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## **The work-life experiences of an invisible workforce: The case of live-in women migrant domestic workers in Malaysia**

**Purpose** - This study explores the work-life (WL) experiences of live-in women migrant domestic workers (MDWs), who represent a significant proportion of migrant workers globally. MDWs play a key role in enabling the work-life balance (WLB) of others, namely the middle-class households that employ them. Yet their experiences have largely been invisible in mainstream WL literature. We draw on an intersectional approach to frame the WL experiences of this marginalized group of women at the intersection of being secondary labour segment workers, with significant legal and employment restrictions as migrant workers, who work and live in the same place as their employers.

**Design/methodology/approach** - Qualitative interviews were conducted with 13 women MDWs from Indonesia and the Philippines working in Malaysia. The women talked about the meaning of work as MDWs, how they maintain familial connections whilst working abroad, and how they negotiate their WLB as live-in workers. Thematic analysis of the interviews focused on the intersection of the women's multiple dimensions of disadvantage, including gender, class, and temporary migrant-foreigner status, in shaping their accounts of the WL interface.

**Findings** – Three thematic narratives highlight that any semblance of WLB in the MDWs' lived experience has given way to the needs of their employers and to the imperative to earn an income for their families back home. The themes are: working as MDWs enables the women and their families back home to have a life; the co-existence of WL boundary segmentation and integration in relation to 'real' and 'temporary' families; and the notion of WLB being centred around the women's ability to fulfil their multiple duties as MDWs and absent mothers/sisters/daughters.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study is based on a small sample of live-in women MDWs in Malaysia, intended to promote typically excluded voices and not to provide generalizable findings. Accessing potential participants was a considerable challenge, given the vulnerable positions of women MDWs and the invisible nature of their work.

**Practical implications** – Future research should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to studying the WL experiences of women MDWs. In particular, links with non-governmental organizations who work directly with women MDWs should be established as a way of improving future participant access.

**Social implications** – The study underscores the existence of policies and regulations that tolerate and uphold social inequalities that benefit primary labour segment workers to the detriment of secondary labour segment workers, including women MDWs.

**Originality/value** – Extant WL literature is dominated by the experiences of ‘the ideal work-life balancers’, who tend to be white middle-class women, engaged in professional work. This study offers original contribution by giving voice to a taken-for-granted group of women migrant workers who make other people’s WLB possible. Moreover, the study challenges WL research by underscoring the power inequities that shape our participants’ marginal and disadvantaged lived experience of work, life, family, and WLB.

## **Introduction**

It is estimated that there are 150.3 million migrant workers globally, 11.5 million of which are employed as migrant domestic workers (MDWs) (ILO, 2015). The sector is heavily feminized, with women representing 73.4 per cent of all MDWs internationally. This equates to around 8.5 million women who have left their home countries to work abroad as non-national domestic workers (Gallotti, 2015). MDWs make important contributions on a number of levels. MDWs' care and domestic services facilitate their employers to work outside their homes, effectively enabling middle-class households to elevate their quality of life and to contribute to the economic growth and development of the labour-importing country. The demand for MDWs continues to rise, with many countries' national policy encouraging women's formal labour market participation, leading to rising dual-earner households, and demographic transformations, such as an aging population and lower fertility rates (ILO, 2015). At the same time, MDWs contribute to the socio-economic development of their home country with the remittances they send home, which considerably improve their families' quality of life and financial prospects (ILO, 2015). Yet they do so by making considerable personal sacrifices, leaving behind children and other family members due to restrictive migration policies of labour-importing countries (Dyer, McDowell, & Batnitzky, 2011).

This article contributes to a growing call for an intersectional approach to work-life (WL) research by empirically exploring the WL experiences of migrant women working as live-in domestic workers. Women MDWs play a key role in enabling the work-life balance (WLB) of others, namely the middle-class households that employ them (Dyer et al., 2011). Yet their experiences have largely been invisible in mainstream WL literature. Despite their substantial number globally, MDWs constitute an 'invisible' workforce due to the nature of domestic work and their low-waged, low-skilled status (Miles, Lewis, Teng, & Yasin, 2019). To address this void and inspired by a feminist commitment to promote voices that are not typically included (Thompson, Rickett, & Day, 2018), this paper explores one research question: How do women

live-in MDWs talk about their lived experience of the WL interface? The study aims to contextualize the MDWs' accounts within the unequal power relationship that exists between live-in MDWs and their employers. By living and working in their employers' private households, MDWs are isolated and often work alone (except high-income households that may employ more than one MDW). Moreover, the legal status of MDWs structurally reinforces the unequal power relationship, which restricts the choices and freedoms that MDWs are able to exercise. In the case of Malaysia, where this study took place, MDWs enter on a quota system with non-transferable work permits and are not covered by the Malaysia Employment Act 1955. Therefore, in legal terms, they are not given the status of 'workers'. Instead, they are classified as 'domestic servants' or 'maids'. MDWs are unable to exercise a basic minimum right bestowed upon any 'worker' – that is, the right to exit an employment relationship and enter a new one. This is because their work permit is tied to the household that employs them and they are not allowed to change freely from one employer to another. If they choose to leave their employer, then the only legal recourse is to return to their home country or otherwise become an illegal migrant worker if they choose to work for a different employer and remain in the country. Given the gendered and exploitative nature of live-in domestic work and the imbalance of power in the employment relationship, we adopt an intersectional approach to take into account the multiple dimensions of disadvantage that intersect to shape women MDWs' experiences of the WL interface.

We now divide this paper into four sections. First, we begin with a critique of dominant concepts and voices in extant WL research and argue for the inclusion of the WL experiences of women MDWs who make other people's WLB possible. Secondly, we position this issue within dual labour market theory and introduce an intersectional approach to WL research to frame our study of MDWs in Malaysia as a case study country that heavily relies on migrant labour. In the third section, we detail our research methods for collecting and analyzing our

participants' accounts. Finally, we present our analysis of women MDWs' narratives of work, life, family, and WLB, followed by a discussion and conclusion of our findings.

### **Prevailing concepts in extant WL research**

WL research is a multi-disciplinary field that examines the relationship between two broad domains of (paid) 'work' and 'life' (i.e. everything else that is not paid work). Conceptually, the relationship between work and life has been articulated through a number of linking mechanisms, including 'balance', 'conflict', and 'facilitation' (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Wilkinson, Tomlinson, & Gardiner, 2017). Among them, the concept of WLB has become the most popular way of framing contemporary debates about paid work and the rest of life (Eikhof, Warhurst, & Haunschild, 2007; Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis & Beauregard, 2018). Yet, the dominance of WLB as a discourse and a concept is problematic, as described by Fleetwood (2007, p. 352):

“it is unclear whether WLB refers to: an objective state of affairs, a subjective experience, perception or feeling; an actuality or an aspiration; a discourse or a practice; a metaphor for flexible working; a metaphor for the gendered division of labour; or a metaphor for some other political agenda” (Fleetwood, 2007, p. 352).

Arguably, WLB has become a social imperative that is in danger of creating false expectations that 'good balance' is somehow attainable (Eikhof et al., 2007; Kamenou, 2008; Lewis et al., 2007). Recently, Wilkinson et al. (2017) proposed a new conceptual vocabulary of 'WL challenge and dilemma' in an attempt to remove positive or negative connotations attached to the concepts of balance and conflict.

More often than not, WLB refers to a person's experience of the interface between work and family, rather than work and the rest of life (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018; Özbilgin et al., 2011). The term WLB is frequently adopted in an attempt to de-gender debates relating to the WL interface and to highlight a broader and more inclusive approach (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018;

Lewis et al., 2007; Lewis, 2003). The gender-neutral language of WLB has emerged in response to fears of a backlash against underlying gender equity issues and against family-friendly policies by those without family and caring responsibilities (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). Yet changing the terminology itself does not automatically change the gendered reality of work, family, and other life spheres (Lewis et al., 2007). With the rise of dual-earner and lone-parent households, the 'adult worker' model has come to replace the 'male breadwinner' and the 'female caregiver' model of paid and unpaid work. This gender-neutral model interconnects citizenship rights with the imperative to engage in paid labour, which underpins debates about WLB (Dyer et al., 2011). Although women's labour market participation has held the promise of increased gender equality, it has been argued that the rise of dual-earner households has failed to translate to a corresponding rise in 'dual carers', resulting in a 'care deficit' (Crompton, Lewis, & Lyonette, 2007; Dyer et al., 2011). In the adult worker model, the notion of the 'ideal worker' is upheld, where it is assumed that the worker engages in and prioritizes full-time paid employment, unencumbered by family responsibilities (including care) or other commitments outside the workplace (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

### **Marginalized voices: The WL experiences of invisible workers who make others' WLB possible**

Despite its framing as an ungendered and more inclusive approach, WLB as a concept and a discourse has been criticized for concealing existing and ongoing gendered processes of the neoliberal adult worker model. The reality is that WLB and the WL interface have historically been approached and studied in the mainstream literature as a (working) women's issue. However, not all working women are represented in mainstream WL research. Özbilgin et al. (2011, p. 191) have coined the term 'the ideal work-life balancers' to denote the propensity for WL researchers to focus on workers "who are predominantly female, white, middle-class

and/or engaged in white-collar work, involved in a heterosexual relationship, and the parent of young children”. They have argued that this has led to a lack of diversity in the voices of workers of different cultural and national backgrounds, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and dis/ability, who have different or no caring and family responsibilities, and who are employed in the non-white collar, non-middle-class jobs.

In addition to a lack of diverse representation of workers, mainstream WL research tends to ignore the issue of inequality of access to power and resources (Özbilgin et al., 2011). This is in part due to the dominance of individual-level analysis in WL research, based on individual attributes and characteristics. The problem with a focus on individual-level analysis is that WL experiences and outcomes are in danger of being explained as a matter of individual choice, whilst the role of structural opportunities and constraints is downplayed or omitted altogether (Lewis et al., 2007). This can be seen in how WLB debates are primarily constructed and positioned as the pursuit of the middle-class, for the benefit of the middle-class. There is a glaring absence of the working-class in the literature (Dyer et al., 2011; Warren, 2015). Yet, as Dyer et al. (2011, p. 688) point out, there is a gendered, classed, and racialized interdependency between different groups of workers’ experiences and outcomes of the WL interface:

“The WLB of middle-class women relies on other women (working-class, black and minority ethnic, and migrant women) working as carers... These workers, in turn, must reconcile their own WLB, often across considerable distances.”

Palenga-Möllenbeck (2013) has identified the importance of an intersectional lens to explore the ‘global care chain’, characterized by transnational division of reproductive work, with migrants leaving their families behind to perform care work overseas, resulting in care gain in host (receiving) countries and care drain in home (sending) countries. The global care chain can be framed within the ‘two-tier’ labour market or dual labour market theory, with the first-tier being occupied by home citizens of the labour receiving country and the second-tier largely occupied by those from countries who provide cheap labour (Peterson, 2007). Dual labour

market theory suggests that the labour market could be stratified into primary labour segment (relatively well paid, good working conditions and stable employment) and secondary labour segment (low paid and insecure employment, typically occupied by individuals with low-level education) (Barron & Norris, 1991; Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). The gendered, racialized, and classed nature of the secondary labour segment is illustrated in Peterson's (2007) study of women MDWs in Spain, to whom Spanish middle- to high-social status women transferred care and domestic work. These women formed a part of the submerged economy and are referred to as the 'invisible others' (Peterson, 2007). Extant studies on migrant workers include a range of sectors and the majority have focused on legal and policy issues. Yet, there is comparatively less attention given to the voices of live-in MDWs (Boersma, 2016; Boersma, 2018). The nature of work and living condition of MDWs is qualitatively different from their migrant worker counterparts who have live-out arrangements. In particular, not much is known about the WL experience of live-in MDWs.

### **An intersectional approach to understanding the WL experiences of women MDWs in Malaysia**

Given the gendered, restrictive, and exploitative nature of live-in domestic work and the imbalance of power in the employment relationship, we adopt an intersectional approach to take into account the multiple dimensions of disadvantage that intersect to shape women MDWs' experiences of the WL interface. Intersectionality is an approach "in which the various forms of subordination that people face are taken into consideration as they act together" (Satterthwaite, 2005, p. 8). Social categories of difference such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability and age do not function as unitary or mutually exclusive identity elements, but reciprocally constructing phenomena that intersect to shape differentiated opportunities and constraints (Collins, 2015).

As one of the biggest importers of labour in Asia (Miles et al., 2019), Malaysia provides an ideal case study of a country that relies heavily on migrant labour, including MDWs. An increase in educational standards and a rise in women's labour market participation have led to an expansion of Malaysia's middle-class and dual-earner households (Miles et al., 2019). This has been accompanied by a trend of urbanization, which has seen workforces shifting away from rural areas, where family support is available, to urban areas in pursuit of better employment opportunities and higher pay. This has led to a care deficit and an increase in the demand for care and domestic services. Women from neighbouring countries with limited employment opportunities and low wages are leaving their homes, familial, and social connections to pursue paid work for better wages in Malaysia. Yet they do so within highly restrictive legal and employment frameworks and conditions that severely curtail their rights and freedoms as migrant workers.

It is estimated that there are currently 300,000-400,000 MDWs in Malaysia, 250,000 of whom are legally registered with the Malaysian government as MDWs (ILO, 2018; Shah, 2017). To reduce dependency on any single population of migrant workers and protect job opportunities for its citizens, Malaysia operates a quota system in terms of sector, gender and nationality, which apply to low-skilled migrants (ILO, 2016). In the case of MDWs, approved countries include Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, and Laos (Immigration Department Malaysia, n.d.), with the first three being the top labour exporters. Under Article 1 of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), domestic work is defined as "work performed in or for a household or households" and domestic worker as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship". However, MDWs are not covered by the Malaysia Employment Act 1955, as the Malaysian labour migration system does not regard domestic work as 'real' work. Therefore, MDWs are not legally recognized as 'workers' in Malaysia. Instead, they are classified as 'domestic servants' or 'maids' (Malaysian Digest, 2018; Mok, 2018). Weak legal protection contributes to the vulnerable and exploitative

working conditions for MDWs to the extent that Malaysia ranked first in the world in terms of the longest working hours of domestic workers, with an average of 65.9 hours a week, exceeding the 48-hour per week threshold (ILO, 2013). This may also be attributed to the ‘live-in’ arrangement of most MDWs in Malaysia, who are hidden from view and are denied social status, economic resources, and political voice, making it difficult to uncover their abuse (Carens, 2013; Huling, 2012; Miles et al., 2019). The live-in arrangement blurs the separation between working hours and non-working hours. It is common practice for MDWs to be expected to be available 24/7, without employers having to specify working hours. MDWs carry out their work for a fixed monthly wage and the notion of overtime work does not exist. In Malaysia, only women can legally apply to work as MDWs. This reinforces the social construction of domestic work as ‘women’s work’ (Miles et al., 2019). The gendered nature of this work is further highlighted by restrictive labour migration policies, making work permits conditional on limitations to MDWs’ sexual or partnership behaviour (Dyer et al., 2011; Huang & Yeoh, 1996). The women are not allowed to marry and become pregnant while employed as MDWs (Napier-Moore, 2017). Their work permit is contingent upon a negative pregnancy test (ILO, 2013), which is required before entry and then annually upon work permits renewal (Napier-Moore, 2017; UN Women, 2013). Accordingly, most employers restrict freedom of movement of MDWs, forbidding them from engaging in romantic relationships, claiming that it will distract them from their work and to ‘safeguard’ them from becoming pregnant (Tayah, 2016). Furthermore, in theory, MDWs should be given one day off a week, yet most MDWs are often pressured by their employers to forgo this, sometimes in exchange for additional pay (but not always).

Inequality among MDWs from different nations can be observed in Malaysia. Filipino MDWs receive higher monthly salary than all other MDWs in Malaysia and are the only group of MDWs who are entitled to a mandated weekly day off. The Filipino government exerts strong and constant pressure to safeguard the welfare of their citizens as migrant workers abroad. The

Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act 1995 protects Filipino MDWs with a standard contract that specify number of working hours, minimum wage, employment conditions, and leave days (APWLD, 2010).

The employment and legal conditions outlined bring to the fore the stark unequal power resource relations and lack of ‘choices’ experienced by the women MDWs. We argue that it is important to take into account that these structural forms of ‘unfreedom’ intersect with other forms of social disadvantage to shape their accounts of the WL interface. According to Yea and Chok (2018, p. 926), the concept of ‘unfreedom’ refers to “the significant restrictions on workers’ various freedoms, such as the freedom to exit employment relationship and enter new ones, the freedom of movement and the freedom to contest conditions”, which may leave no real alternatives for migrant workers and thus compel them to submit to exploitative contracts and arrangements.

Özbilgin et al. (2011) proposed three questions in relation to life, diversity, and power in guiding an intersectional approach to WL studies: (1) “How is ‘life’ conceptualized?”, urging WL researchers to go beyond the heteronormative nuclear family of spouses and children (Özbilgin et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2017); (2) “How is diversity addressed?”, compelling WL researchers to go beyond the focus on gender, the dominant strand of diversity (and inequality) in the WL literature. Instead, multiple strands of diversity should be considered to show how “gender is fundamentally complicated by class, race/ethnicity, and/or other differences” (Acker, 2006, p. 442); and (3) “How is power problematized?”. This last question is important, as Özbilgin et al., (2011, p. 189) noted that most WL studies fail to address how multiple strands of diversity shape power inequities. Subsequently, our approach to intersectionality in WL research is heavily informed by these three questions. We further describe how we have adopted these questions as part of our data analysis of the MDWs’ accounts in the next section.

## **Research methods**

### ***Data collection***

To explore our research question of how women MDWs talk about their lived experience of the WL interface in the context of working as live-in MDWs, we collected data from semi-structured interviews, conducted by the third author, to capture the voiced accounts of the women working as live-in MDWs and how they negotiate the interface between work and non-work (including family and other aspects of their lives) within this context. An interview guide was employed and included questions relating to the circumstances that have led the women to Malaysia to work as live-in MDWs, the nature of their work, what work and life (including family) mean to them, the meaning of WLB and how they enact 'balance' within their employment context.

Our sampling focused on the two largest groups of MDWs in Malaysia: women from Indonesia and the Philippines. As national groups, Indonesians and Filipinos have the most extended history of working in Malaysia as domestic workers. This is in part due to the bilateral labour agreement between Malaysia and the two sending countries. The proximity of languages spoken is also why Indonesian and Filipino woman are the two dominant nationality groups of MDWs in Malaysia. The Indonesian language, Bahasa Indonesia, is similar to the Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia. In the Philippines, both the Filipino language and the English language are official languages. Therefore, MDWs from the Philippines generally have a good command of the English language, which is widely spoken in Malaysia. For our study, the interviews were conducted in English with our Filipino participants and in Bahasa Malaysia with our Indonesia participants. The interviewer is fluent in both languages and able to transcribe verbatim the interviews in both languages.

Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit women MDWs who are employed by local Malaysian families in Kuala Lumpur (KL) for domestic chores, childcare and/or eldercare.

Participant access was difficult given the hidden nature of live-in domestic work and the restrictive employment conditions imposed by law and by the employers of MDWs. Initial recruitment of MDWs took place outside of particular churches on Sunday (for Filipino participants) and outside of Indonesian Embassy (for Indonesian participants) in KL. Many potential participants shunned away when the researcher approached them in public. This is likely due to a large number of unregulated migrant workers in Malaysia who fear being reported to the authorities and face possible deportation to their home countries. Subsequently, the third author was able to recruit participants from common public areas of gentrified residential areas, where MDWs accompanied their employers' children or elderly family members for leisure activities (e.g. walking, swimming or other sports activities). Through these recruitment strategies, 13 women MDWs were interviewed. The number of interviews is within the recommended sampling range in order to achieve thematic saturation at the analysis stage (Guest et al., 2017).

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee at the institution of the first, third, and fourth authors prior to data collection. The second author was invited to collaborate on the analysis and write-up of the research after data collection ended. An information sheet about the study was provided to all participants as part of the informed consent process. This document and the informed consent form were written in both the English language and in Bahasa Malaysia. All Filipino participants were able to read both documents in the English language, while the majority of the Indonesian participants sought verbal explanation the documents. To ensure consistency, the information sheet, details of the study, and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were explained verbally to all participants prior to commencement of interview and participants were able to ask any questions about the study. Details of the consent form in terms of voluntarily participation, freedom of withdrawal, anonymity were also explained verbally before informed consent was obtained. Permission was also sought and obtained to audio record the interview, which took place in public spaces

near the churches or the embassy or in the communal areas of the gated residential communities.

Table 1 provides demographic and contextual details about our participants. Eight were from Indonesia and five were from the Philippines. The age of participants ranged from 24 to 54 years old. Six out of 13 participants were married, four were divorced and three were single. Most of the participants have children below the age of 20, living in their home country where care and financial support from them are required. In terms of education level, our participants from the Philippines have completed high school, with three participants holding bachelor's degrees. The participants from Indonesia had lower levels of education, where the majority completed primary school education. One participant from Indonesia completed junior high school and two participants completed high school.

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Table 1 here

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### *Data analysis*

We recognize that transcription is the first base of analysis rather than a behind-the-scenes task (Bird, 2005; Oliver et al., 2005). Equally important is an acknowledgement that language translation is also a key part of data analysis (Temple & Young, 2004). As described earlier, the third author collected and transcribed the interview data for this study. In the case of interviews that were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, the third author first transcribed in Bahasa Malaysia and then translated all eight interviews into the English language. The first author, who is also fluent in both languages, cross-checked the translation for consistency and accuracy, before all 13 transcripts were passed onto the second author for analysis in the English language.

Our data analysis was informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where the first and second authors engaged in an iterative process of independently reading and coding all the

transcripts of the interview data and then organising the codes into potential themes concerning the research question of “how do our participants talk about their lived experience of the WL interface in their shared current context as live-in women MDWs?”.

The initial coding stage conducted by the first and second authors was guided by the interview schedule. This process allowed us to generate first level themes independently, which we then shared and discussed. We were then able to progress the analysis onto the next stage of collectively searching, reviewing, defining, and refining second-level themes that capture the patterned meanings of the interview data.

At the second level, our analysis was guided by an intersectional approach to WL research, particularly the three questions posed by Özbilgin et al. (2011), which we outlined in the literature review. This framing shaped our construction of the final second-level themes that captured how our participants talked about their lived experience of the WL interface. The questions helped us to continuously situate the themes and analysis within the intersection of the women’s multiple social categories of identity and inequality, including gender (woman), class (domestic work as occupation), and non-national/temporary migrant status with high levels of ‘unfreedom’. Given that the participants did not live within heteronormative nuclear family households (of their own), it was important to explore how life was conceptualized through their accounts as absent mothers/daughters/sisters as well as paid carers and domestic workers who were non-nationals living with their employers (Özbilgin et al.’s question 1). In terms of diversity and the power problematic (Özbilgin et al.’s questions 2 and 3), our analysis does not approach these intersecting strands of social categories as individual attributes. Instead, these strands of diversity act as an analytic focus for understanding hierarchies of privilege and power (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012) that intersect to shape inequitable WL experience and outcomes for this overlooked group of workers. It is worth noting that our analysis does not aim to explain how the intersection structures these accounts in a causal, deterministic way. Instead, our findings and analysis aim to explore how the intersectionality of these strands of

social difference and inequality can help us understand and situate the women's lived experience of the WL interface within this complex context of asymmetrical power and low access to resources.

### **Findings and analysis**

Our findings illustrate how gender, class, and temporary migrant/non-national status with their structural unfreedoms intersect to shape migrant women's accounts of work, life, family and WLB as live-in MDWs in Malaysia. We focus on thematic findings based around narratives of 'work' and 'life' as live-in MDWs, of 'real family' (family back home) and 'temporary family' (employer's family), and of how WLB is conceptualized and enacted. The narratives highlight how any semblance of WLB in our participants' lived experience has given way to the needs of their employers and to the need to work as MDWs to earn an income for their families back home. The three themes are: working as MDWs enables the women and their families back home to have a life; the simultaneous co-existence of WL boundary segmentation and integration in relation to 'real' and 'temporary' families; and the notion of WLB being centred around the women's ability to fulfil their multiple duties as MDWs and as absent mothers/sisters/daughters, whose remittances replace the physical care they would otherwise provide to their families back home.

*Narratives of 'work' and 'life': working as MDWs enables the women and their families back home to have a life*

In the interviews, the participants were asked to talk about the meanings of work and life. Their accounts revealed two dominant and interconnected narratives of 'work enabling life' and 'work enabling the women's enactment of the good mother/daughter/sister for their families back home'. Both narratives are embedded in the women's complex context of moving to a foreign country to become a migrant worker, of living in a foreign country away from family and friends, and of the desire to improve the lives of their children and other family members.

To work as MDWs means to have a life

This narrative captures our participants' accounts of their 'choice' to work as MDWs as a constrained choice, underpinned by a lack of alternative employment opportunities in the city/town where they live with their families. The intersection of gender and class (poverty) and temporary migrant/non-national status shapes these accounts of constrained agency in the context of moving away from family and home country to work as migrant domestic workers, often leaving their children when they are very young. This is the case for Ayu, who left her home country twelve years ago to work in Malaysia when her son was one:

*I am very poor. Very, very poor. That's why I need to work in foreign country for my future. This is because I lived in a very difficult situation. That's why I wanted to change my destiny. I came here to look for money, right? I hope that I can improve my living standard. We wanted to come out of poverty. Also, I want my child to study and to receive higher education. That's my wish. That's why I am determined to work hard.*

(Ayu, 32, married, mother of one son (aged 13), from Indonesia, working with current family for 12 years)

This was also the case for other MDWs. Indah's account below is centred around how she is the sole provider for her family and how this intersects with her gendered identities as a mother, a divorced woman, and a provider:

*The meaning of work. To work for the need of my children. The most important thing is to support my children and my parents as they are old. The children are still studying in school... Everything is for the future of my children and me. I don't have a husband, right? That's why I have to depend on myself...*

(Indah, 36, divorced, mother of 3 (aged 10, 17, and 19), from Indonesia, working with current family for 16 months)

To work as MDWs means to be able to care for their 'real' families back home

Our participants' accounts also included a key narrative of their work as MDWs allowing them to lead a better life now and in the future. In most cases, this means that the life of their family members is improved in the present and less so for themselves. This highlights how the conceptualization of life is tied to their family back home. Our participants tolerate the physical separation from their family, which precludes them from carrying out their gendered care and family roles on a daily basis. Instead, they perform their role as the good yet absent mother/daughter/sister through the remittance that they send home:

*I wanted to work and then earn money to renovate my house. The bathroom and other stuff in my house in my hometown are still not in good condition...I want my kid to go to school. And support my mother and father with money.*  
(Alya, 28, mother of one (aged 3), from Indonesia, working with current family for 2.5 years)

*I work here because for my future. And for my brother also, my younger brother. Because he is still studying. I need to help him for his upcoming college. I need to sacrifice to work as a maid in Malaysia.*  
(Erica, 24, single, from the Philippines, length of time with current family was not specified)

*Narratives of 'family' in the context of live-in domestic work: the simultaneous co-existence of WL boundary segmentation and integration in relation to 'real family' and 'temporary family'*  
Interesting narratives surrounding 'family' emerged from our participants' accounts. In addition to their original family back in the home country, which typically consists of a husband/partner, children, parents, and siblings, our participants' spoke about their employer's household as their 'temporary family' in Malaysia. In addition, their accounts also revealed the

co-existence of WL boundary segmentation and integration in relation to their original and work families respectively.

Distances and distancing: the creation of an emotional boundary between the women MDWs and their real family

When asked about their real family, the women talked about two types of boundaries that separates the work sphere from and the family sphere: geographical (physical) and emotional/mental boundaries. The women who have had to leave their children behind shared stories of how they missed them, as well as their family and friends. The geographical distance and physical separation that the women endure have shaped their accounts of mentally distancing themselves from thinking about their family member. This emotional/mental boundary is important in this context, given that they find themselves becoming upset when they allow thoughts of their real family to drift into their work domain, which then impacts their ability to financially provide through paid work. This form of emotional labour allows the women to continue working under severely constrained circumstances as live-in MDWs:

*I won't think about my families back there. I don't need to. Because if I think of them, I just make myself feel bad and unable to work properly. Maybe if I phone them and if they tell me someone is sick or has died, then I'll be very sad.*

(Nurul, 23, mother of one (aged 3), from Indonesia, working with current family for 7 months)

*Oh my god, I need to cry...(laughter followed by sobbing). I don't want to cry...Because when I talk with my son, I'm so very upset. Because when I came here, I cannot see him growing. It's OK...Because it's part of my life to come here.*

(Angel, 26, single, mother to one son (aged 1.5), from the Philippines, working with current family for 7 months)

### The adoption of a 'temporary family'

Given the work setting of live-in domestic workers, most MDWs talked about adopting their employer's household where they work as their temporary family. Kyla's account below shows how she carries out her role as the carer of the employer's mother. It signifies the dominant narrative of adopting the employing family as the women's temporary family. This serves a function of reducing their feeling of foreignness – of being an outsider:

*I treat her [employer's mother] as my own mother. How to take care of our own parents? With care. If I treat her as employer but not my own parent, then they will think that I might not treat her well, right? She also treats me as her own daughter, not as an outsider. She trusts me. So I have to trust her and take good care of her.*

(Kyla, 41, mother of two (aged 6 and 7), from the Philippines, working with current family for 4 year)

*They are like my own family...I see them as my own family...I see the employer's house as my own house.*

(Putri, 33, mother of one son (aged 13), from Indonesia, working with current family for 4 years)

### MDWs' life fully integrates into the life of their 'temporary family'

While the women in our study practice WL separation with their real family, both physically and emotionally, they practice WL integration by fully immersing in their employer's family life. This practice of total WL integration is owing to the unique context of being 'live-in' MDWs, who are unable to live away from the place where they work and being on-call 24/7. The women's accounts illustrate how this WL integration is experienced in a gendered way. When asked about hobbies and leisure, the women's stories underline the tendency to

internalize their employers' needs as their personal preferences, heavily shaped by the relational and power asymmetry between their employers and them:

*Angel: I love cooking! That's my first hobby. Cooking.*

*Interviewer: So, while working, how do you...Do you have any time for your hobby?*

*Angel: Yes, because I always cook food for them.*

*Interviewer: Do you have the freedom to go out and buy anything?*

*Angel: No. Only they buy. Ma'am ask me always what the ingredients I will cook then she buys.*

*Interviewer: Other than that, any other thing?*

*Angel: Gardening. I'm always good at gardening in the house. Well, I have a lot of hobbies. Singing. I'm always singing. I express my feeling when I'm singing and cooking. When I'm cooking, I'm expressing my feelings. That's why my food tastes good. Full of love, care...I put everything in the food. Because I cannot express to anybody, right?*

(Angel, 26, single, mother to one son (aged 1.5), from the Philippines, working with current family for 7 months)

*Conceptualizing 'WLB' as women MDWs: the notion of 'balance' is centred around the women's ability to fulfil their multiple duties as MDWs and as absent mothers/sisters/daughters*

When asked to discuss the meaning of WLB, most participants referred back to how their work as MDWs enables their life:

*The balance of the work and life? How can I say?...Work to life. Life to work. Means you have to work for the future of your family. And your life, to take care of them.*

(Kyla, 41, mother of two (aged 6 and 7), from the Philippines, working with current family for 4 year)

Their identities as providers and mothers, daughters, and sisters shaped how they make sense of WLB as a concept, reflected in the narrative of being a ‘good mother/daughter/sister’. The ‘good mother/daughter/sister’ is selfless and keeps working hard despite her feelings of isolation from her real family and tiredness due to the nature of live-in domestic work – all this to make a good life for her children and other family members back home. As earlier discussions of our findings have shown, to work is to enable a better life for the women’s families back home now, in the present and also for themselves in the future when they are able to return home to their families.

*Interviewer: What is your opinion towards WLB?*

*Indah: Most important thing is the work itself. Work to live. Work for the children...work as long as I can handle it. I miss them, but I’m here to work for them, right?*

*Interviewer: So when you’re tired?*

*Indah: I think of my parents, think of my children. They do not have things to eat, not able to go to school. So I should work hard. By just thinking of them, it’s useless, as they will still live in difficult conditions. All I can do here is to work for the betterment of their life.*

(Indah, 36, divorced, mother of 3 (aged 10, 17, and 19), from Indonesia, working with current family for 16 months)

The notion of ‘balance’ is, therefore, centred around this framing and the ability to fulfil their multiple duties, which are shaped by the intersection of their gendered, classed, and foreign/outsider identities as migrant women, domestic workers/maids, and absent mothers/sisters/daughters who must financially provide.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper aimed to give voice to live-in women MDWs, who have been marginalized in the WL literature despite the important role they play in making other people's WLB possible. Through an intersectional approach, we identified that the intersection of gender (women), class (low-skill work and low paid labour class), and temporary migrant status has put MDWs at an exceptionally disadvantaged position in terms of WLB experiences and outcomes. The unequal power resource relations and lack of freedom of choice experienced by our participants is further exacerbated by their position as secondary labour segment workers, who are subjected to highly restrictive employment and legal conditions. Owing to the collective and nuanced intersection of being women, domestic workers/maids, and temporary migrants with a restrictive and inflexible work permit, our participants shared narratives of 'life', 'work' 'family' and WLB that highlight how any semblance of WLB in our participants' lived experience has given way to the needs of their employers and to the need to work as MDWs to earn an income for their families back home. The three key narratives were: working as MDWs enables the women and their families back home to have a life; the simultaneous co-existence of WL boundary segmentation and integration in relation to 'real' and 'temporary' families; and the notion of WLB being centred around the women's ability to fulfil their multiple duties as MDWs and as absent mothers/sisters/daughters, whose remittances replace the physical care they would otherwise provide to their families back home. In all, our participants' conceptualizations of work, life, family, and WLB look very different from mainstream WLB debates.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that our participants practiced both extreme WL segmentation and integration simultaneously, which is often conceptualized as a continuum in relation to WL boundary management (Bulger, Matthews, & Hoffman, 2007). While distancing from their real family physically and emotionally (WL segmentation), their life is fully immersed in their temporary family's life, which is their work (WL integration). Boundary theory in WL studies assumes that the two spheres are physically and temporally separated (Ali

et al., 2017; Ransome, 2007). WL segmentation refers to an individual's preference to separate work from life (which tends to be equated to 'family' by default), whereas integration refers to the preference of blending or merging work and life commitments by maintaining highly permeable borders between the two spheres (Kreiner, 2006). Both concepts imply that individuals have agency and capabilities to choose and control the boundary between the spheres, by integrating or segmenting the commitments between work and life (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). In the women MDWs' case, their shared and unique intersection of being women and being live-in MDWs pushes them to face extreme WL segmentation and integration with their real and temporary families respectively. Notions of agency, capabilities, and preferences in managing the boundary are clearly out of the question for them given the intersection of their multiple points of social disadvantage. Our article extends the discussion of the lived experience of the WL interface among MDWs, by demonstrating the relevance of the 'two-tier' labour market in shaping their experiences. In Malaysia, women's labour market participation held the promise of increased gender equality, giving rise to dual-earner households. Women MDWs from less developed economies (secondary labour segment) are filling in the care deficit resulted from formal workforce participation of primary labour segment (predominantly Malaysian professionals from middle-to high-social classes). For many families within the primary labour segment in Malaysia, it has become increasingly possible to pursue full-time income generation activities while attaining WLB, thanks to the important work of women MDWs, who have had to leave their family and care responsibilities behind in order to carry out domestic and care work for others in exchange for an income to send back home. To an extent, the WLB and well-being of middle to high-income households (primary labour segment) are being realized at the expense of MDWs' (secondary labour segment) WLB and well-being. Through the narratives of our participants, it is clear that the current discussions and debates about WLB in the literature bear little relevance to their lived experience. Our study, therefore, has raised uncomfortable

questions about whose WLB is prioritized and privileged and whose WLB is left out and made invisible in WL research. Relatedly, our study also raised another equally uncomfortable political question: in the pursuit of (gender) equality among the mainstream workforce (primary labour segment), are the equality and interests of the marginalized workforce (secondary labour segment) being undermined or even subjugated as a result? We believe these questions are important in driving forward future research in the field.

Our study has contributed to the WL literature by offering voices of an important but undervalued and invisible workforce. Our work has addressed critical researchers' call to move WL research beyond the 'ideal work-life balancers' (Dyer et al., 2011; Özbilgin et al., 2011). We have provided insight about the WL narratives of this group of marginalized workers who have so far been absent from mainstream WLB debates. Mainstream discussions that largely cater to the ideal work-life balancers on how organizations should support individuals in managing the reconciliation between work and family, in terms of family-friendly policies, supportive supervisors and supportive peers (Fiksenbaum, 2014; Matthews, Mills, Trout, & English, 2014) exclude women like the ones in our study. As such, our study has shed light on the importance of future research on understudied and invisible populations in WL studies so that the field is more inclusive and relevant to the realities of inequalities in contemporary societies (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

While we recognize that our study is based on a small sample size of 13 MDWs, we are also clear that we have fulfilled our aim to promote typically excluded voices. We did not set out to provide generalizable findings, given the diverse, complex, and nuanced nature of the lived experience MDWs (and indeed any broad groupings of workers). The issue of participant access was particularly sensitive and difficult in our study, given the hidden nature of live-in domestic work and the vulnerable positions of women MDWs in general. Future research should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to studying the WL experiences of women MDWs.

In particular, links with non-governmental organizations who work directly with women MDWs to support them should be established as a way of improving future participant access. It is our hope that this article will compel future WL researchers to reflect upon how to move the WL literature forward in a meaningful and critical way by capturing diverse voices and lived experiences of all who engage in various forms of work and employment. Also, we hope that future WL research will pay attention sources of power inequity, including policies and regulations which tolerate and uphold inequality in many aspects – for the benefit of the primary labour segment and at the expense of the secondary labour segment. Finally, we are optimistic about the WL field moving in a direction that allows for more voices of marginalized populations in WL studies to be captured and brought into the mainstream through an intersectional approach.

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**Table 1: Profile of Participants**

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number/Age of children	Childcare provider	Tenure (past/current)	Previous Employment	Education	Main duties
Angel	26	Single	1: 1.5 years old	Angel's grandparents	2yrs / 7mths	Housekeeping (5 months renewable contract)	College	Domestic chores (2 households) & childcare
Kyla	41	Married	2: 6 & 7 years old	Husband	18yrs / 4yrs	Domestic work (in Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan & Taiwan)	High school	Domestic chores & eldercare
Erica	24	Single	None	Not applicable	Not Available	Office worker	University	Domestic chores & childcare
Jessa	38	Married	5: 3, 6, 12, 13 & 15 years old	Husband & parents	3yrs / 1 yr	Office worker	University	Domestic chores & childcare
Bea	35	Married	3: 3, 5, 12 years old	Husband & parents	3yrs / 2yrs	Business owner	High school	Domestic chores & childcare
Putri	33	Divorced	1: 13 years old	Ex-husband	7yrs / 4yrs	Domestic work (both in Indonesia & Malaysia)	Primary school	Domestic chores & elder care
Nurul	24	Married	1: 3 years old	Husband and mother	3yrs / 7mths	Domestic work (on specific household chore) in Indonesia	High school	Domestic chores & childcare
Intan	40	Divorced	1: 13 years old	Intan's parents	10yrs / 5yrs	Domestic work in Malaysia	High school	Domestic chores
Nadya	54	Divorced	2: 26 & 29 years old	Nadya's mother when the children were young	13yrs (same employer)	Housewife	Primary school	Domestic chores + the employer factory
Ayu	32	Married	1: 13 years old	Ayu's parents	12yrs (same employer)	Domestic work in Indonesia	Primary school	Domestic chores & childcare
Alya	28	Married	1: 3 years old	Alya's parents	6yrs / 2.5yrs	Restaurant helper in Malaysia	Primary school	Domestic chores & childcare
Dini	32	Single	None	Not applicable	2yrs / 1mth	Domestic work in Malaysia	Junior high school	Domestic chores & childcare
Indah	36	Divorced	3: 10, 17 & 19 years old	Indah's parents	1.25 yrs (same employer)	Babysitter & elder caretaker	Primary school	Domestic chores & eldercare