage was provided but it was only to avoid the suspicion of people. The worst is yet to come, Nina added, “we also need to provide ‘plus-plus’ treatment. There is no way to go back. You have to know that Mam Santi has sold you to Nathan. Well, we will start your training tomorrow...now you all need rest.”

When Praba sat down facing the Zoom camera, I knew that recollecting all the horrible memories was painful for her. She wanted to forget them, but she could not. What happened a while ago was too vivid; it seemed like it only happened yesterday. She tried very hard to hold back her tears. We were in awkward silence at times. I did not try to force her to continue her story. Then she spoke again, “I really wanted to call Ratna. Don’t come...it was a trap. But I could not. I did not have service because my phone was still in Indonesia’s number.” Inside the small room, Praba, Risa, and Indah cried a lot that night. Praba’s motion sickness and the new pain inside her heart brought her to rock bottom. She could not sleep even though she knew her body wanted that.

Ratna

On the day when Ratna finally arrived in Malaysia, she knew there was something wrong. Praba and others avoided her. Moreover, their mentor, Nina, always asked them to do something when Ratna tried to approach them. When everyone was asleep, Praba sneaked over to Ratna’s side. Praba was choking back tears as she told her the ugly truth about how they all had been trafficked. Of course, Ratna was shocked. After few minutes of digesting all the information, guilts ran through her. She blamed herself. If only Ratna was not persuading Praba to cancel her application to go to Taiwan, Praba would not have been experiencing this unbearable sadness. “I know that I am also a victim. Mam Santi should take all the blame, but a part of me knows that I am partly responsible for Praba’s condition. She needed to keep her honor until she got married...she even has never seen the male’s ‘manhood’. I needed to protect her.”

The next day, the little boss, Nathan, gathered all his new workers in a sort of meeting room. Ratna noted her objection about the disparity between what Mam Santi

promised and the job that they had to do in his massage parlor. Nathan said that they needed to work from noon until midnight and get salary's deduction for 16 months⁷. It meant that they could only sent the remittance around USD \$70 for their family in Indonesia. Ratna still argued against her boss. She said that she was going to call Mam Santi to confirm the situation. Ratna still believed that Mam Santi would not be that cruel, especially with Risa who also worked here. Ratna wondered, "It is impossible for Mam Santi to also sell her own niece." However, she could not linger in denial. The fact that four of them had been trafficked and abducted in the massage parlor building was indisputable. In front of Praba and the others, Nathan disclosed how much he purchased them for from Mam Santi. The selling price for each person was different, but it was between \$1600 and \$1800. Nathan added, "in order to get out from the indebted situation due to the recruitment cost soon, you need to perform 'plus plus' massages. This is not an option. It is an order." Being bewildered but still trying to be cool-headed, Ratna tried to bargain, "Fine, we will do what you ask us to do, but don't force the girls [Praba and Risa] to do the 'plus-plus' job. Otherwise, you will see us all die here." The little boss thought for a while and said yes. After the meeting ended and Nathan went away, they all cried. Ratna said, "Indah passed out because of the overwhelming emotional and physical wound. She was still in recovery from her delivery and the surgery. I know that the situation was harsh, but I needed to make a decision quickly. We need to protect the girls [the unmarried]. I sacrificed myself for Praba, and Indah had to do it for Risa."

⁷ Recruitment cost has been a long-time debate between the policy makers and private sectors in Indonesia. Currently BP2MI struggles to shift the cost burden, which is now still charged to migrant workers, to the recruitment agency.

Among the six participants in this study, Ratna was indeed one of a kind. Five other women shared with me that Ratna's motherly manner and support had helped them to recognize that they were not alone. Moreover, Ratna was the one who had courage to argue with Nathan. When Nathan delivered the rule that the workers were not allowed to perform the five daily prayers (*shalat*), Ratna talked back: "If you don't allow us to pray, we will lose our minds and go crazy. You cannot run your business properly because we can't be as productive as you want." For this matter, Ratna won the game. However, there is always a price to pay for disobedience. Suci remembered that Ratna often became the target of their boss' anger and verbal abuse.

The feeling of sin and guilt in doing an undignified job was the grief that repeatedly haunted Ratna and other participants. Ratna said, "I kept wondering in my prayer whether Allah would accept all of my good deeds and fasts during the 30-days of the month of Ramadhan or not. I kept fasting; meanwhile, I still did the sinful jobs." When I asked if I may know the kinds of services that they needed to provide, I could see that Ratna wanted to tell the details, but she needed time. I gave her as much time as she needed until she was ready, or we could cut out the interview if she wanted to.

Ratna shared her pain by saying, "They (the employers) rarely called us by our name. Each of us had a number. They called me as... 'nine', if I remember it correctly." During the few weeks of training, Nina taught Ratna how to do the Thailand style of massage. Customers needed to pay hourly for the treatment. The fee varied depending on the massage service that customers chose. Ratna and others needed to do regular body massages for the first 30 minutes of each service. For the remaining 30 minutes, they had to offer the main service which is called *urut batin* (manhood massage). There were some

varieties of *urut batin*. When customers chose “ping-pong” for the price around \$12 (RM⁸ 50), it meant the spa therapist needed to perform a hand job until the customers ejaculated. An “ice cream” massage was a term for a blow job service, and the price was around \$38. The additional price which was around \$12 would be charged if the customers wanted to grope the breast, butt, or private parts of the therapists. If the customers still wanted more “satisfaction,” they also could pick the “complete” service, which included everything listed above as well as an “eating out” service by paying extra from \$50 to \$100. However, there was also a limit. Nathan forbade the workers from giving sex (sexual intercourse) as a service.

Even though Praba did not take *urut batin* job, she needed to offer the service to customers and called anyone, the available workmates, to take the plus-plus job. Ratna said, “Whenever the bell rang to notify that there is a customer coming in, and Aunty⁹ called my number. I always cried, hugged Praba, shed my tears, and got myself together again. I needed to be friendly to customers, otherwise they complained to Aunty. Then, Nathan would use it as justification to increase my debt.” Without much to say, I could see the other side of working overseas: it is not empowering but disempowering instead. It was torture for Ratna.

Inka & Gita

When Inka shared her story about where they lived and their conditions, it became clear to me that they were living in confinement. Nathan had three massage parlors, one

⁸ Ringgit Malaysia

⁹ The workers address Nathan’s mother as aunty. She is the cashier and the one who always calls which therapist should work when customers come.

in the same building with their dormitory and two others located outside¹⁰. The dormitory was on the second floor. It was an open room where they did all basic activities: sleeping, cooking, washing clothes, etc. The only closed space was one bathroom which was located in the corner. The room lacked proper air circulation because all of the windows were closed. Inka remembered that there was one window that had a little gap due to a crack. She could insert a finger through the crack to the outside world. She said, “Sometimes when we wanted to breath fresh air from outside, we dragged our nose along the crack. I inhaled from it and imagined the taste of freedom. It (freedom) should be nice.” Another nightmare for Inka was if the worst should happen, such as house fire, and all of them would be burned alive inside the building. All the windows were locked with a metal bar (trellis), and Nathan always locked the doors from outside every time they all went back to the dormitory after working. In the three months of working there, Inka had never received her monthly salary. She knew that her decision to refuse to give *urut batin* massage services would lead to extra oppression from Nathan. It was her conscious decision, but she could not stop wondering how she would tell her parents about her promise to send money monthly. Her head also filled up with her physical health. Inka became ill as a result of the stress. She got horrible constipation until she could not move her body. Nathan was a little worried and gave her some medication, even though what she needed at that time was to see a doctor. She said, “There was no way that he would take me outside. Everything seemed to drive me crazy. I could see myself in one of the

¹⁰ Nathan’s father always drove them to the two places.

workers who had tried to cut her vein several times with knives. I always thought about what would happen if I became mentally ill there.”

Gita was also really distressed about her situation in the massage parlor, so much so that she tried to take several pills at a time. She could not tell which frustrations had weakened her so deep inside: “I did not want to give *urut batin* massage services, but I needed to pay off my recruitment cost debt soon. Moreover, I felt so alone. I slept in the same space as Nina, and we all knew that she was Nathan’s right-hand woman. I could not mingle with others, nor was I allowed to practice *shalat*. I felt really stupid if I thought back on my former self from that time.”

Suci

The hardest thing for Suci came when she realized that she needed to compromise about the reality. She still kept Mam Santi’s promise about working in a beauty and body care salon, until one day when Nina taught her how to do a body massage. A massage job in her mind was all about facial massage treatment. When she needed to do body massages, however, she was willing to compromise. Nevertheless, the burden became unbearable when Nina taught her about “ice cream” and “ping pong” genital massage. Even so, she conformed but with a heavy heart. She was working from noon until midnight, almost without a break. She was shocked when Nathan paid her first salary, and it was only \$70. She knew that she would not get paid around \$350 like Mam Santi promised, but \$70 was just too wrong. Nathan gave the argument that the reduction was for a mobile service plan and other administrative things. “Nathan said that I needed to

work harder for the next month so he could give me more salary. I obeyed him. But what I got for the next month was even smaller...only around \$57.”

Suci recalled how their employers were able to swindle Malaysia’s police when they try to investigate any massage parlors which provided sexual related services¹¹. Nathan forbade the workers from offering *urut batin* massage services to certain people whom he had profiled as police; he called them “ghosts.” Suci recalled that she and other workers were only allowed to perform the “plus plus” service on Chinese, Indian, Bangladesh, Filipino, and other individuals who were not of Malaysian descent. When Aunty warned, “the ghost is coming,” they could only perform regular body massage but could not offer or give *urut batin* services, despite the customers asking for the service. Suci said that the costumers were of various ages. Sometimes they looked like young guys who seemed not even 17 years old, or even old men. Suci shared with me, “I have even given the service to a very old guy who seemed like the same age as my grandfather.”

She said, “every time Aunty called my number and I needed to provide *urut batin* services, I was crying out loud inside my heart, even though I still had to be friendly in front of customers.” Suci always remembered her parents who raised her with Islamic religious values. She felt dirty and sinful. She once asked Allah in her prayer, what kind of sins had she done in her past that made her have to experience a fate like this?

¹¹ Sexual related commercial service is illegal in Malaysia

Bringing Back the Memories: Can We Undo This?

During this chapter, I found it necessary to re-examine the discussion between women, work, and the gender labor division. We recall that Mam Santi persuaded Ratna and Praba to cancel their applications to work in Taiwan because they would take informal jobs as caregivers or domestic workers. If they chose to work in Malaysia, they could take formal jobs as spa therapists. The job types available in Taiwan were categorized as informal work because families directly employ migrant workers; those positions are different from “formal or institutional” jobs which are under supervision of companies or organizations. Praba once said to me, “If I chose an informal job, I needed to do domestic chores. I imagined a more pleasant working condition, like working inside the AC room and having proper breaks by choosing a formal job.” Some participants also shared their less desirable attitude towards informal jobs. Their testimonies triggered me to start a discussion on the conversations regarding formal-informal job opportunities for Indonesian, female, migrant workers. Rather than labeling one as better than the other, I want to start the discussion with the Indonesian government’s objective to launch a “zero domestic workers” campaign as its national target.

The emergence of “zero domestic workers by 2017” came from the statement made by Indonesian President, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), on February 13, 2015, when he attended a national conference held by a political party. He expressed the predicament regarding how Indonesia became a popular country for sending foreign domestic workers. President Jokowi spoke to the audience: “We have to hold our pride and dignity” (Detik.com, 2015). The “zero domestic workers” roadmap was his response to public outcry over the endless maltreatment and exploitation cases towards domestic

female workers working overseas. On one hand, the public anger towards examples of their “sisters” enduring miserable lives abroad could create a positive sentiment. It could foster empathy and a shared alliance to demand more legal and actual protections for migrant workers from any abusive or exploitative condition. On the other hand, if that public anger translated into national shame regarding the “household” jobs, it could turn out to be counterproductive.

Stigmatization towards household chores as low-skilled jobs has always been a product of misogyny constructed by male-dominated ideology. It is taken as a given that males are stronger than females; therefore, husbands could perform productive-physical labor and then gain a reputation as a breadwinner. This masculinity culture legitimizes women’s exploitation in emotional and physical labor, including unpaid household chores and taking care of the children or parents without proper recognition. The very same culture also perpetuates a constructive notion that doing domestic jobs is mundane, less productive, or less valuable than the work men can do through employment. From this point of view, I want to ask a question which is commonly expressed in the struggles to end capitalist and sexist mentalities: Do we need a new value system to recognize that loving and nurturing roles are also valuable to our economic development?

According to Coyle (2015, p. 18), from the perspective of the contemporary economic standard, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), originated from a group of Western educated white men who arranged wartime and post-war budgets in the 1940’s. In a nutshell, GDP statistics embrace a value system where positive economic activity is a result of the dynamic flow of money into the country. The consequence is very bizarre. For example, GDP does not value the contribution of domestic work or caregiving, while

the system takes prostitution into account (p. 111). How could this happen? Because some elitists with power and wealth conceptualized that monetary transactions supersede well-being and human development (Beneria, 2003, p. 115-116). This decision has further entrenched discrimination against domestic workers and strengthened oppressive power structures. In addition, even though people with privilege are willing to pay for the service, domestic work will get paid less than other job sectors because of their inherent stigmatization (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, p. 58-60). As a result, it is not surprising that abuses towards domestic workers are ignored by the public.

There is another argument against the “zero domestic workers” campaign that must be acknowledged. Instead of amplifying the work or labor rights and women’s rights activism, the “zero domestic workers” program will disempower poor, low-educated working class. This disproportionately harms poor, working class women who seek better pay in migrant work. Oftentimes job opportunities reflect class biases. According to the World Bank (2017, p. 22), wealth distribution in Indonesia is a major problem which contributes to massive inequality between rural states and urban areas. Even though migrant workers coming from urban areas are still struggling to come out from the poverty line, they still have privilege to enjoy better infrastructure and education. Yet the poor, low educated migrant workers from rural areas have less options to enter the job market. The “zero domestic worker” roadmap will only push them into a lower line of the social hierarchy.

From the discussion of discrimination towards women in the labor force in terms of domestic jobs, I want to make a transition to the discussion of opportunities of female Indonesian migrant workers in the formal sector. If Indonesia’s government wants to turn

down (or even wipe out) the number of informal workers working abroad, will enforcing opportunities in the formal sector be effective? Does working in formal sectors give a guarantee for female migrant workers to have a more dignified and decent job? If I ask these questions to the six former spa therapists, I believe they will give pessimistic answers without a second thought.

Jan Breman (1976), a Dutch sociologist specializing in labor class discourse, expressed his critique towards the binary division of the formal and informal labor systems (p. 1870). From the definition, “[the formal sector] implies (a) a set number of inter-related jobs which are part of a composite, internally well-organized labor structure; (b) work situations which are officially registered in economic statistics; and (c) working conditions which are protected by law.” He further explains that this definition is heavily grounded by capitalistic nature which situates modern urban sectors (industrial enterprise, formal scheme, urban sector, etc.) as the center of economic establishment. By some degree, we need to agree that the formal sectors likely reduce the oppressive and exploitative labor conditions for workers, especially for female migrant workers. There are some benefits promised by the formal sectors: migrant workers will gain some degree of autonomy (Chang, 2018, p. 216), written contract legalized by governments (both from sending and receiving migrant countries) will regulate companies to set wages and push them to apply it rightfully (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2006, p. 223), and the scheme will protect the workers’ freedom to join union (Piper, 2010, p. 113). However, it compels me to centralize the predicaments of the six former spa therapists, who bore exploitation, confinement, and oppression, as a way to contest the theoretical assumption of formal labor system.

According to data from the National Agency for Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BP2MI-Badan Nasional Perlindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia), throughout 2020, spa therapists contributed a relatively small (only 211 people) total number of Indonesian female migrant workers in the formal sector (see the Table 1). Even though spa therapy jobs are included as a formal category within Indonesian labor migration, I need to bring attention to the inherent, vulnerable nature of this job.

Table 1

Top job positions of Indonesian female migrant workers in the formal sector, January-December 2020

No	Job Position	Total numbers of female workers
1.	Caretaker	7,458
2.	Factory worker	3,771
3.	General worker	1,181

Note. Item numbers are derived from Sistem Aplikasi Kartu Tenaga Kerja Luar Negeri website (ktkln.bnptki.go.id)

According to Urtnowska-Joppek, Gajc, and Goździeniak (2019, p. 430), massage therapy is beneficial for the restoration of physical strength and can be dated back to ancient times. During the ancient Olympic Games, body rubbing was provided as a therapeutic treatment for athletes in order to provide relief and improve physical fitness. In ancient Egypt, Queen Cleopatra popularized wellness and massage treatment by her use of a milk-flower bath to enhance eternal youth and beauty. Massage or spa treatment was commonly believed to be a natural “healing power” to increase the capacity of human body regeneration in order to boost individuals’ psychophysical wellness

(Urtnowska-Joppek, Gajc, & Goździeniak, 2019, p. 430). However, historiography concerning Roman Baths also reveals that there is a strong connection between massage parlors and brothels (Walkley, 2004).

According to Oerton (2004, p. 550), in the development of the modern era, when every service could be categorized as a job opportunity, spa therapy has a stereotypical “body job” reputation which renders a thin border between massage therapy and commercial sex work. This type of job is also heavily connected to the gender/sex division when particular individuals are more appropriate or considered more capable of providing the service (p. 544). As a result, the sexualization and the sexual commodification of this type of labor devalue massage therapy as a means of work. In research engaging some members of a professional association for massage therapists in Canada, nearly one-third of participants expressed fear of sexual harassment that they might encounter from the patients or clients (Richard, O’Sullivan & Peppard, 2020, p. 208). According to the research, the therapists experienced various forms of harassment from sexual-related jokes and sexual invitations up to unwanted touching from their patients.

However, without downplaying the adverse experience that they faced, the Canadian spa therapists can still claim the power with their privileged status as highly educated, well trained, professionals, not working in the low wage sector, etc. The research reported that the therapists were able to discharge the clients or submit the harassment case in clinics where they worked, so management can increase screenings of prospective clients (Richard, O’Sullivan & Peppard, 2020, p. 209). The situation would look very different if we compared it to the chronicles of six spa therapists in this

research. Inka, who refused *urut batin* services, still experienced sexual harassment from the male customers. “Even though I already told them that I only performed regular body massage, I often got sexually harassed. They suddenly groped or touched my private area during the massage section. They pretended to do it unintentionally.” Despite her asking her customers to stop doing that, she needed to hold back her true expression of disgust. She refused it with a smile and friendliness to avoid punishment from her boss if those customers gave an unsatisfactory review. From the chronicles of the six spa therapists, it is very obvious to see that they have to face the humiliating and degrading conditions differently from the “professional” spa therapists at everyday level.

From this chapter, we know that the current modern era encourages all, both males and females, to enter the labor market. However, the global economic, political, and social order that we are adhering to still discriminates against women by preventing them from having equal participation. Despite the fact that women were treated unjustly, we acknowledge that they all have a different level of experience in facing oppression, exploitation, or discrimination. With the stigmatization of house work, we can see that male-dominated ethos does not recognize informal work as valuable to economic development standards. It results the vulnerability and injustice towards informal workers. Nevertheless, being employed in a formal framework does not necessarily safeguard women from experiencing violence due to their gender. In the research about female therapists, the reality “that men have a ‘right’ to demand sexual access to women implies a power dynamic between men and women where men are sexually dominant, and women are subservient” (Richard, O’Sullivan & Peppard, 2020, p. 209).

We also need to point out that spa therapists in Canada and the six former therapists in this study are experiencing a different level of power and agency to confront sexual harassment in their workplace. Therefore, intersectionality as a guideline used by feminist scholars significantly helps us to understand the complexity of social inequality. There is no one perspective which can investigate gender-based discrimination comprehensively without exploring how the power relations work within class, educational level, profession, nationality, etc. A researcher needs to conceptualize oppression to acknowledge the extensive “heteropatriarchy, neocolonialism, [and] capitalism...that catalyze social inequality” distinctively across nation-states (Collins, 2019, p. 239).

CHAPTER 4

HOW THE SUBALTERN RESIST

According to Said (1988), “subaltern” was originally coined by Gramsci to define dispossessed, oppressed, or vulnerable groups due to the suppression performed by the more powerful and privileged classes in societies (p. 5-6). Even though I fully understand that people are not equally oppressed, here, I argue that six former spa therapists in this study could be categorized as subaltern. By focusing on their individual experiences, I saw their precarious position in an asymmetrical power relation. They are trapped as human trafficking victims because of multiple oppressors: Mam Santi, Agency X, Nathan, clients, state actors, their societies, and more, to be explained in the next chapter. Despite their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, I want to inquire: could the subaltern exercise resistance? What should I, as a researcher, do to construct a more just narrative for these six former spa therapists?

If we read, watch, or learn about human trafficking cases from daily newspapers, TV news, or other mainstream channels, most of them might provide us with the narratives of the victims’ sufferings. If we get the information from states’ official statements, we will get reports about how they successfully have saved the victims from their abusive traffickers or exploitative conditions. It might lead us to question: are all of the reports correct and based on facts? The answer might be yes. However, as a researcher who is obliged to be critical in all data or facts laid before me, I claim my rights to ask: do the reports provide the whole truth? Then, the answer might be no.

Hall (1997, p. 3) argues that a phenomenon or a fact carries a complicated relation between who sees the events, how they see them, and which channel or language is used

to produce the thoughts. The fact that all narratives about human trafficking cases are made by people of privilege or those with power will only further expose victims in the sense of their victimhood. Avoiding being trapped in this tradition, I hope to enrich the discussion by emphasizing the victims' agency, resilience, and reflexivity on the structural injustice that they have faced. Their solidarity to engage "hidden" confrontations towards their employers is very impressive. I even felt ashamed of myself for being surprised to think of how poor individuals with a low level of education like them could create a very brilliant defiance strategy to fight against the oppressive conditions. As a scholar, I also reminded myself to critically reflect on my own biases in the intellectual or political productions.

I felt very privileged to listen to the six spa therapists telling their stories about their collective struggle and compassion towards each other. They showed me that power and defiance are not only for a few individuals who live in a high social status, class, or position, but for everyone. In the previous chapter, we mostly see their fragility and collective sufferings. But in this chapter, I will emphasize their admirable solidarity, agency, and resistance. On the "public stage," their abusive employers and disrespectful customers might only see their obedience, but that does not mean they did not fight back. The battle was real, even though it was designed to go unnoticed.

Solidarity for the Oppressed

Like other new workers who just came to the massage parlor, Suci had been warned by Nathan: "Do not mix around with Praba and Ratna. They will give you bad influence." Likewise, Nathan gave the same warning to Praba and Ratna, to leave other

workers alone. The first time Praba saw Suci, Praba felt sorry for her. Like other spa therapists in the massage parlor, Suci may not have known from the beginning that Mam Santi was going to sell her. Praba said, “I worried about her. She seemed really scared and confused with what happened.” Ratna also tried to find a way to approach and support Suci without Nina or Nathan knowing it. Ratna pretended to get angry with Suci, “I yelled and called her name to come to me in the washing space¹². I was scolding her because she made all of my almost-dried clothes get wet. I gave Suci a tiny piece of paper on which I had already written. I wanted to give her support and let her know that we were all in this together. She was not alone.”

Their sisterhood was getting stronger day by day, even though they needed to be really careful not to show that they were close with one another. Praba said, “We rarely came together as a group. When we talked to support each other or arranged little acts of defiance and suddenly Nina or one of Nathan’s other women came, we moved away from one another quickly. We acted like we were strangers.” Praba also created a group chat on WhatsApp. The members were other spa therapists who had smartphones. The conversation in the group chat was quite diverse, ranging from joking around with each other, gossiping about their bosses, brainstorming ideas to escape, to even sharing some *Koranic* verses to support anyone who felt worthless or hopeless.

Nevertheless, building solidarity was not that easy. Adding to the complexities of the social world, all these female spa therapists had no monolithic experience or perspectives. Most of women in this study said that they only built an allyship with ten

¹² They washed their clothes manually (they do not have washing machine or dryer in the dorm). There was a place with a portable electric stand fan to produce the air flow in order to dry all the clothes on the line.

people from the total of fifteen spa therapists in the massage parlor. They excluded Gita, Risa, Nina and the other two workers. One of the women in this study said, “Nina was our biggest ‘enemy.’ We were friends with Gita and Risa at first, but they then moved to Nina or Nathan’s side. The other two workers were just...complicated.” She could not identify whether the two workers were friends or enemies, so the solidarity did not include them. From the interview with Gita, I could see that she was very cognizant that all her friends hated them at that time. Instead of supporting the solidarity against exploitative conditions in the massage parlor, she eventually sided with Nathan. She confessed, “I will not deny that I was evil towards my friends. I felt like I was being brainwashed. Every time Nathan got angry because of mistakes that we made, I put blame on others, even though I was the one who made them.” Gita knew that she was wrong. She said that that guilty feeling lives with her every day, and it may stay until heaven knows when.

Resistance

In performing resistance, the spa therapists learned from other workers’ mistakes. Even though they were dying to escape and to do whatever it took, Praba always reminded the other colleagues that they needed to think smart and be cool-headed, “Do not perform acts of stubborn courage, for example, jumping from the second story of this massage parlor building. We are still young, and we still have a brighter future ahead to have a better job and make our parents happy. If God’s willing, we could get free, we will be freemen in one piece. Do not risk your life.” They also learned that overt rebellion would not be effective for a long-run resistance.

Furthermore, Nathan sustained his power through fear and threats. He always brought up a story about how a worker among them lived miserably in order to pay for her rebellion. Regarding this, Suci told me the story about how Nathan was very mean to a spa therapist who had been there for two years. He confiscated that worker's phone, limited her daily meals, and often showed outbursts of anger towards her every time he was in a bad mood. Suci said, "we became very careful about our moves. Nathan could take away the cellphone from anyone who rebelled."

Taking into account Suci's fear of being without her phone, I discovered that phones became an essential *weapon of the weak*¹³ for the spa therapists throughout their journey of resistance. Similar to Suci, all participants in this study admitted that phone seizure was the most terrifying threat for them. Phones were all they had to connect them with the world outside the massage parlor walls. Even though they always wore poker "cheerful" faces like nothing happened, video calling with their families effectively assuaged their pain from the daily exploitation and harassment that they received. Shame and guilt for being trafficked and working in a sexual related job made them conceal the truth from everyone. However, by being connected with people who cared about them, they gradually tried to collect courage and find the moment when they were ready to say, "This is not my fault. I need help, so please be my ally."

One night, after completing *shalat*, the name of Praba's fiancé suddenly came to Ratna's mind. Ratna had been like a mother for Praba. Praba shared everything about her

¹³ The term is inspired by the work of James C. Scott (1985)

life with Ratna, including her love life. Just like other female workers in the massage parlor, Praba felt hesitant about being honest regarding her condition. She was sort of afraid that her fiancé would leave her after he knew the truth. But after Ratna shared her “divine” clue, Praba started to think that her fiancé might be the one who could help them all to escape from the cage that was the massage parlor. She started to gain confidence and reasoned that, if her fiancé could not accept her just the way she is, she was ready to break up. Then, when the condition was quite safe (no one was watching), she told her fiancé everything. Praba shared with me, “his first reaction was shock and disappointment with me because I did not tell him way sooner. But then he did not blame me any longer.” After Praba hung up the phone, her fiancé, who was in Indonesia, started to browse for anything about how to submit a complaint regarding the emergency situation experienced by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. He wrote down all of the important numbers, such as the Indonesian embassy and consulate offices in Malaysia and forwarded them to Praba. Due to the time restriction of using phones in the massage parlor, Praba’s fiancé sent a complaint on her behalf.

About a few days after Praba’s fiancé submitted the report, Sir M., an official of the Consulate General of The Republic of Indonesia in Johor Bahru (KJRI JB), phoned him to talk over his report. Praba’s fiancé shared the situation that Praba and other spa therapists were in. He gave Praba’s cell phone number to Sir M and informed him of the time frame when Praba could use the phone and pick up phone calls. Sir M later called Praba one day, and she was really grateful that Sir M was well informed about the situation. Praba remembers every detail about her and her friend’s journey to get freedom. It is unforgettable for her.

When Sir M. phoned Praba for the first time, she was near Nina. Sir M introduced himself, how he got her number, and then asked, “is it okay for you to clarify your situation right now?” Praba said no. Being cognizant that Praba was under surveillance, Sir M suggested that their communication could continue over a WhatsApp chat. Through chatting, Sir M learned that their situation was quite unique: the female spa therapists are documented workers who experienced an exploitative and inhumane condition. This was ironic given their legal status in the country. Sir M asked Praba to send pictures of her passport, employment contract, and other documents that could prove her documented status. Praba said she could not do that because Nathan took away all of their personal and important documents. She said with regret, “If I knew that it would be like this, I would have taken pictures of every piece of paper before Nathan confiscated them.” Moreover, there was another challenge. Sir M said that it would be better if Praba and her friends could provide the evidence that they were employed in a sexually related spa or massage job. Sir M mentioned some cases that happened before where employers could very easily get away from their responsibility by saying “everything is a lie and cannot be proven because there is no evidence.” Praba wondered if Sir M was right.

Praba shared this information with Ratna and other friends in the group. They agreed that they needed to collect the required evidence. It also meant that they needed to avoid making mistakes and to be “less rebellious” in front of Nathan. Otherwise, Nathan would take their phones away, and their mission to keep connected with Sir M and to provide any evidence would be ruined. However, the fear of Nathan finding out and becoming even more brutal with them was creeping up. Inka said, “I was very scared when I heard that we would arrange a clandestine movement. But one of them said

something that lifted spirits: ‘We have to go through with this and fight the battle together because I am sure that I can’t do this alone.’” In order to collect all of the evidence and supporting documents, they needed around two months to complete everything and to send all of them to Sir M to further the process.

Everything seemed to be going okay with some elements of luck. Whenever a little bit of opportunity came, they tried to get the most out of it. The first instance came from Nathan’s error. Every day before the massage parlor was opened for the customers or clients, Nathan held a meeting with all of his workers. Then, something strange happened. Nathan allowed the spa therapists to have their cell phones, even before the meeting started. Normally, all the female spa therapists were only permitted to use their phones in times between when the meeting ended or when they were not providing massage services to their clients. Besides these allowed times, they needed to give up their phones at the cashier desk. Ratna was the first to realize that Nathan was totally oblivious that day. Ratna pinched Praba’s back to notify her of this serendipity. Without having to say a word, Praba picked up on the gesture code and activated the recording memo on her smartphone without a lot of fuss. Finally, they obtained their first piece of evidence, an audio recording of Nathan’s voice when he explained the *urut batin* massage with each new service price.

Other attempts at collecting evidence got easier when the massage parlor accepted some new Indonesian female migrant workers who were coming in. Just as before, Nathan warned Praba and Ratna not to come near the new workers. But they both found their own discreet way to explain the true situation in the massage parlor to the new

members. Praba said, “I made sure to talk about the sexually related jobs in our massage parlor with the new members. Of course, they were all shocked. I comforted them and convinced them that we could get out of this horrendous situation soon, as long as they helped me. From there, we could finally take pictures of their passports and employment contracts before Nathan took all of them away the next day.”

According to Ratna, collecting video recordings when the spa therapists provide *urut batin* service for the clients was the most challenging mission. The massage parlor had surveillance cameras in several spots. Even though there were no surveillance cameras inside the massage service booths, Nathan would still easily find out if they were not careful. They also needed to give up their phones to the cashier’s desk whenever Aunty called a number for a customer who was waiting. There were several times that they felt the situation was under control, when neither Nathan nor Nina were around. However, just like how the world works, bad luck sometimes happened. Ratna laughed when she shared this story with me. “One day, we managed to set up our phone camera so that it was facing a colleague who provided a ‘ping pong’ massage. When we watched the recording result, we realized that we did not switch the shot for the front-facing camera setting. The result was an all-black video because the camera filmed the wall in the background. It was really sad, but I can laugh it off now.”

And then, Ratna observed that there was one of the new workers who cried a lot one afternoon. Ratna wanted to approach her to offer support, but Nathan would not like it. She asked the other new worker about what happened and found out that the crying girl just had a big fight with her husband. Her husband, who was also an Indonesian migrant worker in Malaysia, was very mad because his wife did not want to share details

about the location where she was working. He accused his wife of being unfaithful. Similar to the lived experiences of other spa therapists in this study, the shame and guilt to work at a sexual related massage service made them hide every truth from their families or the loved ones. But well, Ratna had a plan.

Ratna later tried approaching the new girl and said to her, “We need your husband’s help to run our plot, and I will help you to explain the situation to him.” After getting permission, Ratna got the husband’s cell phone number and called him. Ratna felt that having a non-smartphone could give some degree of benefit in exercising “clandestine” resistance. She then talked about how Nathan performed sudden technology inspections on some of her colleagues. Lucky for them, Nathan did not find the “evidence” because Praba had already saved all of the files on a hidden password locked folder. However, the technology inspection became a warning to the group because their boss already smelled the fishiness, so they needed to be more careful. But Nathan did not seem too fond of Ratna’s monophonic phone because he had never checked it. And it was good. Her “ancient” phone gave the group flexibility to call everyone, including Sir M and the worker’s husband who would help them to make the plot happen.

When I asked how that worker’s husband first reacted, Ratna answered, “He was furious after knowing what kind of job that his wife doing in the massage parlor. I scolded him and told him to pull himself back together. This is not what his wife or any of us wanted to happen. We were trapped in Mam Santi’s human trafficking chain.” After few minutes of ranting and being speechless, finally he was willing to be part of the group’s plan. Ratna further explained, first, he needed to include one more person

because Ratna was afraid that technical problems like from the previous instance might occur. She needed two video recordings for a backup if either one of it did not work. The worker's husband and his friend needed to come into the parlor and pretend to be clients. Then, at checkout, they both needed to tell Aunty that they wanted to get services from certain workers (Ratna gave the calling identification number of the wife and another spa therapist who were willing to be volunteers in this scheme). Inside the massage booth, the assigned spa therapists would provide *urut batin* massage services, and everything needed to be filmed with the "clients'" phones (in case Nathan still performed the "phone inspection day").

There were only four people who knew about the video recording plan: Ratna, Praba, and two volunteers. Other spa therapists in their solidarity knew that they planned something, but they did not really know about the details. When I asked her for the reason that only a few of spa therapists got involved, Praba shared a few concerns. Nathan and "his women" already had a suspicion that we were getting closer to one another each day. Praba did not want to create unnecessary attention or anxiety within the group which could invoke suspicion. She also wanted to maintain the optimistic mentality of other workers. They had once failed in collecting evidence, but if this would be unsuccessful again, it would not take them down. Praba wanted to prevent anyone who felt burnt out because resistance should keep going whether they win or lose.

Besides that, another impressive thing was about how they coordinated the scheme, strategy, and other details. They could no longer have an intense conversation on WhatsApp because their communication was being monitored by the employer. Forming a close gathering was also difficult because "Nathan's spies" were around them.

However, where there's a will there's a way. One bathroom for fifteen people, which they thought was very inhumane before, finally became something that Ratna was really grateful for. By using an excuse that it would save time to go to the bathroom in groups, they could talk and share each other's ideas without anyone knowing. When I expressed how I was mesmerized by how amazing and brilliant everyone was in the group, Ratna said with a laugh, "Nathan's biggest mistake was to recruit me. His 11-year kingdom fell because of our teamwork."

On D-day, everyone was nervous. Another luck happened at that time. Nathan and Nina were not there; they both were at the other branch. Moreover, each spa therapist in the solidarity group also had a significant role, even though some of them did not really know what it was all about. Praba was responsible for the process of video recording. One or two girls were assigned to distract Aunty by keeping her occupied at the cashier's desk. Another girl who was located in the same parlor branch with Nathan that day was obligated to update with any information about Nathan or Nina's movement. All important information was distributed via WhatsApp. The remaining spa therapists, who were not involved directly in the mission, gave their support through constant prayers. Religiosity is very important to them. In an oppressive condition when they could not seek help from anybody, they believed that there was the owner of Supreme Power who always witnesses and listens to their cries. Ratna always reminded them, "Allah is always with the oppressed. We should always maintain our *shalat* and keep our mouth moist with *shalawat*.¹⁴ Allah will provide a way."

¹⁴ Islamic prayers, especially for the salutation to Prophet Muhammad

Even though they experienced several strokes of good luck, it still did not assuage their nerves. They experienced a rollercoaster of emotions. Every time the doorbell chimed as a sign there was somebody coming to the parlor, they wondered, “are they coming yet?” And yes, finally the people they had been waiting for were there, one of the workers’ husbands and his friend. From the viewpoint of the workers, those two gentlemen were not merely human beings who could help them to end their suffering. Their arrival symbolized that all of their daily struggles would be fruitful. They all realized that there had been countless moments to break them down. Hope is a dangerous thing, but it is the one which keep them alive amidst the agony that kills them bit by bit each day.

Does this Mean the Subaltern Won?

After the mission to collect evidence, the solidarity group of the spa therapists felt a little bit relieved. From the labor regulation perspective, Nathan had undeniably violated both labor and human rights. The way he ran the business obviously showed the disparity between what was written clearly on the employment contract and how Nathan treated his workers. All the collected evidence had been convincing enough to show that there were exploitative, illicit, and illegal labor activities in the massage parlor. Praba had sent all of the files to Sir M. She also kept others in the loop and informed them that all they needed to do was wait until KJRI Johor Bahru built up the development of the case.

And then one day, Nathan called Praba to come and see him. He looked very furious. He said that her father (big boss) just received a phone call from an official in the Indonesian embassy office in Kuala Lumpur (KBRI KL) regarding the underpaid report

on behalf of Praba. He also needed to visit the office immediately. Praba was very confused. Why was it only considered a wage-related report? The cause of the workers' suffering was way more than that. And she was also terrified. What if Nathan went ballistic on her? Why did Sir M. and the KJRI office not give any notice beforehand? Before Praba was finished analyzing all of her overwhelming thoughts, Nathan suddenly begged Praba to withdraw her report. Nathan then said that they both could continue the discussion after he got back to the massage parlor again, but right now he needed to go to the Indonesian embassy office immediately.

Praba tried to reach out to Sir M at the earliest opportunity to know what was going on. When she was able to connect with him, Sir M explained that confusion might emerge due to the multiple reports submitted by Praba's fiancé. KBRI KL did not know that the case had been supervised by Sir M and other staff members of KJRI JB. Sir M assured Praba that Nathan would not do any harm to her and made sure that he would be in the location where Nathan was being interrogated.

On the same day, when Nathan got back to his massage parlor, he immediately called all the workers who were included in the "rebellious" group. Right away, Praba acknowledged that Sir M had hinted at their solidarity. In the meeting, everyone could see that Nathan looked disheveled, confused, and his face looked so pale. Nathan then informed the workers that officials from KJRI wanted to meet all of them tomorrow. Praba said, "Nathan begged all of us to say no if KJRI staff gave an offer for us to return to Indonesia." Deep down in their hearts, they all wanted to go home to Indonesia. But considering that they were still trapped in the parlor, they were afraid that they could have put their lives in danger if they voiced their true feelings. In responding to Nathan's

request, Praba said that she would think about it, and it was echoed by all the other spa therapists.

Adit had only worked as a spa therapist for around a week when Sir M and other KJRI JH officials were coming to the massage parlor. She was still very excited to begin a new life in Malaysia as a spa therapist in a beauty and body care salon. Despite the excitement, she still had a suspicious feeling about her new job. Her new colleagues seemed nice but always shunned her whenever she tried to approach them. She also perceived that they all did not look that healthy, especially from their skin tones. Adit said, “Most of them had light skin, but it is more like yellow-pale skin, a kind of skin tone possessed by somebody who rarely goes out in the sun light.” Adit was still on the job training and did not acknowledge *urut batin* services yet. She then felt more suspicious whenever she observed how her seniors’ looked before and after providing massage services to their clients. It was hard for her to elaborate on, but she knew that something fishy was going on inside the booth. But everything became clear when Sir M. came to the massage parlor.

That morning, Nathan called up all the workers who were engaged in the “rebellious” solidarity to meet Sir M. in the meeting room. Nathan forbade Adit from joining. Adit said, “I pretended to obey by walking away, but I came back again and eavesdropped.” Inside the room, Sir M. collected information about the experiences of the workers. Adit cried when she listened to each of their stories. They had been trafficked, confined, exploited, sexually assaulted, and oppressed all this time. The suffering was unimaginable for Adit. Sir M. brought up the topic of the workers’ appeal

to return home to Indonesia. He said that the appeal was granted, and KJRI JB was in the process of arranging the repatriation. They were freed. The workers hugged each other. They performed *sujood*,¹⁵ screaming and crying aloud. It is a joyous scream that all people do after being silenced for a long time. It is a happy cry that free men and free women yearn to express after regaining their freedom.

When I asked how she felt the first time to go outside and to see the world again, Praba said, “On our way to go to the hotel, Sir M. allowed me when I asked whether I may open the car window. I opened it and inhaled the breeze from outside. My first reaction was ‘so...this is Malaysia? It is very nice to finally meet you.’” The views of highways, buildings, or vehicles, that Praba saw during her way to go to the hotel, might be very ordinary for some people, but for Praba and her friends, that view embodied the new chapter of beginnings and fresh starts.

After arriving in a hotel, Sir M. gave the newly freed spa therapists a heads-up about what they would face when they reached KJRI JB. There would be inevitable, frequent interrogation and interview for the case development. They also needed to confront their former boss and the trafficker, because KJRI official had summoned Mam Santi. The women’s prediction that their former boss would deny everything was right. In front of KJRI JB staffs, Nathan assured them that his massage service business was legal and ethical. When the video recording was played, he boldly denied by saying that he had no idea about what happened inside the massage booths, and those “oral jobs” were under

¹⁵ Prostration to express thankfulness and gratitude to Allah

mutual consent between the spa therapists and the clients. He then said another lie: he had never received financial profit nor forced the workers to perform *urut batin* massages. But his wordy talk stopped when KJRI staff played another piece of evidence in the form of audio file. Nathan listened to his own voice where he explained about the new prices of “ping pong” and “ice cream” services. It weakened him. He could not deny it any longer.

Nathan did not meet his obligation as the employer as it was written in the employment contract. First, based on the regulation, formal workers are not allowed to live in the same building/house with their workplace. Besides that, the condition of the dormitory was very inhumane. Second, the confiscation of personal documents and cellphones are also breaking the law. Third, withholding salary and confining the workers are absolutely forms of human rights violations which indicates to human slavery. Due to his inability to meet legal requirements in protecting his workers, Nathan was responsible to pay financial penalties. He also should pay all the monthly salary and the additional compensation for each worker. According to the employment contract, the spa therapists are entitled to receive monthly salary around \$245, so each of them would receive different amount based on how long they had worked. For the additional compensation, Ratna said that KJRI JB forced Nathan to pay \$700. Shamelessly, Nathan still bargained that the total amount of costs he needed to pay was too much and unfair. Praba said, Sir M. threatened him that if he did not pay it, the case would go to *mahkamah* (Malaysian trial process). Terrified to get into prison, Nathan then agreed with the payment.

Soon after the interrogation with their former employer, the former spa therapists finally met with the trafficker again. Mam Santi flew from Indonesia to attend the KJRI's

summon. In front of the women, she cried and apologized about what happened. She did not know that everything went like this and asked why they did not tell her about the sexual related job. Praba had enough with Mam Santi's soap opera. Straightforwardly, Praba talked back. She explained all the evidence showed clearly that Mam Santi had traded them all knowingly. She said to Mam Santi, "Do you think that we are that stupid? We knew that you just held a glamorous party for your daughter's wedding and bought a new car. Where did the money come from if it was not from selling us? Does it feel good to benefit from pushing down others?" Praba could not control her anguish. How could you not be angry to people who had treated you like merchandise?

Praba, Ratna, and the others stayed in the shelter home owned by the KJRI JB office for around two weeks. Praba said that time was one of the happiest moments in her life. The other five participants in this study were in agreement. They were very excited to go back home and met their families again in Indonesia. Besides that, even though only for relatively short time, they learned a lot during their stay there. They learned to be more compassionate with themselves and others. They tried to heal themselves by stopping self-blaming for the bad past. They also started forgiving their friends who had once opposed their resistance against Nathan's domination. A few days after staying in the shelter, they told Sir M. that there were still other spa therapists who were not included in the report. The women in solidarity started to acknowledge that what Risa or Gita did was also a way for survival, even though they were at the different sides. Especially for Gita, they already forgave her and understood that she was also living in an extraordinary pain at that time.

Moreover, the taste of freedom gave them time to be reflexive about the bitterness caused by the power of money could do to underprivileged people like them. They left their families and their hometown because of money. For this case, money could be a symbol of love, unselfishness, and empowerment. However, money could also be an evil force to condone why human beings could trade other human beings. They tried to understand on how the smell of money could shut people's heart from the sense of humanity. This is the reason why they did not seek help from Malaysian police officers when they came to the massage parlor to do the regular labor inspection. The experience in seeing money could be very dangerous which made them think: How do we know whether you are bad or good police officers? If our filthy rich boss could purchase us, would it not be possible for him to buy your integrity? Are we wrong to be careful about this?

Resistance Under the Veil of Acquiescence

As I mentioned a few times in this writing, my objective is to highlight the central aspect of agency and power possessed by the underprivileged community. As I immersed myself deeper by interviewing the six human trafficking victims, I knew that I did not want to emphasize them as victims, because they are so much more than that. Their collective stories are painful and beautiful at the same time. This is one thing that motivates me to seek a proper theoretical framework which respects them as the central actors of political struggles. Then, I remember the term of "subaltern" when I took Everyday Forms of Political Resistance class (JHR 598) by Dr. Natasha Behl in the third semester of my master program. The class taught me a lot about how scholars or

researchers in social studies need to consider the impact of power dynamics in defining social realities (Behl, 2019).

A prominent subaltern/decolonial scholar, Edward Said (1988) entices us to use a more diverse alternative in approaching social realities. Using Indian context, he delivered an argument that the struggle for independence from British colonialism did not only come from Gandhis, Nehrus, and other elitists (p.vi). Fueled by political self-interest, a few elitists erase subaltern's struggles from our historical textbook. According to Spivak (1988, p. 5-6), colonist hegemonic power has shaped bourgeois class biases in our knowledge production. The ideology posits that agency or defiance against domination are only for the few elitists who engaged themselves in a "progressive" organized movement. Alas, the mindset was agreed by the nationalist bourgeoisie who refused to be in the same level with low or non-educated subaltern. As a result, the subaltern has never got proper recognition as people who also resist due to their assumed minor "level of consciousness."

Considering the social justice element in knowledge production, the subaltern context gives us a tool to challenge how the intellectual and institutional works perpetuate the representation of privileged communities as the central stories. From the perspective of highly educated people, they would be surprised to know that these six women (one of them is even only an elementary school graduate) could perform very brilliant defiance. From the perspective of rich, high-status people, they might mistakenly underestimate that those women with lack of financial or social capital are still able to practice power and agency. Moreover, people with masculine perspective would never recognize those women's resistance because males still wrongly assume that resistance

should be formed as a “patriotic” or physical fight. Avoiding the traditional way to lionize “big persons” again, I want to affirm that the subaltern group in this study are also fighters. Under the daily oppressive situation in the massage parlor, the six human trafficking victims kept their own way of struggle. By using the concept of the subaltern scholars, I urge a fairer recognition to acknowledge that oppressed community is also an important agent in their individual and collective struggle.

Wrestling with the issues of people’s struggles, scholars cannot dismiss the significance of class element in shaping and defining the political and intellectual activism. In a world that devalues poor and working class, marginalized communities are rarely recognized as people who engaged in political activity. Therefore, to acknowledge that the six human trafficking victims in this study also employ political resistance, I want to start the discussion by defining political movements. According to Kelley (1994, p. 4), the traditional theory of politics has designed a rigid, formal method in deciding which political activism to be counted appropriate or authentic. Taken as a belief, we often assume that all intellectual products are the manifestation of neutrality and integrity. However, we have to start deconstructing our way of thinking because people who have privilege to produce knowledge might likely construct theory from their own perspective or interest.

Kelly (1994) further argues, “such an approach not only disregards diversity... but it [also] presumes that the only struggles that count take place through institutions” (p. 4). From here, knowing the background of theorizing is very important because it affects how individuals see their values and positions in the social world. In contrast, theory also influences how societies values individuals’ contribution in the community

therein. If resistance should be performed in a formal or institutional way to suit with the definition of political activity, the subaltern or female participants in this study will not be considered as a community who fight against domination. In order to dissent the rigid definition, I needed to find another theoretical framework of political resistance which can embrace more pluralized political movements.

Scott (1985), in his book *Weapons of the Weak*, delivers an alternative notion to highlight the agency performed by the oppressed communities in challenging status quo. Living in a tyrannical condition, subaltern realized that overt rebellion would cost unimaginable physical or psychological pain (Scott, 1990, p. x). As a result, oppressed people cannot be frank to express their rejection, disgust, or hatred towards their oppressors for the sake of survival. However, if scholars only see what appears on the surface, we will only see that these subordinate groups are living in total subordination. By using historical context, Scott (1990) used the situation in Antebellum American slavery to elaborate the social complexities between domination and subordination (p. 5). When the owner beat her daughter due to a mistake that she did not do, the enslaved mother only watched and could not do anything. But after the master went away, the mother stormed to another slave to curse and express her rage and hatred towards the employer. According Scott, this is the public and hidden transcript that scholars need to see when they want to observe the hidden resistance performed by the marginalized community. That concept to see beyond the mainstream approach was called *infrapolitics* (p. 183).

Infrapolitics is relevant with the hidden activities performed by the six former spa therapists in resisting the abusive and exploitative condition in the massage parlor. In

front of Nathan and the customers, they show obedience and politeness. When Nathan ordered that they could not practice *shalat* or gather as a group, in the public stage, they agreed. But in the hidden stage, they tried to steal time to do prayer and secretly made a chat group to keep connected and support each other. Besides *infrapolitics*, Scott (1985, p. xvi) also contributes a significant approach to make sense that political activity could emerge not only “behind the stage”, but also in everydayness. During his two years of political ethnography in a Malaysian village, Scott recounted how peasants perform the Brechtian strategy in their everyday defiance. That resistance strategy consists of contradictive gestures and words that are considered mundane and “ugly,” such as backbiting, character assassination, poaching wood, and foot dragging (p. xvii; p. 35). Scott further explains that Brechtian method used by working class people “represent a form of individual self-help... [and] a symbolic confrontation with authority” (xvi).

Exploring Scott’s theory to analyze the massage parlor’s study case, I started seeing all over again the embodied resistance showed in the collective stories of my participants. Picking up a symbolic confrontation as an act of resistance, I remember how Ratna disobeyed to use Thai style massage as she was trained by Nina the first time she came to the parlor. She said, “only me and my customers knew what happened inside the booth. I, indeed, provided *urut batin* services because Nathan obliged us all to do it, but when it came to regular body massage, I could do whatever I wanted. I always provided the Javanese style massage instead of the Thai style one.” Ratna’s testimony showed the distinctive style of the subaltern’s resistance. They learned to accept the reality that they had been trafficked. As female, poor, low educational level, and underpaid (some unpaid)

migrant workers, they learned how to conform with the deprivation and injustices on a daily basis, but it does not mean that they live in total acquiescence.

They still claimed their power and agency even though they were in a very limited space and opportunity. Scott's theoretical framework contests the long-standing paradigm that political resistance should be formed in organizational or institutional arrangement. The communities who live in unimaginable oppression such as peasants, human trafficking victims, undocumented migrant workers, and slaves, are people who cannot have the luxury of joining a visible protest or labor union. Scott's contribution in *infrapolitics* and everyday political resistance widen our political view: an individual struggle is also political resistance.

However, with respect to generate more just narratives of people's struggles, perhaps the most important limitation from Scott's work is in the absence of gender discussion. What I do wish to assert is that the assessment of power, domination, subordination, and resistance will not be comprehensive if we only narrow down to class struggles. Spivak (1988, p. 27-28) reminds us that the inevitable process of marginalization is even exist in marginal communities. Using the example of the phenomenon of a lower caste in India, Spivak expressed how patriarchy became rooted as a cultural belief, in which "men would not accept female leadership," and the constitution of woman as a symbolic object of exchange. Unfortunately, historians also perpetuated the tradition in neglecting women as a part of civil society who fought against colonial power. Spivak's argument for deconstructing historiography, then, is a longing for feminist, subaltern scholars or historians to raise the figure of women as subjects of struggles and to stop putting them as powerless victims (p. 30).

As a way to explore a more inclusive discussion of women's struggles, I begin to dig into an approach which will not invalidate them as a part of legitimate knowledge producers (Behl, 2017, p. 580). In social science, positivistic-numerical approach is often viewed as canonical in conceptualizing an appropriate scientific product (Pachirat, 2018, p. 15). I will not minimize the accountability made by survey or sophisticated data collection, but I want to argue that this is not the only approach to explain social or political realities. Due to underprivileged conditions, not every person could enjoy access for education so it could be difficult for them to convey their voices to that "sophisticated" channel. It challenges me to ask: Is it fair or democratic to exclude somebody's voices? What should we, feminist scholars, do to contest it?

Collins (2019) addresses the concern of intersectionality to raise the role of marginalized communities in the process of intellectual production. By highlighting African American women's experience, she captures the significance of lived experience to construct a theory to be more relevant with social realities (p. 158-159). In other words, there is a process where authors work with the communities in struggle to generate the interconnectedness of academia and activism. This cogeneration of knowledge is an important element that I want to operate throughout the writing process of this thesis. The lived experiences of six former spa therapists in this study is a crucial contribution to articulate systematic relations between power, patriarchy, poverty, and human trafficking chains. Besides that, by interweaving their collective stories and experiences, these women demonstrate how solidarity is very important to disrupt the status quo.

According to transnational feminist scholars, solidarity continues to be one of the most powerful forces for social activism in the world today (Nagar & Swarr, 2010, p. 2). A central principle of women's solidarity in this research is the shared experience of oppression and the imagination of freedom. In the effort to collect evidence, Praba considered these two keys when she persuaded other new spa therapists to join the resistance. "Don't you want to end everything and go back home to meet your families again?" she said. However, women do not have to experience the same oppression to build solidarity. How, then, might we conceptualize it? A number of feminists scholars argue that women's solidarity across differences is possible, even though it is not easy. Collins (2019), for instance, argues that the distinctive perspective and experience enables us to understand the social world and build up collective behavior to perform action (p. 158).

However, Hooks (2000) reminds us to be aware with the danger of "sisterhood." The interest of female-bourgeois-white liberationists lies in the connection of sisterhood with the idea of "common oppression" (p. 43). This thought will likely produce disengagement and misrepresentation that all women have the same degrees or types of oppression. Meanwhile, the complex social realities could divide women in terms of "sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and ...other prejudice" (p. 44). Therefore, a democratic approach to respect all differences is important because the dialogue will offer real support with care, rather than the intention to diminish what is assumed not appropriate (p. 65).

Lastly, throughout this chapter, I want to disrupt the frequently binary assumption of resistance: that it is either rebellion or acquiescence. The presence of the female

migrant workers in the massage parlor resistance are real. However, if we only see social realities from what appears in the tip of the iceberg, we limit ourselves to the assumption that these former spa therapists were living in total subordination. The new approach to see political activism in the lens of democracy and social justice discourse sheds light that every voice matters. The voices of subaltern are valuable to change our attitudes and practices in the knowledge production process.

Within the academic institutions which constitute Eurocentric and male ideology, the politics of knowledge likely works around to praise masculinity, “objectivity”, and hegemony of power. In order to stop this tradition, I situate putting women’s voices and their lived experience as the main attention. Their personal imagination, interests, and agency to fight for freedom and social change could be major tools to reinforce the transformation of global economic and political process. In order to achieve this, I need to think “beyond Northern epistemologies” and embrace dialogical engagement (Collins, 2019, p. 110-113). The coproduction of knowledge disrupts the ethical objectivity approach which puts researcher and participants in a distant and asymmetrical relation. This is an effort to decolonize knowledge practices and to stop the traditional intellectual elitists in seeing “the others.” Interactive and collaborative works between the two parties are the essential fuel to gain all integral aspects of social complexities. This is the kind of solidarity that I need in order to question the dualisms of theory and praxis or academia and activist. Besides that, solidarity for women’s struggle does not need to negate our personality or identity. Just like bell hooks (2000, p. 65) says, “we can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity.”

CHAPTER 5

SEEING THEM THROUGH BUREAUCRATIC LENSES

I performed a chronological technique in shaping this thesis project to emphasize that all cycle of migration (pre-departure, employment abroad, and return phases) could be a significant guide to construct a critical analysis of power dynamics in human trafficking chains. Regarding the women's resistance against their oppressors, the previous chapters of this thesis project address the individual private actors who themselves benefitted from the horrific human exploitation business. This section, I have to swallow a brutal truth that people who must have supported and protected them could be actors who involve in oppressing and silencing the women's resistance.

The process of writing this thesis project embodied my personal, intellectual, and political journey. I always hoped that the six women in this study told me a fiction story, but it's real. This is heart-wrenching to know that how they get trapped in the human trafficking chains partly because of the result from unruly bureaucratic system. And I am part of the system. As a civil servant who works under a hierarchical system, I become more self-reflexive with political or apolitical culture in Indonesian governmental bodies. As a woman, I start to realize why the feminist movement is important to dismantle the male dominated culture which jeopardizes our democracy. As a scholar, I learn to interrogate my ability to be a part of knowledge producer and question its tradition which construct whose voices are considered legitimate (Behl, 2017, p. 580).

Getting Out from The Cage: A Brief Story After They're Home

After the spa therapists returned to Indonesia in around November 2019, they needed to do several interviews to follow up their cases. They wanted justice, and justice is not only about financial compensation, but also bringing the perpetrators to trial and punishing them constitutionally. When they knew that Nathan would not get punitive sanction, they were mad, but they acknowledged their positionalities. Their status as female migrant workers in low wage sectors put them in a complicated imbalance power under all social and financial capital possessed by their former employer. Moreover, they already felt tired, and just wanted to return to Indonesia soon to see their families and homes. However, it did not mean that the resistance had ended. They wanted Mam Santi and Agency X to be held accountable and be brought to justice. They considered that it will advance their struggles, especially when they were surrounded by a good support system, their families, for the example. However, it turned out to be not much easier than they thought before.

Feeling ashamed and unready for victim-blaming attitude from society made them reluctant. From the six female therapists, five of them are unmarried; they are afraid destroying their familial honor and reputation. Gita may have never told to her parents about the sexual-related job in the massage parlor if Ratna did not help her to explain the situation after Gita asked for help. The sorrow that Gita's parents, especially that her mother should bear was unendurable. For almost a week after Gita's mother knew everything, she got sick. Gita observed that, until right now, her mother was often caught off guard in absentmindedness. After she got the presence of mind back, she said to Gita, "If I am educated, I really want to do something [fight back]. But I am stupid...even

illiterate. I don't know what I should do." I can see that Gita choked back tears as she described her parents' suffering.

Gita's hesitance to expose her experience in the massage parlor is similar with Suci right now. Suci lied to her parents about the reason why she returned to Indonesia before the completion of the two-year employment contract was because the massage parlor suddenly went bankrupt. She does not want to expose her painful and embarrassing memories in order to avoid her family's sorrow. However, Ratna's story about her family's reaction had surprised me. Her husband does not see what Ratna's experiences in the massage parlor are embarrassment and shame. Championing the value of marriage beyond family's reputation is not only helping Ratna for her healing process, but also for a collective struggle for the spa therapists' solidarity. He even fully supports Ratna to seek justice by continuing the case for trial. When I sat down to analyze Ratna's husband support and attitude, I see that a solidarity to dismantle stigmatization and oppressive culture towards women is not only a "women's job" (hooks, 2020). Men can be an ally that contributes an equal struggle to create a more just or democratic society. From their stories, I learn a precious lesson that feminism is a shared solidarity beyond inherent identities.

During the interviews and reflexive work in analyzing all data findings, I am speechless with the contradiction that the six spa therapists carried out throughout their chronicles. They are fearless and vulnerable at the same time. Even though they, eventually, need to trade off their courage to continue the case with their family's reputation at stake, they are still brave, and their resistance's stories are still very

valuable. The subaltern in this study may be able to speak¹⁶, but to win the war, we would never know how long or far the struggles should be taken.

Imagining A Transformative Culture in Bureaucratic Systems

When I connected with the six former migrant workers in January 2021, I know that the status of their case had been closed. It was discontinued due to something that God only knows. Many other complex and difficult issues came continually to the surface when I tried to reach out to some civil servants. In separate Zoom meeting, they relatively gave me the same conclusion: no matter how they tried to continue the spa therapists' case, "Jakarta" had already taken it down. When I asked them about how Mam Santi and Agency X are doing right now, they desperately said that there was no punitive action for them both. According to Law of Indonesia No 18 of 2017 on Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, private recruitment agency which violate the labor law could get financial and administrative sanction. Agency X gets none of it.

One of civil servants that I made contact with, Hadi (male, has worked more than 10 years as a bureaucrat) expressed how he is exasperated with the cycle of human trafficking crime and the impunity. The impunity keeps existing. He remembers another case that his team needed to investigate; an indication of illegal placement of some female Indonesian migrant workers to go to Singapore. Hadi connected with an Indonesian Police officer in a regional level¹⁷ and asked his team to do a further investigation about the crime. Hadi gave all the detail information about the "mafia" who

¹⁶ This expression is inspired by Gayatri Spivak's work: *Can the subaltern speak?*

¹⁷ In order to respect the confidentiality of my participant's identity, I do not mention the name of region.

gave ride to the female workers, which airport where they would send the migrant workers off to Singapore, what time for the flight, and other details. The next day when Hadi asked about the follow-up, he knew that the police officer team let all the people get away. No one got arrested. Listening to Hadi's testimony infuriated me, but I had to be honest that it is not surprising. Bribery from private actors to state actors is (I am ashamed to say it) a common thing.

Another example is the age fabrication in Suci and Inka's cases. Suci was 18, and Inka was 19 years old when they registered themselves as prospective Indonesian migrant workers. According to the Law No. 18/2017, they actually already passed the age limit to be an illegible migrant worker. As reported by Inka, she eavesdropped when Mam Santi got a phone call from somebody that requested females above 20 years old for spa therapist jobs. It turned out to be not a big deal for Mam Santi. She bribed officials in an Immigration office and got their ages fabricated for two years older. Once again, document fabrication to establish a "legal" document illegally is not a rare thing.

During my five years of service, I often heard a gossip about illegal practices involving state actors circulating in the work unit where I worked at. The rumor constantly evolved the illicit practice conducted by high ranked/low ranked bureaucrats or civil servants in central/provincial/county (or even village) level. As I am being reflective right now, this usualness could shut off the willingness to create a transformative social change within bureaucratic communities. When I was still actively working, the normalcy discouraged me to problematize these practices. I felt like I already conformed with the condition and had no motivation to even discuss or fight against the status quo. Even though I truly condemned any forms of unlawful conduct

inside state bodies, I started to build a jaded attitude: it usually happens and becomes a part of bureaucratic culture, so what can I do?

Imagined Gender Equality in Bureaucratic Systems

Naming gender inequality in bureaucratic system is complicated. According to the official website in my institution, there is no imbalance between the total number of female and male bureaucrats. Females even slightly outnumber with 505 people over the 487 people of male bureaucrats. However, when it comes to the number of female bureaucrats in supervising level, the asymmetrical number between male and female is very significant. In order to explain this tension in the terms of dialogical and analytical manner, I embedded several thoughts from some female and male bureaucrats who were willing to be part of this research. Their views are very critical and impactful for my self-reflexivity in recognizing what I can and cannot see.

The inherent service in my institution is quite unique comparing to other Indonesian states' agencies. Even though the job is still adhering 8-hour workday, from Monday to Friday, some of civil servants who work at operational¹⁸ working unit are needed to be ready on call for 24/7. For example, the typical "24/7" job that some of my colleagues need to perform is picking up sick migrant workers from airport and driving them until they get home and meet with their families. Some cases are even really heartbreaking. We need to provide specific service for burial when migrant workers died overseas, and we need to coordinate with the deceased families for human remains

¹⁸ In general, the services of the Indonesian bureaucratic system could be categorized into two positions: administrative works (budgeting deskwork) and operational works (fieldwork, giving direct services to community)

repatriation. Sometimes, in doing this 24/7 job types, my colleagues and I need to sacrifice our weekends or do overtime work because some of the cases should be dealt in a timely manner. Even though these extra jobs are bound to all civil servants, the inherent characteristics of the jobs make female civil servants more difficult to participate in the services than their male counterpart.

Based on my personal experience, I observed that the majority of my female colleagues who have been married and become mothers face a lot of trouble when they are appointed by their supervisors for the sudden on call job. They sometimes tried to negotiate with our supervisors to appoint different employees who are more flexible with time or unmarried, like me. Oftentimes I agree to take the replacement, but sometimes I decline it as I need a self-care or personal time as well. Debating the married female bureaucrats who decline sudden service calling, Hana (female civil servant, unmarried, more than 5-year experience of civil services) shared a story about an inspiring female civil servant in our institution who was located in an Eastern Indonesia regional branch. Hana said that even though that female civil servant is married and has kids, she commits to always be available whenever the public service's calling. Hana further said, "She does not even mind to drive an ambulance to pick up migrant workers from the airport if an ambulance is the only official vehicle that is available in her office." However, the degree of dedication required by female bureaucrats to participate in public services cannot be simplified by their willingness or not. There are social, cultural, and even geographical issues that are important to consider.

Regarding the sociocultural issues, we need to recognize that despite the participation of women in public service, they still cannot let down their cultural baggage

as a wife or a mother. Multiple responsibilities for women who juggle several tasks between public and housework are very common. Hari (male civil servant, married, more than 5-year experience of civil services) remembers when he and his female colleague were assigned for the night on-call service. Recalling the moment, Hari said, “Our job was not only to pick up from the airport, but also bring the migrant worker home. Sometimes we need to spend hours to find the house’s location because the migrant workers forgot their address.” Hari observed that his female colleague’s husband kept calling every hour asking where they were at. He also understood that some of her female colleagues were not comfortable to be paired with male civil servants when they were assigned in on-call duty, especially at the night. In order to ease the discomfort between him and his female colleague, sometimes Hari brought his wife to accompany them in doing the night job.

Besides the social or cultural norms associated with being outside at night, my female colleagues also encounter a predicament related to geographical condition. Lina (female civil servant, married, more than 5-year experience of civil services), shared her concerns about being assigned to do fieldwork in the nighttime, especially to go to some regions with high crime rate. Regarding the field setting characteristic, listening her alarm about on-call duties, night public service raises my attention about the vulnerability for women. I completely understand her hesitation to make a full commitment for our “24/7” job because I feel the same way. Even though my status is a civil servant in a central governmental agency, I got a decree to be placed in a regional branch, and it is not in

Java island¹⁹. From 34 total numbers of Indonesia's provinces, my work placement was included as one of 10 provinces with the highest number of crime rates according to Statistics Indonesia. If my supervisor wanted to assign me to do the nighttime public service, I always asked to be paired with other male colleagues because it would give me a feeling of protection. Because oftentimes, societies still see women as weak and they consider us as an easier target for crime. This patriarchy mindset which is embedded in every aspect of human life was indeed a weapon to destroy our democracy, especially regarding the participation and representation of women in the public sphere.

From some of civil servants' lived experiences, they raise an important issue about how the cultural, social, and even geographical obstacle results to the discouragement and disengagement for female bureaucrats to serve the community. For the case of the institution where I work at, this situation will justify any action to write off female bureaucrat names to partake in core activities related in direct services to the Indonesian migrant workers. Exploring deeper to the situation, the unequal representation of female bureaucrats impacts our public service quality and gives disadvantage to the male civil servants itself. One time, Hari was assigned to pick up a female Indonesian migrant worker in an airport and needed to interview related the maltreatment that she got from her abusive employer in a Middle Eastern country. He held up an airport pickup sign and had waited for relatively long time in the arrival room, but no one came near him. Finally, after asking help from a female airport staff to check in the lady's bathroom, Hari found out that the female migrant worker hid herself there. She was afraid to come

¹⁹ Even though Java is not the biggest island in Indonesia, Jakarta, the capital city is located in the island, and more than 50% of Indonesia's population is in Java. Wealth distribution had been concentrated to the area, especially during the Java-centric rule in Soeharto era.

near him and thought that Hari was another bad guy just like her former boss. Learning from this lesson, sometimes Hari needs to ask his wife again to accompany him in doing some services if he is not assigned with female colleagues. Hari explained to me that the participation of female bureaucrats in performing direct service is very important.

Moreover, there is another attention to the need of dismantling male-dominated ideology in organizational setting. Nia (female civil servant, unmarried, more than 5-year experience of civil services) shared to me when I asked whether she faced discriminatory practices related to her work. She said, “I am still doing direct services for migrant workers and I feel that my supervisor gives a fair opportunity towards both male and female workers. However, I also have a strenuous obligation related to deskwork.” Her supervisor reason was that women are more meticulous in numerical stuff, so he assigned Nia to do extra administrative jobs in preparing regular budgeting reports. Of course, it wore her out. Nia’s testimony shows a different layer of dilemma faced by female bureaucrats. The sexist division of “feminine and masculine” jobs construct an unfair workload for female civil servants. Some of the women need to show extra hard work to claim their contribution and participation in public services.

As I listened to one another’s stories of our inherent job characteristics, the difficulties for female bureaucrats to participate in public service are wrapped in multiple layers. Socio, cultural, and geographical aspects are intertwined to discourage female bureaucrats to give comprehensive dedication to their jobs as public servants. When I began to scrutinize this, male dominated culture highly contributes to perpetuate the norms of which jobs are male or female. Again, just like my argument in chapter II, using feminist as a tool for social change is not about valuing one type of job as better than the

other one. I will not argue with my female colleagues who believe that their roles as a wife or a mother are more important, so they have to decline in giving public service outside the normal working hours. In decolonial feminist movement (chapter II), women's dedication for both housework and public work are equally valuable and needs to be recognized. What is most important to challenge is the sexist ideology that lets men control what women can or cannot do.

Human Trafficking, Bureaucracy and the Question of Democracy

Through the lens of lived experiences, I want to highlight the connection between human rights, social justice, and the importance of studying power relations to see the societal paradox between theory and praxis on holding both earlier notions. According to the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights or OHCHR (2000), everyone should enjoy their basic rights, at any rate, simply because they are human beings. However, in the development of our society, unequal power possessed by individuals or communities created a norm to decide who gets more rights than the others (Wellman, 1987, p. 199). This imbalance drives political responsibilities and involvement to confront systems of power including racism, heteropatriarchy, class exploitation, and colonialism, which prevent people to get equal access and opportunities (Collins, 2019, p. 126). Therefore, in theorizing and implementing social justice into action, scholars need to be aware with every intersecting power relation which construct marginalization towards people based on their inherent identities.

Using intersectional analysis helps us to comprehensively understand that there is no certain rigid context or category to describe the complexities of inequalities in our

society. Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to express her confusion and frustration towards the “ambivalent” social identities experienced by African American women in facing discrimination based on race and gender. Crenshaw further explained that mono-categorical framework (feminist only or anti-racist only) will not recognize the daily multiple oppression experienced by women of color. This is because: “...women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women” (p. 1252). In the development of the contemporary feminist movement, Collins (2019, p. 24-25) argues that intersectionality is a groundbreaking worldview for both social scientists and activists to fully address social problems. Social transformation to create a more just society needs to see the systems of subordination are created by the interconnectedness of multiple identities such as race, gender, class, and others. For this study, using intersectionality approach throughout my research process tremendously helped me to be more sensitive with every possible multiple oppressive system experienced by Indonesian female migrant workers.

In the case of the six female spa therapists, I want to begin to highlight that their marginalization is deeply intertwined with their identities as migrants. A sociologist, Turner (1993, p. 489) developed an argument that globalization and precarious nature of social institution had shaped the degree of rights enjoyed by individuals embedded within citizenship. Using Marshall’s idea, Turner criticize how the concept of citizenship is very Eurocentric with the definition: democratic participation for people under “civic, political and welfare institutions” (p. 496). The embeddedness of “institution” in this definition implies that individuals ought to be recognized in formal status entitlement to claim their

basic rights (freedom of speech, religion, union, etc.). However, the development of our society shows that there is a paradox: state and formal bodies can campaign democracy and crush it at the same time.

To further understand undemocratic practices towards woman exercised in countries which always claim themselves as democratic, I will use Behl's (2019) *exclusionary inclusion* as a theoretical framework. Using the Jyoti Singh's rape case, the author explores the gap between the commitment of inclusive access of rights for all citizens and the denial of women's interests to end everyday discrimination and exclusion in democratic India (p. 5). She further makes the gap obvious by centering the women's lived experience in challenging their daily exclusionary inclusion in all institutional level; state, civil society, religious community, and home (p. 5, 12). Situating the case of the six female spa therapists, Indonesian governmental bodies demonstrate the *exclusionary inclusion* towards these women. Their statuses as Indonesian citizen and documented migrant workers cannot assure them to gain access equal rights when they seek constitutional justice for their human trafficking case. This lived *exclusionary inclusion* experience makes me question: how we can claim to live in democracy if the institutional state bodies negate women's freedom and democratic participation?

In order to answer the practice of democracy from the intersectionality manner, Collins (2019, p. 2) encourages us to problematize the way we think democracy in a formal, traditional way. She further explained, "democratic institutions that once offered such promise for realizing ideals of freedom, justice, equality, and human rights are increasingly hollowed out from within by leaders who seem more committed to holding on to power than to serving the people." From this argument, Collins highlights that a

few of people who take oaths to serve their countries can destroy democracy if they do not consider community as their service priority. Through this argument, I shift to reflect and understand my role as an Indonesian citizen, a public servant who wants to be part in upholding democracy and favoring the community that becomes the priority of my service, Indonesian migrant workers. This is my personal view, but it could be a shared struggle of other public servants in imagining a more democratic climate in Indonesia's bureaucratic setting.

As a civil servant, I always ask to myself about the relentless warning that Indonesian public servant have to be apolitical. This is paradoxical with what I have learned as a student for these two years, because scholars believe that individual or collective political struggles are important to create a more just societies which put marginalized communities to the center. In order to address this tension, I arrange an analytical discussion of Indonesian civil service organizations in a chronological way by exploring the culture of bureaucratic system in pre-Soeharto era, during Soeharto era, and the reformation era.

According to Haque (1997) the architecture of bureaucracy in developing countries could not be detached from the interest of colonizers to control their colonial regions. Colonizers use "bureaucratic apparatus to expand control over raw materials and cheap labor, maintain law and order, and ensure tax collection" (p. 439). In the development of postcolonial era, Indonesian bureaucracy is still constrained by the collaboration with foreign capitals which makes the country as a "bureaucratic-capitalist state" (p. 441). Moreover, according to Pierskalla, et.al (2020, p. 2), in the New Order

era, Soeharto used the state bureaucracy to maintain his 32 years of dictatorship, besides also using the military (ABRI) and the hegemonic Functional Group (Golkar) party.

Reflecting how the regime use civil servants to toughen the ruling Golkar party, Indonesian bureaucrats must be apolitical since the Reformation Era began from 1998. Even though the Indonesian state bureaucracies started to reform by aiming for a merit-based system rather than personal connection, “[Soeharto had] left Indonesia with a civil service that was not only highly corrupt but also very inward looking and unresponsive” (Barenschot, 2017, p. 135). In an ethnographic research, Barenschot (2017, p. 138) observed how an incumbent gubernatorial candidate deployed bureaucratic apparatus to be “success team” in arranging door-to-door campaign at the village until provincial level. During my working period, I also see how political parties can abuse the national budget and use the labor of bureaucrats to perform their “political” interests. Here, I interrogate apolitical obligation rhetoric for Indonesia’s civil servants. How could we be apolitical, as in fact we are the puppets under control of elitists’ political interest?

Moreover, in the optimistic of democratization in the reformation era, women and minorities are still underrepresented in civil service leadership positions (Pierskalla, et.al, 2020, p. 4). As I mentioned in a part of this chapter, I placed a discussion with a colleague about the importance of female bureaucrats’ representation and participation in direct services for Indonesian migrant workers. They both are equally important, but until right now we cannot give a robust remedy to relieve the disjuncture. The transition from a nepotism culture to merit-based system in the Indonesian bureaucratic recruitment or promotion is something that we need to be proud of. However, it does not mean flawless and without critique. According to Chappell (2006, p. 228), the concept of merit-based

system is very Eurocentric, patriarchal, and highly gendered. The author further explained, “Without women’s input, policy decisions that are made at the highest level [of bureaucracies] have tended to disregard (and thereby reinforce) the unequal political, economic, and social position of the two sexes, as well as make stereotypical assumptions about male and female behavior” (p. 228).

Pierskalla, et.al (2020, p. 1) raises an alarm that the lack representation of women and minorities’ bureaucrats in strategic position level will affect the quality of public service and public’s trust towards bureaucracy and public servants. Hari’s testimony about his hardship to build trust with female Indonesian migrant workers in the airport makes me suspicious about the validity of statistics on sexual violence cases towards Indonesian female migrant workers. What appears in the surface may only be “the tip of iceberg.” When the patriarchal environment still normalizes the misrepresentation and disengagement of females in public service, it means we accept the normalization of sexual violence towards women (Wilson & Thompson, 2001, p. 67). States, as the representation of society, do not even bother to provide an adequate emotional or material support to women for their healing or seeking justice. The situation could be even worse.

According to Wilson and Thompson (2001, p. 68) after the tiresome trial process, the decision will be an impunity and light sanctions for the perpetrators. The victims have to endure another pain of self-blame, guilt, and even victim blame from the society. Here, I am being self-reflexive about the *exclusionary inclusion* faced by my research participants (Behl, 2019). Bringing the idea by Anderson (2006) about imagined political community, I engage a self-talk on what I can do better as a female bureaucrat to demand a more democratic climate in state bodies. Moreover, I want to deliver an inquiry to my

female colleagues: is the representation of women civil servants in supervising level enough to empower our Indonesian female migrant workers from discrimination? If representation means to give woman power, according to Hooks (2000, p. 86), this could be a basic dilemma. Power means obtaining power through controlling others. Feminists who believe in solidarity among the oppressed must acknowledge that women could be repressive and capable of corruption like men. She further explained that what we all need is new value system which fight for collective struggle, not to reproduce a system to create other few elitists (p. 94).

Lastly, Indonesian bureaucratic reform is not only a rhetoric. Bureaucrats should not perpetuate a tradition to prioritize ruling group, elitist bureaucrats, or capitalist in their service. We have to reconsider, rethink, and challenge the long-standing system whatever degree of power we might have. Indonesian civil servants are always being reminded to preserve the ideology of neutrality and impartiality, but we all know that we cannot. Working in hierarchical system unconsciously drives us to not question how the system is created, who people are behind this, and what their motivation is. By rethinking the nature and history of bureaucracy, we could always contest that the system of power in state bodies is not fixed and permanent (Chappell, 2006, p. 230). Every time public servants do the state works, we cannot only build up a practical engagement to communities that receive our service, but we need to also use our emotional engagement. Every illegality performed by state actors could lead somebody to being used and abused. The priority of our important agenda is humanity and solidarity to address the needs of communities, our Indonesian migrant workers.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The first time I read *Playing with Fire* was when I learned interpretivist methodology from the feminist perspective. I was moved by the persistence of Richa Nagar, one of the authors, to disrupt the traditional way that social scientists conduct their research. Nagar and *Sangtin* writers argue that researchers in social studies cannot detach themselves from their research participants and often have emotional engagement. By considering the value of all voices, the authors successively deconstruct how Eurocentric scientists claim the recognition of knowledge production. Intellectual works with “the others” should empower and benefit each other, rather than steal their voices to exercise power domination. Nagar holds researchers to high analytical, critical, and ethical standards throughout the research processes. When conducting my research about gender discrimination among female Indonesian migrant workers, *Playing with Fire* inspired me to see the impact of lived experiences for people who live in unequal social conditions. This book also shaped my strong belief that the epitome of solidarity is collaborative work as it requires respect of each other’s differences.

Collaborative works need a continuous collective effort. A long-lasting bond is what I aspire to have between me, as the researcher, and the six participants. Even though my main personal purpose is to the completion of my thesis project, our collaboration in building a collective and progressive conversation regarding inequalities experienced by women in globalization will not end. No matter how brave and strong they are to survive, and even thrive, in unimaginable oppressive situation, it will be very naïve for me to not acknowledge their emotional scars, their trauma. I really hope that our ongoing

collaborative conversation will, at least, provide a channel for their healing process.

Through this collaborative writing, I want to let my participants know that their resistance and solidarity are powerful, beautiful, and inspiring.

At the same time, emotional engagement with society is important for researchers of social justice and human rights studies. In order to generate social change to fight against oppression, empathy will fuel the commitment to social justice and encourage action. In this study, I explored the link between the emotions of the readers and political engagement. Therefore, emphasizing deep and detailed stories is necessary to capture human beings as brave and vulnerable. Placing women's voices at the core of analysis represents an expanded framework to understand the political resistance of the subaltern, especially in the postcolonial regions. Their voices enrich the understanding of how capitalist globalization and colonialism intersect with the struggle of race, class, and gender. If scholars continue to only focus on the mainstream academic sources, third-world women's voices will not be heard, which may lead to the reproduction of ideas from only male or elitist's perspectives. By putting "her" voices at the center of these narratives, the liberation of all oppressed peoples is realized, which pushes forward the destruction of oppressive political-economic systems and male-dominant ideology.

All six women I interviewed said that they are physically fine, but mentally wretched. Their voices demonstrate that there has always been a contradiction of democracy (Behl, 2019). This contradiction means that we need to pressure any system which denies freedom and equality for all, and ultimately envision justice as a larger entity than self-interest. Do not let the riches, elitists, or capitalists, overthrow our democracy. I argue that these six female spa therapists in this study are the victims from

the political and economic system which perpetuate the discrimination towards female, poor, or working-class people. However, the corrupt system is capable of exercising power domination in a bigger scope. We all could be the next victims. Therefore, we cannot separate ourselves from the struggle of underprivileged communities. This is also a reminder for me, as a scholar and a public servant to pressure our bureaucracy to do the right thing: prioritizing our service to the community.

I am working in an institution which clearly can do better to accompany the victims of human trafficking in the process of healing. Incorporating this objective, I also engage in a critical analysis of the power dynamics of the bureaucratic system in Indonesia through the lens of everydayness experienced by public servants. I am highly inspired by my fellow public servants who always perform the resistance in creating a more democratic climate in the bureaucratic system. They see issues in the bureaucratic system and try to change it from within. They fully acknowledge that changing the system overnight is impossible. Resistance is a long struggle which needs collective work from other optimistic bureaucrats who believe in love of humanity and equality.

Being able to interview the six female migrant workers makes me realize the importance of emotional engagement with communities that receive our services. Especially within my bureaucratic community, civil servants should see Indonesian migrant workers as not only workers with remittances, but also human beings who have freedom and dignity. We have to admit that institutional bodies' complicity in ignoring and perpetuating the practice of human trafficking is undeniable. Whatever degree of state actors can abuse their power, in small or big portions, they are still considered to be part of trafficking human beings. I know that it will be an uncomfortable reminder for

some people working in bureaucratic settings. Nevertheless, I feel at the breaking point right now seeing this happen over and over again, meanwhile I know that we can do better. Silence and ignorance could be acts of violence. And this is my “gentle” reminder: who are you working for? Were you being sworn to provide service for few elitists or riches? I hope we can create solidarity to stop any cultures and practices which do not put the wellbeing and welfare of our communities as the priority. Let us be comrades in imagining and building social changes which favor the rights’ protection of the community that we love, our Indonesian migrant workers.

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